

RICHARD KENDAL/DESMOND O'NETTL



# Authors bloodied in Amazon warfare

Polly Samson, left, and Rosie Alison, seen with her husband, Tim Waterstone, say they have been unfairly criticised



## Amateur book reviewing on the website has descended into a vicious free-for-all

**Rosie Kinchen and Maurice Chittenden**

WHEN Rosie Alison, a producer who works for the company behind the Harry Potter films, tried her hand at writing a novel, her book initially went unnoticed by the critics.

A year on, it is at the centre of its own whodunit mystery after a series of barbed reviews on the Amazon website.

Alison, 46, the wife of Tim Waterstone, founder of the chain of high-street book-sellers, has called in internet investigators to see if the stinging comments are the work of a rival publisher jealous of her success.

Her plight speaks volumes about the cut-throat tactics that have entered the once genteel world of literature. Authors are turning on one another; Amazon has recruited a team of amateur reviewers; and agencies are charging authors £5,000 to place favourable fake reviews online.

These methods have emerged as the market contracts. Last year 3,500 new titles of hardback adult fiction were published in Britain, but book sales have dropped 3.3% on the year. Authors earn an average of £16,531 a year, according to the Authors' Licensing and Collecting Society.

Alison's book began to attract attention when it was longlisted for the Orange prize for women's fiction. The *Very Thought of You*, about an eight-year-old evacuated to Yorkshire during the second world war, made the Orange shortlist.

It now has 119 reviews on the Amazon website — 50% more than the book that won the prize, Barbara Kingsolver's *The Lacuna*, and Ian McEwan's best-selling *Solar*. Sixteen of them give the book just one star out of five, despite it being praised on the cover by John Boyne, the author of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, as "without question one of the best debuts I've read in recent years". Alison has produced the film of his book.

Her harshest critics compare her work to Mills & Boon. A reviewer calling herself Paige Turner writes: "I read this book on holiday and it almost ruined my week." Another said it was "one of the worst books I've ever, ever read".

Alison, who is now in dispute with Amazon about the hostile reviews, said: "I don't really like getting involved in these kind of things."

Chris Emmins, of Kwikchex, a company that specialises in protecting online reputations, said Alison had approached him to investigate the negative reviews. He said: "I looked at some of them and certainly the wording and the dates of postings were indicative of a malicious attack."

Polly Samson, 48, the former Sunday Times writer, has won plaudits for her book *Perfect Lives*, published this month, but has been hit by sneering reviews on Amazon because she is married to David Gilmore, the Pink Floyd guitarist.

One reviewer, Felicia Davis-Burden, writes: "Every story seems to be a variation of Samson fictionalising the life she probably has as Mrs D Gilmore. You need to leave home."

Gilmore, 64, posted a response on Amazon, asking, "How far were you thinking she should go?" and saying it is a "very odd review indeed".

Earlier this year Simon Winder had a highly critical review of his book, *Germania*, removed by Amazon after discovering that it was written by another academic — Diane Parkiss, a don at Keble College, Oxford — who was known to him but hiding behind a pseudonym. She defended herself, saying: "I would not want to mislead readers into thinking that I have any high-level expertise in the subject matter of books I read as a general reader."

Although Amazon guidelines state that reviews should not be posted by people with a financial interest or a competing book, its reviewing policy allows users to comment anonymously as long as they have a customer account.

This has opened the door to firms offering to post favourable reviews for payment. Nathan Barker, the founder of Reputation 24/7, which specialises in "reputation management", offers a service that starts at £5,000. He said: "First, we set up accounts. For a romance novel we'd pick seven female profiles and three males and throw in a couple of curve balls. We'd say we like this book, but add a tiny bit of criticism and compare it to another book. Then we would proactively spin it in the next review. For example, 'I read this book and thought it was great. I passed it on to a friend and still haven't had it back.'"

Barker claims it is a common practice among publishers. According to industry insiders, one of the biggest giveaways of a planted review, especially at this time of year, is a line saying: "It would make the perfect Christmas gift."

Authors are now advertising openly online for people to boost their books with favourable reviews on Amazon.

The going rate is about £160 for 50 reviews.

Amazon has recruited more than 2,000 amateur reviewers for its Amazon Vine network. Members are sent monthly lists of new books and can choose up to four free volumes to review.

It said: "Amazon does not influence the opinions of Amazon Vine members, nor do we

modify or edit their reviews." Sally Zigmund, 59, who has written her own novel, *Hope Against Hope*, has reviewed the Alison and Samson books for Vine. She said: "It's a good way to get free books. I didn't like the Alison book very much, I'm afraid, but it was a personal opinion. I try to be honest but I probably give friends higher

reviews than I normally would have done."

Another author, Julia Stephenson, writing in today's News Review, admits to posting a favourable review of her first novel, *Pandora's Diamond*, and sniping back at other reviewers using aliases.

She said: "My favourite alias is Bob Gold from Blackpool. I

envisage him as a louche ex-nightclub entrepreneur who may have had something to do with Radio Caroline. He responds to shouty ladies ['I've never read a book that made me so angry!'] with a benign but irritating 'Cheer up, luv'."

*Think there's a book inside you? Well, trust me, keep it there, News Review, page 2*