



# Swarming a Book Online

By DAVID STREITFELD  
Published: January 20, 2013 | 188 Comments

Reviews on [Amazon](#) are becoming attack weapons, intended to sink new books as soon as they are published.



Steve Dykes for The New York Times

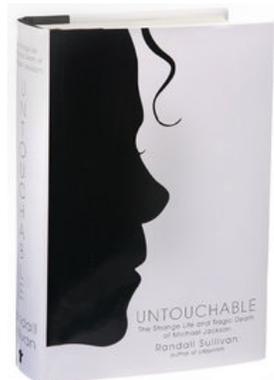
Randall Sullivan is the author of "Untouchable: The Strange Life and Tragic Death of Michael Jackson."

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Alessandra Montalto/The New York Times  
In the book Randall Sullivan writes that Michael Jackson's overuse of plastic surgery reduced his nose to little more than a pair of nostrils and that he died a virgin despite being married twice.

In the biggest, most overt and most successful of these campaigns, a group of Michael Jackson fans used [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) to solicit negative reviews of a new biography of the singer. They bombarded Amazon with dozens of one-star takedowns, succeeded in getting several favorable notices erased and even took credit for Amazon's briefly removing the book from sale.

"Books used to die by being ignored, but now they can be killed — and perhaps unjustly killed," said Trevor Pinch, a Cornell sociologist who has studied Amazon reviews. "In theory, a very good book could be killed by a group of people for malicious reasons."

In "Untouchable: The Strange Life and Tragic Death of Michael Jackson," Randall Sullivan writes that Jackson's overuse of plastic surgery reduced his nose to little more than a pair of nostrils and that he died a virgin despite being married twice. These points in particular seem to infuriate the fans.

Outside Amazon, the book had a mixed reception; in The New York Times, Michiko Kakutani [called it](#) "thoroughly dispensable." So it is difficult to pinpoint how effective the campaign was. Still, the book has been a resounding failure in the marketplace.

The fans, who call themselves Michael Jackson's Rapid Response Team to Media Attacks, say they are exercising their free speech rights to protest a book they feel is exploitative and inaccurate. "Sullivan does everything he

can to dehumanize, dismantle and destroy, against all objective fact," a spokesman for the group said.

But the book's publisher, Grove Press, said the Amazon review system was being abused in an organized campaign. "We're very reluctant to interfere with the free flow of discourse, but there should be transparency about people's motivations," said Morgan Entrekin, president of Grove/Atlantic, Grove's parent company.

Amazon said the fans' reviews had not violated its guidelines but declined further comment.

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The retailer, like other sites that depend on customer reviews, has been faced with the problem of so-called sock puppets, those people secretly commissioned by an author to produce favorable notices. In recent months, Amazon has made efforts to remove reviews by those it deemed too close to the author, especially relatives.

The issue of attack reviews, though, has received little attention. The historian Orlando Figes was revealed in 2010 to be using Amazon to anonymously vilify his rivals and secretly praise himself. The crime writer R. J. Ellory was exposed for doing the same thing last fall.

Attack reviews are hard to police. It is difficult, if not impossible, to detect the difference between an authentic critical review and an author malevolently trying to bring down a colleague, or organized assaults by fans. Amazon's extensive rules on reviewing offer little guidance on what is permissible in negative reviews and what is not.

With "Untouchable," Grove had hopes for a modest best seller. The book was excerpted in Vanity Fair, and Mr. Sullivan, a longtime contributor to Rolling Stone who lives in Portland, Ore., promoted it on "Nightline" and "Good Morning America." Amazon selected it as one of the best books of November, encouraging readers to "check out this train wreck of a life." The retailer also selected it as one of the 100 best e-books of the year.

None of that helped when Mr. Sullivan tried to complain, saying reviews of his book were factually false yet being voted up by the fans so that they dominated the page for "Untouchable." The bookseller replied with boilerplate. "Rest assured, we'll read each of the reviews and remove any that violate our guidelines," adding, "We've appreciated your business and hope to have the opportunity to serve you again in the future."

In an interview, Mr. Sullivan asked: "Should people be allowed to make flagrantly false comments about the content of a book or its author? This is suppression of free speech in the name of free speech."

"Untouchable" is 586 pages of text, with 200 pages of notes. Much of it focuses on Jackson's chaotic last years, including his efforts at comebacks, his struggles to remain solvent, his shocking death in 2009 and the battle over his estate.

A version of this article appears in print on January 21, 2013, on page B1 of the New York edition with the headline: Swarming a Book Online.

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**amazon reader** liberia

i actually bought the books and they suck , thing is these authors need to realize that noone cares about michael jackson except his fans. who else is going to read this mess. his friends already know him and his family and the haters would waste their money so all this article is aiming at is a jackson fan and i dont care if he got his info from tom mesereau obviosly he twisted what the man told him because he is writing the same fiction we have experienced over and over again in the star , the inquirer, the globe and every other rag that wrote about jackson. why cant a person that knew him actually write a book like frank did which isnt always nice either but it is believable. noone is perfect and we all know that but come on to write about a person with such venom or lack of knowledge, telling us things we happen to know as fact are not true is just plain ridiculous. ONCE AGAIN I WILL REPEAT. THE ONLY PPL READING THESE BOOKS ARE JACKSON FANS PPL remember that fact when you take to copying and pasting from the news and trying to sell it to us for more than a paper costs.

Jan. 22, 2013 at 7:50 a.m. RECOMMENDED 6



**Susan62509** Las Angeles

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