

## Why Books Become Blockbusters

At the risk of alienating folks who either love or hate *Fifty Shades of Grey*, I want to share an observation I made the other day. I'd written a few words about the trilogy a few weeks ago. The books are wonderful examples of horrible writing, yet as of the middle of July had sold in excess of twenty million copies. One thing I've learned as a author is this: You don't have to have very much skill as a writer to become a best-selling author. I've seen it time and again. But why, I asked myself, would a poorly written loosely pornographic novel sell so well? Certainly folks are not forced to buy it, and indeed it has some real and legitimate appeal to attract sales numbers in the millions.

I got a clue from Amazon.com. First let me tell you a little story: Several years ago there was a very famous writer who was far past his best years. He'd been a legend when he was at his peak, and was widely acclaimed by many. Years passed without a new book, and he began to feel to need to write again. (I was told he needed the money.) So..., he spent a year writing a huge tome, only to have it severely edited by his publisher. Privately, a lot who knew him said his skills had declined dramatically. When the book finally came out, it was generally panned by the critics but sold reasonably well because of his previous reputation.

I was considering buying this famous author's new book, and was reading the reviews on Amazon.com a month or so after its release. To my surprise, they were usually either very good or very bad; that is, 5 stars or 1 star. There were a few in between, of course, but most reader reviews were at one end or the other. It made me curious and I started looking closely at the reviewers' comments. Those who gave him a 5-star rating were generally already committed fans who had been waiting for years for a new book by this author. On the other side, those who gave him a low rating were a younger group of readers, many of whom were not even born when his first books came out. They bought and read the book because someone said they should, but in the end they plain didn't like his style or content. Objectively, if the book had been his first work, it probably never would have made it into print.

As to *Fifty Shades of Grey*, the pattern of reviews on Amazon.com followed the same one as the famous author I cited

above. Look at the graph (from July 27, 2012). Of the 9,429 folks that reviewed it, 41% loved it (5-stars) and 33% hated it (1-star).

### Customer Reviews

#### Fifty Shades of Grey: Book One of the Fifty Shades Trilogy



This means that a lot of people who read the book and took the time to review it had strong feelings one way or the other and not a lot in between. Now, look at the graphs for the second

and third books of the trilogy. For book two, 62% loved it and only 10% hated it. The same for book three, the same thing: 65% gave it 5-stars and 11% gave it one star.

### Customer Reviews

#### Fifty Shades Darker (Fifty Shades, Book 2)



the book out of curiosity, word-of-mouth, whatever. A lot of people hated it—in my opinion, rightfully so. The writing is atrocious, the plot ludicrous. But on the other hand, a lot of people loved it. There was love and money and kinky sex, the kind of things our fantasies are made of. Those people became the hard core that bought the second and third books in the series.

### Customer Reviews

#### Fifty Shades Freed: Book Three of the Fifty Shades Trilogy



But unless the author finds a way to sustain her new found fans, I predict her success will be a very short phenomenon. There are already dozens of copycats either on the market or on the way, probably written by authors with half-decent writing skills to say the least. I suspect the 5-star fans who bought the second and third books will soon become bored, turning their literary tastes to some other fad du jour in reading tastes. We'll see. Ask me in a year.

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