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The Best Book Reviews Money Can Buy

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For decades a largely stagnant industry controlled from New York, book publishing is fragmenting and changing at high speed. Twenty percent of Amazon's top-selling e-books are self-published. They do not get to the top without adulation, lots and lots of it.



Isaac Brekken for The New York Times There were books I wished I could have gone back and actually read," said Brittany Walters-Bearden, who wrote reviews for Mr. Rutherford. "But I had to produce 70 pieces of content a week to pay my bills."

Mr. Rutherford's insight was that reviews had lost their traditional function. They were no longer there to evaluate the book or even to describe it but simply to vouch for its credibility, the way doctors put their diplomas on examination room walls. A reader hears about a book because an author is promoting it, and then checks it out on Amazon. The reader sees favorable reviews and is reassured that he is not wasting his time.

"I was creating reviews that pointed out the positive things, not the negative things," Mr. Rutherford said. "These were marketing reviews, not editorial reviews."

In essence, they were blurbs, the little puffs on the backs of books in the old days, when all books were physical objects and sold in stores. No one took blurbs very seriously, but books looked naked without them.

One of Mr. Rutherford's clients, who confidently commissioned hundreds of reviews and didn't even require them to be favorable, subsequently became a best seller. This is proof, Mr. Rutherford said, that his notion was correct. Attention, despite being contrived, draws more attention.

The system is enough to make you a little skeptical, which is where Mr. Rutherford finds himself. He is now suspicious of all online reviews — of books or anything else. "When there are 20 positive and one negative, I'm going to go with the negative," he said. "I'm jaded."

Trainloads of Books

"If there was anything the human race had a sufficiency of, a sufficiency and a surfeit, it was books," the New Yorker writer Joseph Mitchell wrote in 1964. He reflected on "the cataracts of books, the Niagaras of books, the rushing rivers of books, the oceans of books, the tons and

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Nick Oxford for The New York Times

"I was creating reviews that pointed out the positive things, not the negative things," Mr. Rutherford says of his former work. "These were marketing reviews, not editorial reviews."

truckloads and trainloads of books that were pouring off the presses of the world at that moment," regretting that so few would be "worth picking up and looking at, let alone reading."

Since then, the pace of production has picked up quite a bit, although it is debatable whether Mr. Mitchell, who died in 1996, would be any more impressed by the quality. There has been a boom in what used to be called vanity publishers, which can efficiently produce physical copies that look just as good as anything from the traditional New York houses. But an even bigger factor is the explosion in electronic publishing. It used to take the same time to produce a book that it does to produce a baby. Now it takes about as long as boiling an egg.

In 2006, before Amazon supercharged electronic publishing with the Kindle, 51,237 self-published titles appeared as physical books, according to [the data company Bowker](#). Last year, Bowker estimates that more than 300,000 self-published titles were issued in either print or

digital form.

"I don't know how many people have a book in them trying to get out, but if they do, all the barriers are being removed," said Kelly Gallagher, vice president of Bowker Market Research. "This is a golden age of being able to make yourself more widely known."

In theory, at least, good reviews are proof that a writer is finding his or her way, establishing an audience and has something worthwhile to say. So as soon as new authors confront that imperative line on their Amazon pages — "Be the first to review this item" — the temptation is great for them to start soliciting notices, at first among those closest at hand: family, friends and acquaintances. They want to be told how great they are.

"Nearly all human beings have unrealistically positive self-regard," said Robert I. Sutton, a Stanford professor and the author of several traditionally published books on business psychology. "When people tell us we're not as great as we thought we were, we don't like it. Anything less than a five-star review is an attack."

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