May 17, 2024 / Amazon’s garbage book factory

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SCORING <Code Control>

NOEL KING (host): Your dad’s favorite author Erik Larson has a new page-turner. It’s about The Civil War, and it’s gotten a lot of press.

*<CLIP> AUTHOR ERIK LARSON, FRESH AIR: Lincoln did something that I think politically was quite brilliant. He decided…*

NOEL: As with other Larson books - like The Devil in the White City or The Splendid and the Vile or Thunderstruck - the title’s campy and kinda random: The Demon of Unrest.

*<CLIP> AUTHOR LARSON: It’s almost as if this demon is afoot in the land and sometimes frankly it's a little hard to figure out why.*

NOEL: What does that have to do with the Civ- ? Never mind.

Point is: your dad isn’t going to remember the title when he goes to buy the book on Kindle - he’s probably just gonna search for Erik Larson. And up will pop what you might call “Erik Larson books.”

Titles such as Erik Larson Biography, Erik Larson Biography Book, the Biography of Erik Larson and Erik Larson the Biography of a Storyteller. All published in the first five months of this year.

What’s going on? Coming up on Today Explained: a man, a plan, a scam, A-I, and why Kindle is full of garbage.

[THEME]

*<CLIP> TIKTOK VOICE: You’re listening to Today, Explained.*

NOEL: Constance, go ahead. Give me your full name and tell me what you do.

CONSTANCE: My name is Constance Grady. I'm a senior correspondent covering culture for Vox.

NOEL: Have you heard that our colleague Kara Swisher wrote a book?

CONSTANCE: I have heard. It's been the talk of the town.

NOEL: <laughs> I actually read it. I really like it. It's a very good book. It's also a book that has a staggering amount of buzz. In your piece, you write about this weird thing that happened with Kara's book. What went on exactly?

CONSTANCE: Yeah. So around the same time that the book comes out, a bunch of other books with kind of similar titles start to show up on the Kindle store.

SCORING <Lost Planet>

*<CLIP> JOURNALIST KARA SWISHER: You go look up Kara Swisher, and there's 20 AI biographies written by me, that aren't me, that are pictures of me and very femme-y pictures of me, you go look for them…   
BILLIONAIRE LAURENE POWELL JOBS: What?!*

CONSTANCE: They’re all kind of dancing around the phrase “Kara Swisher book,” kind of the same way that a lot of stores that exist now are named things like “Plumbing Near Me” so they show up if you're searching for a plumber near you. So you're seeing titles like “Kara Swisher Book: How She Became... ”

*<CLIP> SWISHER: …She Became Silicon Valley's Most Influential Journalist. That's not even interesting.   
SETH: And then this one I feel like maybe someone spilled coffee on their computer. <audience laughs>*

CONSTANCE: ...and “Kara Swisher: Silicon Valley's Bulldog”, and “Kara Swisher Biography: Unraveling the Life and Legacy.”

*<CLIP> SWISHER: Tech’s Queen Bee with a Sting. Which, I’m like, ok.*

CONSTANCE: A lot of books that are not actually by Kara Swisher, but if you're just kind of quickly searching “Kara Swisher book” so you can click on your first result and get the book that you want to read, there's something that looks close enough that if you're in a hurry, you kind of might click them by accident.

*<CLIP> SWISHER: So on this AI thing, I did, I wrote the CEO of Amazon and I'm like, ‘What up, dude?’ Like – and he's, and they're like, oh, we're going to take them down for you. And I'm like, I'm not talking about me.  
POWELL JOBS: Yeah.*

*SWISHER: What about everybody else?*

CONSTANCE: That is great for her if she can get it. That's probably not the case if this is happening with other authors.

SCORING OUT

CONSTANCE: So here's what's happening: the phrase “Kara Swisher book” is trending on the Kindle store front, and keyword scrapers that exist to find trending search terms are delivering the phrase “Kara Swisher book” to what we might call garbage book generators. So these will be people who use a combination of AI and very, very cheap ghostwriters to generate as quickly and cheaply as possible, a series of books that they can plausibly title under something that includes whatever keyword is trending and get very distracted people to sort of accidentally buy them, and that's how they make their money.

NOEL: What does it look like when these books – the trash books – pop up?

CONSTANCE: So the trash book is going to have a plausible enough title that if you're reading quickly, it'll look like what you're looking for. It'll have kind of a cheap and weird-looking cover, a lot of clipart, and really shoddy Photoshop, kind of smashed-together, often the cover is AI- generated… But if you're just looking fast, it's all designed to be just good enough to get past any first sensors that you might have up. The cost is going to be way lower than the cost of the actual book, and a lot of times price is one of the only metrics that people are scanning. So if you're just looking for the cheapest possible way to get the book you want, this is a book that you can very easily end up clicking on without looking all that closely. You click ‘Buy Book’ and it shows up on your Kindle, and it might take you a few pages to realize, ‘Wait, this is not the book by Kara Swisher that I wanted to read.’

