



Under attack:
Author Polly
Samson

The women writers at war over fake reviews

Publishers 'hijack' Amazon's customer verdicts

By Nick Fagge

THE story involves subterfuge, jealousy and dirty tricks in the world of literature.

And its unlikely setting is the readers' reviews section on Amazon.

Alongside details of a book for sale, the website offers supposedly independent verdicts from customers, including a rating of from one to five stars.

However, rival publishers are accused of hijacking the system to praise their own volumes and disparage the opposition.

Authors are turning on each other, agencies are charging up to £5,000 to place favourable fake reviews and Amazon has recruited a team of amateur critics to restore the balance.

One author, Rosie Alison, became so incensed by a series of barbed reviews on the website that she called in investigators to see if rival publishers were behind the stinging criticism.

Miss Alison is a producer for the company behind the Harry Potter

'No flair for language'

films. Her first novel, *The Very Thought Of You*, went virtually unnoticed when it was published.

But the book, about an eight-year-old World War II evacuee, became the target of vicious assaults after it was long-listed for the Orange prize for women's fiction this year.

By yesterday it had attracted 119 reviews on Amazon – 50 per cent more than the book which won the prize, *The Lacuna* by Barbara Kingsolver. While many praised its qualities, 16 reviewers give the book the minimum one star.

One compares Miss Alison's writing to Mills and Boon novels, while another claims she 'has no feel for fiction at all, no sense of what makes a plot tick along, no flair for language'. Another implies that the author's success is connected to her marriage to Tim Waterstone, founder of the chain of High Street bookshops.

Miss Alison, 46, is said to be in dispute with Amazon about the hostile reviews and has approached Kwikchex, a company which specialises in protecting online

reputations, run by Chris Emmins. He said: 'I looked at some of them and certainly the wording and the dates of the postings were indicative of a malicious attack.'

Another author, Polly Samson, 48, has suffered sneering reviews on Amazon because she is married to David Gilmour, the Pink Floyd guitarist.

Her most recent book, *Perfect Lives*, published this month, was the target of some vicious criticism. One reviewer, Felicia Davis-

Burden, said: 'Every story seems to be a variation of Samson fictionalising the life she probably has as Mrs D Gilmour. I'm sorry, Polly, but this book bored me. You need to leave home.'

Earlier this year historian Simon Winder forced Amazon to remove a critical review of his book *Germania* after he discovered it was written by a rival academic – Diane Purkiss, of Keble College, Oxford.

Guidelines set by Amazon state that reviews should not be posted by anyone with a financial interest or a competing book. But the

online giant accepts anonymous reviews from anyone with a customer account. This has led PR firms to provide favourable reviews of new books, at a price.

Nathan Barker, of Reputation 24/7, offers a service starting at £5,000. He said: 'First we set up accounts. For a romance novel we'd pick seven female profiles and three males.'

'We'd say we like this book but add a tiny bit of criticism and compare it to another book.'

Mr Barker claims this is common practice among publishers.