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The boisterous world of online literary commentary is many things. But is it criticism? By James Marcus

By James Marcus

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Due to a widely reported technical blooper, the Canadian division of Amazon.com revealed the identities of several thousand of its anonymous reviewers. For just a few days in February, until the company restored their electronic fig leaves, these stealth critics were effectively unmasked. For the most part, of course, this was no big deal. What difference did it make if "a reader from Saskatchewan" turned out to be named Keith -- and actually lived in Hoboken? Surely such minor mendacities could be forgiven. Maybe Keith was just shy, and longed for the Great White North.

Yet there were also some alarming discoveries to be made. A fairly large number of authors had gotten glowing testimonials from friends, husbands, wives, colleagues and paid flacks. A few had "reviewed" their own books. The novelist John Rechy, among those caught in flagrante, pleaded the equivalent of self-defense: He was simply fighting fire with anonymous fire. Other miscreants cited the ancient tradition of self-puffery, practiced by both Walt Whitman (who wrote not one but three unsigned reviews of *Leaves of Grass*, and quoted them all in the second edition) and Anthony Burgess (who paid for the stunt with his job).

Still others dismissed the idea that there was any conflict of interest to begin with. Lisa Jardine, a British academic heavyweight and occasional paid consultant to Amazon's U.K. site, made no attempt to repair the online giant's critical reputation. Indeed, she suggested that it had no reputation to lose. As she saw it, Amazon was essentially a promotional hog heaven, where any author with a brain in his head would quite naturally shill for his own creations: "There's nothing immoral about it. This is a marketing website."

It's hard not to chuckle over what one company spokesperson called "an unfortunate error." The exposure of such brazen fibbing inspires a certain relish: It's like that moment in "The Wizard of Oz" when the curtain is yanked aside and Frank Morgan is revealed as a fake. Yet the sheer variety of reactions to the glitch -- from outrage to embarrassment to jaded indifference -- suggests that something more is afoot.

Can this latest chapter in Amazon's long, complicated romance with the vox populi tell us something about pitfalls of Internet democracy? Perhaps. At the very least, it's a reminder that art and commerce can make for extremely strange bedfellows.

A little personal history may shed some light. I worked as a senior editor and writer at Amazon from 1996 to 2001. When I first started at the company, it was still a vest-pocket operation with 50 or so employees. Visitors

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to the site encountered a vast, bare-bones catalogue: We sold more than a million different titles, but offered little information about them beyond the card-catalog level.

To begin addressing this information deficit, Amazon founder Jeff Bezos came up with a two-pronged approach. On one hand, he hired people like me, former journalists and editors -- slowly at first, then in droves. Among our main duties was to write old-fashioned book reviews, complete with byline. Despite the occasional flicker of unease about our role -- were we critics or sales clerks? -- we functioned more or less like traditional reviewers, reading the books and rendering honest judgment, preferably in 250 words or less.

No editorial staff, not even a burgeoning one, could spackle in the giant holes in the catalogue. It would have taken centuries. Luckily, Bezos had already come up with a canny expedient: customer reviews. By the time I came aboard, Amazon was already encouraging visitors to comment on the books they had read. What began as a trickle would turn into a steady stream, then a torrent: Soon there were thousands, then millions of reviews. Who would have thought that the book -- an archaic information product already slated for extinction by various starry-eyed futurists -- could elicit this mighty outpouring of opinion?

Day after day, they kept coming, running the gamut from stylish elegance to stream-of-consciousness blather. At that point, they struck us professionals as something of a sideshow -- a virtual mosh pit where the customers could play by any rules they chose. Most of us came to enjoy the racket, with its noisy assertion of electronic populism.

True, there were some flaws from the very start. A simple piece of software could comb through the incoming reviews to detect specific naughty words and ethnic slurs. Yet a less common obscenity, or even a misspelled one, snuck right in the back door. If a customer came across one of these smears and complained, we usually removed it -- a process that might take weeks, since Amazon's gleaming, high-tech chassis sat atop a Dickensian-era infrastructure. Sometimes, though, we weren't sure how to weigh in. During my first few weeks on the job, a Wiccan from the Midwest took us to task for a nasty customer comment about casting spells. Were witches truly a minority in need of our protection? Only after a heated departmental debate did the comment disappear -- as if by magic.