NOEL: <laughs>

CONSTANCE: ‘This is a series of biographical claims about Kara Swisher and I'm not sure that's actually true, what they're saying about her.’

SCORING <Hyper Science>

*<CLIP> AI VOICE: Kara Swisher is a power of nature in the realm of tech news-casting.*

CONSTANCE: So there are a few tells that you will get that this is not the book you're looking for. One is just that the narrator might be different, right? Kara Swisher writes her book in the first person. She is the person telling you this story. The biographies are third person.

*<CLIP> AI VOICE: For the north of twenty years, she’s been Silicon Valley’s most sharp writer, exposing the ascent and fall of realms…*

CONSTANCE: But there are also some tells that will show up in text that is generated by an AI or by a large language model. So one is that it tends to follow a pretty classic, like, kind of five-paragraph essay format.

NOEL: Huh!

CONSTANCE: Sort of each sentence will have a topic sentence and then sort of three supporting ideas, which leads cleanly to the next. You'll sort of feel like you're reading a pretty okay eighth-grade essay.

*<CLIP> AI VOICE: Swisher has barbecued everybody from Elon Musk and Imprint Zuckerberg to Sheryl Sandberg and Kim Kardashian, separating admissions, revealing contentions, and igniting basic discussions about the effect of innovation on our lives.*

CONSTANCE; And you'll also start to notice that a lot of the things that it's very confidently asserting to you don't necessarily match up with your understanding of the way the world actually works.

NOEL: <laughs>

CONSTANCE: You'll start to notice the misinformation that AI has become known for. And this happens with audiobook versions too.

*<CLIP> AI VOICE: Thus, jump into the universe of Kara Swisher, and get ready to be tested, informed, and engaged. You will love it.*

SCORING OUT

NOEL: So the interesting thing here is the numbers, right? So Kara writes one book and then like 3 or 4 titles sprang up around her one book. Do we have a sense of how often this is happening? And does it happen with every big book, every book that gets buzz?

CONSTANCE: This *is* something that we're seeing more and more with the release of particularly buzzy books that are really taking off on Amazon, that their keywords are trending, and it's something that we have seen become more common as generative AI gets cheaper and easier to use and more widely distributed.

*<CLIP> AUTHOR KATHLEEN HANNA: It’s come to my attention that all of these biographies about me have shown up on Amazon, I think TODAY. Which is really an exciting day for me, because I’m not just releasing one book – this is the real book, my book that I wrote – I’m releasing, like nine books all at the same time…*

CONSTANCE: I tried a lot of things when I was reporting this story to figure out if there was a way to quantify the number of these garbage books that are coming out, I talked to the Authors Guild, I talked to a bunch of different authors. It seems as though the only people in a position to quantify the amount of these books that are coming out is Amazon itself. And it is really not in Amazon's best interest to tell anyone how many of these books there are.

NOEL: What does this mean for consumers other than, you know, you really need to make sure that you have the real title?

CONSTANCE: It means that buying a book becomes kind of, walking through a field of landmines.

SCORING <Artificial>

CONSTANCE: You have to figure out what you're looking at and be really careful and make sure that you're not just throwing your money at a kind of book-shaped digital file that doesn't have anything inside it.

SCORING BUMP

CONSTANCE: It also means that we have to be really, really careful with what we're reading, because there are kind of literal dangers that are also in place here. I spoke to a man who worked for the New York Mycology Society. So this is about foraging for mushrooms. He had been finding all of these AI-generated foraging books on Amazon.

*<CLIP> FERAL FORAGING YOUTUBER: Most of them had the exact same title: the Forager’s Harvest… Bible. What’s worse, if you try to look up just “The Forager’s Harvest” – which, by the way, is the real book – you still get inundated by these other titles.*

CONSTANCE: They were also full of misinformation. They showed mushrooms that didn't exist, mushrooms that looked like real mushrooms but weren't really there. He was incredibly worried because he said, ‘If you have even the slightest bit of wrong information about a wild mushroom that you're picking to eat, that can literally mean life or death.’ Which was so striking to me because it shows that, you know, the worst-case scenario with a garbage e-book is you could literally die from it.

SCORING OUT

CONSTANCE: That's not great.

NOEL: Hmm…and what about Jeff Bezos? No. I'm kidding.

CONSTANCE: <laughs>

NOEL: What about Amazon? About the people who are, like, supposed to be in charge of the Kindle marketplace? Have they cracked down on this at all?

