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BUSINESS DAY

The Best Book Reviews Money Can Buy

By **DAVID STREITFELD** AUG. 25, 2012

TULSA , Okla.

TODD RUTHERFORD was 7 years old when he first understood the nature of supply and demand. He was with a bunch of other boys, one of whom showed off a copy of Playboy to giggles and intense interest. Todd bought the magazine for \$5, tore out the racy pictures and resold them to his chums for a buck apiece. He made \$20 before his father shut him down a few hours later.

A few years ago, Mr. Rutherford, then in his mid-30s, had another flash of illumination about how scarcity opens the door to opportunity.

He was part of the marketing department of a company that provided services to self-published writers — services that included persuading traditional media and blogs to review the books. It was uphill work. He could churn out press releases all day long, trying to be noticed, but there is only so much space for the umpteenth vampire novel or yet another self-improvement manifesto or one more homespun recollection of times gone by. There were not enough reviewers to go around.

Suddenly it hit him. Instead of trying to cajole others to review a client's work, why not cut out the middleman and write the review himself? Then it would say exactly what the client wanted — that it was a terrific book. A shattering novel. A classic memoir. Will change your life. Lyrical and gripping, Stunning and compelling. Or words to that effect.

In the fall of 2010, Mr. Rutherford started a Web site, GettingBookReviews.com. At first, he advertised that he would review a book for \$99. But some clients wanted a chorus proclaiming their excellence. So, for \$499, Mr. Rutherford would do 20 online reviews. A few people needed a whole orchestra. For \$999, he would do 50.

There were immediate complaints in online forums that the service was violating the sacred arm's-length relationship between reviewer and author. But there were also orders, a lot of them. Before he knew it, he was taking in \$28,000 a month.

A polite fellow with a rakish goatee and an entrepreneurial bent, Mr. Rutherford has been on the edges of publishing for most of his career. Before working for the self-publishing house, he owned a distributor of inspirational books. Before that, he was sales manager for a religious publishing house. Nothing ever quite worked out as well as he hoped. With the reviews business, though, "it was like I hit the mother lode."

Reviews by ordinary people have become an essential mechanism for selling almost anything online; they are used for resorts, dermatologists, neighborhood restaurants, high-fashion boutiques, churches, parks, astrologers and healers — not to mention products like garbage pails, tweezers, spa slippers and cases for tablet computers. In many situations, these reviews are supplanting the marketing department, the press agent, advertisements, word of mouth and the professional critique.

But not just any kind of review will do. They have to be somewhere between enthusiastic and ecstatic.

"The wheels of online commerce run on positive reviews," said Bing Liu, a data-mining expert at the University of Illinois, Chicago, whose 2008 research showed that 60 percent of the millions of product reviews on Amazon are five stars and an additional 20 percent are four stars. "But almost no one wants to write five-star reviews, so many of them have to be created."

Consumer reviews are powerful because, unlike old-style advertising and marketing, they offer the illusion of truth. They purport to be testimonials of real people, even though some are bought and sold just like everything else on the commercial Internet.

Mr. Liu estimates that about one-third of all consumer reviews on the Internet are fake.

Yet it is all but impossible to tell when reviews were written by the marketers or retailers (or by the authors themselves under pseudonyms), by customers (who might get a deal from a merchant for giving a good score) or by a hired third-party service.

The Federal Trade Commission has issued guidelines stating that all online endorsements need to make clear when there is a financial relationship, but enforcement has been minimal and there has been a lot of confusion in the blogosphere over how this affects traditional book reviews.

The tale of GettingBookReviews.com, which commissioned 4,531 reviews in its brief existence, is a story of a vast but hidden corner of the Internet, where Potemkin villages bursting with ardor arise overnight. At the same time, it shows how the book world is being transformed by the surging popularity of electronic self-publishing.

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.

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 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.”

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.

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.

“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.

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.

“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.”

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 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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