# Do Not Trust That Stranger's 5-Star Review

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Last Saturday, I was desperate for Mozart sheet music. It had to be for piano, and it had to be easy to play. Out of 84 options on Amazon, a book with 4.7 stars caught my eye — good enough for a 9-year-old's music-class presentation. Later that afternoon, I needed to book a hotel for our summer vacation and I trusted the 1,310 reviewers on TripAdvisor who gave my pick an average of four stars, along with a good number of "fantastics" and "wonderfuls."

 Dinner was a 4.5 star meatloaf recipe. And this weekend, with Memorial Day sales in full swing, I will turn to an army of online reviewers who will help me bite the bullet and replace a toilet that has mysteriously begun flushing of its own accord. Someone else will have put the time in at Home Depot so I don't have to.

But which someone? Who are these reviewers I'm trusting with my purchasing decision, big and small? I don't know for sure, and yet I feel completely stalled until I've scrolled through everything they have to say.

It's not that I'm afraid of a little research. As a writer at [Wirecutter,](#) The New York Times's product review site, I pore over user ratings professionally, though I don't rely on them solely. For my [review of foam mattresses,](#) I focused my efforts on extensive reporting and slept on the mattresses myself. I analyzed online comments to deduce trends, and I certainly didn't take stars at face value.

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As Dr. Salganik explained, even if a system is gamed, the worst product probably won't end up at the top of your screen for long; assuming there's a considerable difference in quality among the options, it will eventually be knocked down. But if the products are pretty similar, then yes, it's possible that the very best one will actually not float to the very top — though that's no tragedy either. As Barry Schwartz, the author of "The Paradox of Choice," argues, if everything is essentially the same, then there's nothing wrong with ending up with a product that's the second- or third-best of the heap.