CONSTANCE: Kindle has done a number of things in order to try to make it more difficult for you to publish these garbage books. They have started to require that if you're publishing something on Kindle Direct Publishing, you have to say whether or not your content is AI-generated. There's only so many titles that you can publish in a day, which can prevent people, you know, from just churning them out and churning them out and churning them out through AI-generating machines. On the other hand, I have talked to people who found that Kindle is very reticent to take down garbage books after complaints from authors who feel that it's infringing on their IP, especially if those authors aren't, you know, well-connected Kara Swisher. Which also makes a certain amount of sense, right, because Amazon does not have an incentive to take down a file that is selling well on their site. That is money that Amazon can use. They do have an incentive to try to keep this user-friendly. And to the extent that the Kindle store becomes so choked with garbage that users stop being interested in using it, that becomes a big problem for them.

SCORING <Anti Gravitation>

NOEL: Who is behind all of the garbage books?

CONSTANCE: So this is what I went digging to find out, and… I found something kind of incredible…

NOEL: Ooh.

SCORING OUT

NOEL: Coming up next?

CONSTANCE: Comin’ up next.

SCORING BACK IN

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

NOEL: It's *Today, Explained*. We're back with Constance Grady, senior culture correspondent for Vox. Okay, so, Constance, you went into the seedy underbelly of how trash books get in the Kindle marketplace. Who are the people doing this?

CONSTANCE: So this is really, really interesting once you get into it. There's a lot of characters in this story. One of the first characters that I want to introduce you to is a man who goes by Big Luca.

NOEL: Hmm.

CONSTANCE: Also, sometimes Luca de Stefani.

SCORING <After Them>

*<CLIP> SCAMMER LUCA DE STEFANI: Hi, this is Big Luca everybody, and it’s a quarter past 5 here in Dubai and I just woke up and I’m having a cup of coffee and I’m ready to work…*

CONSTANCE: And according to the legend, he is the one who holds the world record for making the most money using Kindle Publishing in a single day.

*<CLIP> DE STEFANI: How do you actually go from 0 to more than $8k a month in three months? How do you do it? So I have gathered all my strategies in this package.*

CONSTANCE: Big Luca is one of the first teachers of the garbage book grift who really makes it big, and the thing that sets his class apart from all the other classes in this ecosystem is that he gives his students access to a secret Facebook group where they can arrange to buy five-star reviews that will push their garbage books up Amazon's algorithm. Eventually one of the people who takes Big Luca's class is a man named Christian Mikkelsen. He apparently found the class by googling the phrase “how to make money online.”

NOEL: Mmhhm…

CONSTANCE: He's a college student. He publishes an e-book titled “How to Be a 4.0 Student in College Like Me”…

NOEL: <laughs>

CONSTANCE: …at Big Luca's Self Publishing Revolution. And apparently it does well enough that he pulls in his twin brother Rasmus. And they start going to town: they are publishing trash book after trash book. They're about things like tantric sex. They're about keto. They're about crystals. They're about all of these kind of trashy, fad-y keywords. Anything that they can kind of cram into a title that will attract someone's attention. That someone, somewhere, is reliably searching for. They come up with this innovation, which is they run their manuscripts through Google Translate, and then they just sell the result as a foreign-language edition. This bumps their income into six figures.

NOEL: Mmm.

CONSTANCE: It is also the thing that eventually gets Amazon to block their publishing account.

NOEL: <laughs>

SCORING OUT

*<CLIP> SCAMMER CHRISTIAN MIKKELSEN: Ok, alright, what’s up everybody. Uh, welcome to our channel. We are the Mikkelsen twins. My name is Christian…   
SCAMMER RASMUS MIKKELSEN: My name’s Rasmus…*

CONSTANCE: So they start their classes after Amazon blocks their publishing account. They're like, ‘We can’t sell these guides to keto/tantric/crystal sex anymore. We're going to start teaching other people how to do this instead.’

*<CLIP> MIKKELSEN: Welcome to this YouTube video, where I’m going to be talking about how you can make $100k in one single day from your publishing business.*

CONSTANCE: What they advertise is they say that they will give you access to keyword scrapers so you know what kind of book to write.

*<CLIP> MIKKELSEN: So with these, you do not need to narrate anything yourself. You do not need to write anything yourself. You do not need to design any cover yourself. You do next to nothing…*

CONSTANCE: They will show you how to use AI to generate an outline, and then either use AI to generate a draft, or they'll send it to a ghostwriter who will write the draft for you. The ghostwriting company they work with charges less than $0.01 per word. It works out to $500 for a 30,000-word book.