Then there was the problem of false attribution. When William Shakespeare or Jesus Christ posted a customer review, it was a simple matter to press the Delete button. Famous living celebrities posed a more ticklish dilemma: As I recall, their contributions were verified by e-mail whenever possible. That aside, customers were free to take on any identity they liked. This was the Web, after all, where we were supposed to slip the constraints of the material world and function as pure spirits. If one of these spirits happened to plagiarize most of his customer reviews from the book section at Salon.com -- and then indignantly accuse the magazine of stealing his work when the deed was exposed -- well, purity was a relative thing.

You could argue that these were mere technical difficulties. A teenage programmer with a six-pack of Jolt could probably attend to most of them in the course of a weekend. Yet the snowballing popularity of the whole process forced the editorial staff at Amazon to confront some more pointed questions. What exactly was the relationship between professional reviewers and casual readers? By opening the conversation about books to millions of amateurs, had the Web more or less destroyed the notion of cultural authority? Had the Bastille of elitism finally fallen?

We pondered these questions long and hard. We pondered them even harder once it became clear that the company was casting its lot with the customer reviewers and subtly ushering its editorial staff out the door. When I left Amazon after five years, I thought these matters might no longer bedevil me. Yet they still do -- and in the wake of last month's high-tech pratfall, perhaps I can share some basic conclusions.

For starters: Imagine that you're circulating from room to room at an enormous cocktail party, with millions of guests, eavesdropping. Undoubtedly you will be treated to some gems, some brilliant bits of repartee, the occasional burst of intellectual fireworks. Most of what you hear, however, will be pretty mundane, given the law of averages and the general human tendency to lose track of our thoughts halfway to completing them. Well, the same rule applies to customer reviews, both at Amazon and elsewhere. There's plenty of wheat amid the chaff -- but there's lots of chaff, acres and acres of it, much of it lacking coherence, clarity, charity and punctuation. In a sense, it's now the audience, not the editor, shouldering the burden of culling out the good stuff. Whether this represents a seismic shift in the cultural terrain or merely a fresh division of labor remains to be seen.

If only there were some way to combine the speed and democracy of the Web with the more meditative character of traditional criticism. Oh wait, there already is: blogging. In some cases the convergence is quite literal -- witness the case of Terry Teachout, reviewing for such Bronze Age bastions as the Wall Street Journal, The Washington Post and Commentary with his left hand while blogging like mad with his right at his site, www.artsjournal.com/aboutlastnight. But even those bloggers who never venture into print have something in common with their opposite numbers in the traditional media: a name to besmirch, a reputation to smudge. It keeps them honest in a way that anonymous, duck-and-cover reviewing never can. It also encourages a kind of snarky civility, very welcome in our polarized era.

This may change, of course, as the blogosphere moves further into the mainstream. Already there are turf wars, low-level spats. No doubt a pecking order will gradually materialize, since even cyberspace operates according to the familiar logic of *Animal Farm*: All bloggers are created equal, but some are more equal than others. There will be stars, contract players, boffo traffic numbers. There will be a proliferation of advertising on the most visible sites -- there is already, in fact -- and a defiant tug-of-war between the early bloggers and their entrepreneurial successors.

Perhaps I'm being too cynical. If the blogosphere turns out to be a brave new world after all, where logrolling and cronyism fear to tread, I'll be the first to applaud. In any case, there's no denying that the practice is on the rise: According to a recent study by the Pew Institute, up to five percent of all Internet users have created blogs in the last year alone. We do seem to be on the verge of that radiant future in which everybody, as the saying goes, is a critic.

A confirmed Luddite myself, I confess to viewing this prospect with mixed emotions. I'm grateful to the Internet, I love its Whitmanian capacity to contain multitudes, yet I cringe at the thought of keeping up with it all, the endless tsunami of argument, the compulsion to send our ideas into battle like guided missiles. Too bad: There's no turning back the tide, no depriving the populace of its niftiest microphone ever. Like it or not, we're going to hear America singing, and the really intriguing question is what the chorus will sound like. •

James Marcus is a former senior editor for Amazon.com. He sat on the board of the National Book Critics Circle from 1996 to 2002. His book "Amazonia: Five Years at the Center of the Dot.com Juggernaut" will be published in June.

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