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The Best Book Reviews Money Can Buy

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(Page 3 of 4)

Mr. Sutton's best-known book, about bullies in the workplace, had 110 five-star reviews on Amazon late last week, none of which he paid for but a few of which he says he solicited. He once asked his wife to review one of his books. To his disappointment, she refused.

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Mr. Rutherford's customers faced no such setbacks. Mark Husson, author of "LoveScopes: What Astrology Knows About You and the Ones You Love," wrote in an online testimonial about GettingBookReviews.com that "my review was more thorough than I expected. I wanted to go back out and buy my own book." On Amazon, "LoveScopes" had 70 reviews, 65 of which were five-star.

Peter Biadasz, a writer here in Tulsa, hired GettingBookReviews when he published "Write Your First Book." As a writing coach, he knows all about how writers obsess over bad reviews. "Nobody likes to hear their baby's ugly," he said. Still, he added: "I know the flaws in my book. I know my baby's not perfect."

But it is perfect, according to all 18 reviewers on Amazon, every one of whom gave it five stars.

"For me, it came out very favorably," Mr. Biadasz acknowledged. Most books, he cautioned, will not get such uniformly glowing notices.

This is true. For example, here's a derisive notice, recently posted on Amazon: "I was utterly bored." A second reader offered this: "Mediocre." A third: "This isn't good prose."

All three were offering their opinions of "The Great Gatsby." Quite a few reviews of the book, the F. Scott Fitzgerald classic that's among the greatest American novels of the last century, deem it somewhere between so-so and poor.

Roland Hughes, another self-published writer, has a theory about this: "Reviews for the established classics tend to come from actual readers."

A computer programmer and novelist based in Illinois, Mr. Hughes, 48, says he has spent about \$20,000 on review services. "I'd like to say I view it as an education," he wrote in an e-mail. His goal, not yet accomplished, is to make that difficult leap from "being an author" to "being a recognized author."

His thriller "Infinite Exposure" had an average rating of 4.5 stars out of 5 late last week on Barnes & Noble, while another of his books, "The Minimum You Need to Know to Be an OpenVMS Application Developer," got 5 out of 5.

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“Some of these review services will actually ensure your title is read by someone who likes your genre of books,” he added. “The last thing you want is someone who loves Christian and romance novels reviewing a science-fiction book which has no romance and calls into account the existence of God.”

Finding the Reviewers

Traditional journalism jobs may be dwindling, but the Internet offers many new possibilities for writers. As soon as the orders started pouring in, Mr. Rutherford realized that he could not produce all the reviews himself.

How little, he wondered, could he pay freelance reviewers and still satisfy the authors? He figured on \$15. He advertised on Craigslist and received 75 responses within 24 hours.

Potential reviewers were told that if they felt they could not give a book a five-star review, they should say so and would still be paid half their fee, Mr. Rutherford said. As you might guess, this hardly ever happened.

Amazon and other e-commerce sites have policies against paying for reviews. But Mr. Rutherford did not spend much time worrying about that. “I was just a pure capitalist,” he said. Amazon declined to comment.

Mr. Rutherford’s busiest reviewer was [Brittany Walters-Bearden](#), now 24, a freelancer who had just returned to the United States from a stint in South Africa. She had recently married a former professional wrestler, and the newlyweds had run out of money and were living in a hotel in Las Vegas when she saw the job posting.

Ms. Walters-Bearden had the energy of youth and an upbeat attitude. “A lot of the books were trying to prove creationism,” she said. “I was like, I don’t know where I stand, but they make a solid case.”

For a 50-word review, she said she could find “enough information on the Internet so that I didn’t need to read anything, really.” For a 300-word review, she said, “I spent about 15 minutes reading the book.” She wrote three of each every week as well as press releases. In a few months, she earned \$12,500.

“There were books I wished I could have gone back and actually read,” she said. “But I had to produce 70 pieces of content a week to pay my bills.”

An E-Book Best Seller

John Locke started as a door-to-door insurance salesman, was successful enough to buy his own insurance company, and then became a real estate investor. In 2009, he turned to writing fiction. By the middle of 2011, his nine novels, most of them suspense tales starring a former C.I.A. agent, Donovan Creed, had sold more than a million e-books through Amazon, [making him the first](#) self-published author to achieve that distinction.

« PREVIOUS PAGE | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | NEXT PAGE »

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