*<CLIP> MIKKELSEN: We’ve worked out an exclusive deal with our favorite ghostwriting company to get the lowest ghostwriting prices humanly possible. It’s the same deal normally only we can get because we’re friends with the CEO.*

CONSTANCE: They say they'll promise how to introduce you to audiobook narrators who you can haggle down to a $20 flat fee. They'll show you how to get those five star ratings on Amazon. They'll kind of give you everything you need in order to just rake in this passive income goal.

*<CLIP> MIKKELSEN: In other words: someone else does the work, but WE get paid. That’s how the whole model works.*

CONSTANCE: According to the people who I talked to who actually took this class, though, really what happens is you pay your $2,000 to get into the class, and then you get a bunch of one-on-one calls with someone who's called a coach, who kind of just tells you, ‘Oh, you actually have to be taking the $8,000 class to get access to any of this stuff. And if you really want to be successful, you'll quote unquote, “invest in yourself” and take the $8,000 class. And that's how you'll really get to passive income in the end.’

*<CLIP> MAD CUSTOMER: I personally decided to go through this process that they’re talking about in which they sent me an email with the link to their free video. And then they asked for money in order to learn how they do this so-called simple thing. Here it is, ladies and gentlemen: name any Burger King, McDonalds, Walmart job that actually have you pay it to get hired.*

NOEL: And – and again, the people who've taken the Mikkelsens’ classes, they're told: ‘Your name will not be on this, but don't worry about it. You'll be making money.’

CONSTANCE: Yes. That's right. The people who take this class are told they're going to produce the book. They don't have to write it. They will not put their name on it. But they should be proud that they've made a book, and they should be proud because they are going to get rich from it. Or, I should say, they don't guarantee that you'll get wealthy from it, but they say there is a possibility that you can. And then they show a lot of screencaps of some of their students who have been successful in order to illustrate just how successful you could maybe be.

NOEL: Every bit of this is something I would fall for in a slightly different life…

CONSTANCE: It's so convincing! I watched the, the sales pitch they have, and about halfway through I was, like, hypnotized. I was like, ‘Am I stupid for never having done this? Like, is this the key to a successful life? How could I not have seen it before?’ It's sort of shockingly easy to fall into the trap of thinking that this is actually a good idea, even when, you know, first of all, that it's unethical. And second of all, that it's really not likely to actually work.

NOEL: And it does – so it does raise the bigger question, which is: all the spammy garbage books. Is this just a phenomenon of Big Luca and the Mikkelsens or other people? Did other people pick up on it and they're like, ‘No, no, no, we're jumping in too’?

CONSTANCE: Absolutely other people have picked up on this. There is a whole ecosystem of people who have run this grift and turned to the teaching grift and kept going. What I think is really striking about the Mikkelsen twins is they are not very interested in hiding what they're doing. They kind of operate in plain sight. That makes it easier to see how this all works, economically speaking. I think it also makes it easier to see what the appeal is emotionally for the people who are doing it. You can kind of feel the tug of this idea that maybe it could actually be this easy, and you could publish a book and be super rich, and you don't even have to write it.

NOEL: Yeah, I get that, I get that, yeah, this is clearly a grift. You've said it a bunch of times, but is it illegal?

CONSTANCE: What Christian and Rasmus are doing, as far as I can tell, is not illegal. A lot of it is unethical. A lot of it is against Amazon's terms of service. So things like buying reviews, that's something that if they can catch you, they'll kick you off their site. But none of it is really, you know, something that you can go to jail for.

NOEL: So we're going to see more of this, almost certainly, right? If nobody's going to jail?

CONSTANCE: Yeah. There are not that many incentives to not do it if it's something that you're into.

SCORING <Gore>

CONSTANCE: One of the things that really strikes me about this, and kind of feels like a little bit of the tragedy of it to me, is that what this script does is exploit the part of us in our culture that thinks of books as valuable things, right? It exploits this belief that books are really meaningful, and writing a book is something to strive for, and that reading a book is a good thing to do that will enrich your life and in every case, that it intersects with those ideas. It replaces a book that is real and is of some amount of value to you, with just this book-shaped digital file filled with nonsense and misinformation. And I think that's really what we all stand to lose when this grift goes on.

SCORING BUMP

NOEL: That was *Vox*’s Constance Grady. Kara Swisher’s book, by the way, is called “Burn Book”. It’s in stores now.

Amanda Lewellyn produced today’s show and Amina al-Sadi edited it. Rob Byers engineered and Laura Bullard fact-checked.

The rest of our team includes: Avishay Artsy, Victoria Chamberlin, Hady Mawajdeh, Haleema Shah, Miles Bryan, Peter Balonon-Rosen – welcome, Peter! – Denise Guerra, Patrick Boyd, Andrea Kristinsdottir – welcome, Andrea! – my co-host Sean Rameswaram, Matthew Collette and Executive Producer Miranda Kennedy.

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