



The Best Book Reviews Money Can Buy

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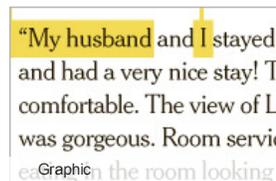
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Mr. Locke, now 61, has also published a nonfiction book, [“How I Sold One Million E-Books in Five Months.”](#) One reason for his success was that he priced his novels at 99 cents, which encouraged readers to take a chance on someone they didn’t know. Another was his willingness to try to capture readers one at a time through blogging, Twitter posts and personalized e-mail, an approach that was effective but labor-intensive.

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“My first marketing goal was to get five five-star reviews,” he writes. “That’s it. But you know what? It took me almost two months!” In the first nine months of his publishing career, he sold only a few thousand e-books. Then, in December 2010, he suddenly caught on and sold 15,000 e-books.

One thing that made a difference is not mentioned in “How I Sold One Million E-Books.” That October, Mr. Locke commissioned Mr. Rutherford to order reviews for him, becoming one of the fledging service’s best customers. “I will start with 50 for \$1,000, and if it works and if you feel you have enough readers available, I would be glad to order many more,” he wrote in an Oct. 13 e-mail to Mr. Rutherford. “I’m ready to roll.”

Mr. Locke was secure enough in his talents to say that he did not care what the reviews said. “If someone doesn’t like my book,” he instructed, “they should feel free to say so.”

He also asked that the reviewers make their book purchases directly from Amazon, which would then show up as an “Amazon verified purchase” and increase the review’s credibility.

In a phone interview from his office in Louisville, Ky., Mr. Locke confirmed the transaction. “I wouldn’t hesitate to buy reviews from people that were honest,” he said. Even before using [GettingBookReviews.com](#), he experimented with buying attention through reviews. “I reached out every way I knew to people to try to get them to read my books.”

Many of the 300 reviews he bought through GettingBookReviews were highly favorable, although it’s impossible to say whether this was because the reviewers genuinely liked the books, or because of their well-developed tendency toward approval, or some combination of the two.

Mr. Locke is unwilling to say that paying for reviews made a big difference. “Reviews are the smallest piece of being successful,” he said. “But it’s a lot easier to buy them than cultivating an audience.”

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Mr. Rutherford, who says he is a little miffed that the novelist never gave him proper credit, is more definitive. "It played a role, for sure," he said. "All those reviews said to potential readers, 'You'll like it, too.'"

End of a Venture

By early 2011, things were going swimmingly. Mr. Rutherford rented a small office in Tulsa and hired two assistants, including an editor who polished his reviews for \$2 each. He had plans for a multimillion-dollar review business that went far beyond just books. But the end was near.

The collapse was hastened by a young Oregon woman, Ashly Lorenzana, who gave Mr. Rutherford and [GettingBookReviews.com](#) perhaps their only bad review. [Ms. Lorenzana](#), 24, self-published some of her journal entries as an exceedingly bleak book, "[Sex, Drugs & Being an Escort](#)" ("I hated today," reads one representative passage. "Today was full of hate. I hate, hate, hate.") In seeking some attention for it, she checked out Kirkus, a reviewing service founded in 1933 that has branched out into self-published books. Kirkus would review "Sex" for \$425, a price that made her balk.

Another issue with Kirkus was that it did not guarantee its review would be positive. Ms. Lorenzana felt she would then be in the position of having spent a bundle just so someone she did not know could insult, belittle or devalue her work. On the Internet, you can usually get someone to do that free.

"You're taking a chance by putting your writing out there — a huge chance," she said. "You want validation that it's not a joke."

When Ms. Lorenzana found [GettingBookReviews.com](#), \$99 seemed reasonable. But the review did not show up as quickly as she expected. She posted a long, angry accusation against Mr. Rutherford and his service on several consumer sites, [saying she had received better treatment](#) from a reviewer whom she had hired for \$5. ("You could tell that the person had really spent a few minutes checking out the information about my book and getting a feel for it before just diving into writing a meaningless review.")

Mr. Rutherford refunded her fee, but his problems were just beginning. Google suspended his advertising account, saying it did not approve of ads for favorable reviews. At about the same time, Amazon took down some, though not all, of his reviews. Mr. Rutherford dropped his first name in favor of his middle name, Jason, so that people who searched for him through Google would not automatically see Ms. Lorenzana's complaints.

These days, Mr. Rutherford is selling R.V.'s in Oklahoma City and planning a comeback in that narrow zone straddling what writers want and what the marketplace considers legitimate. Bowker, the data firm, says that as many as 600,000 self-published titles could appear in 2015, and they all will be needing their share of attention.

Mr. Rutherford tried to start another service, Authors Reviewing Authors — a scratch-my-back-and-I'll-scratch-yours approach. Authors preferred receiving over giving, however, and that venture failed. Now he is developing a service where, for \$99, he blogs and tweets about a book — he has 33,000 Twitter followers — and solicits reviews from bloggers and regular Amazon reviewers. No money is paid to the reviewers, so Google has approved ads for the service.

He says he regrets his venture into what he called "artificially embellished reviews" but argues that the market will take care of the problem of insincere overenthusiasm. "Objective consumers who purchase a book based on positive reviews will end up posting negative reviews if the work is not good," he said.

In other words, the (real) bad reviews will then drive out the (fake) good reviews. This seems to underestimate, however, the powerful motivations that writers have to rack up good reviews — and the ways they have to manipulate them until a better system comes along.

"It's a quagmire," Mr. Rutherford conceded.

A few months ago, he self-published a guide for aspiring authors called "[The Publishing Guru on Writing](#)." Late last week, it had one lone review on Amazon, two sentences from

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someone named Kelly. "Great advice," it read, giving the book five stars and, even more important, that all-important shot of credibility. Mr. Rutherford said he had no idea who Kelly was, but added, "I'm glad she liked it."

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