

Who moved my rank? Sales rank purged from Amazon

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In this Jan. 26, 2006 file photo, writer Annie Proulx speaks at a news conference in Madrid. (AP Photo/Daniel Ochoa de Olza, file)

(AP) -- Amazon.com apologized Monday for an "embarrassing and ham-fisted cataloging error" that led to the sales ranking being removed from tens of thousands of books.

The online retailer initially said Sunday that a "glitch" had caused the problem and promised that the numbers would be restored. But Monday afternoon, sales numbers were still gone for such recent works as

Chelsea Handler's "My Horizontal Life" and from such classics as Gore Vidal's "The City and the Pillar" and James Baldwin's "Giovanni's Room."

"What kind of a childish game is this?" Vidal said Monday. "Why don't they just burn the [books](#)? They'd be better off and it's very visual on television."

On Monday, Amazon spokesman Andrew Herdener called the deletions an "embarrassing and ham-fisted cataloging error for a company that prides itself on offering complete selection." He said that 57,310 books in categories ranging from gay and lesbian literature to health and erotica had been affected.

"This problem impacted books not just in the United States but globally. It affected not just sales rank but also had the effect of removing the books from Amazon's main product search," Herdener said. "Many books have now been fixed and we're in the process of fixing the remainder as quickly as possible, and we intend to implement new measures to make this kind of accident less likely to occur in the future."

Authors strongly questioned Amazon's explanation, with some posting e-mails they had received from the online seller that said their books had been placed in an unranked "adult" category, excluded from some searches and best-seller lists. And the glitch dates back to at least February, when Craig Seymour noticed that the ranking for his memoir "All I Could Bare" had been deleted. (It came back, he said, a few weeks later.)

Affected books include the scholarly (Michel Foucault's "The History of Sexuality, Volume 1"), the obscure (V.K. Powell's "Suspect Passions") and the famous. The sales rank has been missing for E. Annie Proulx's "Brokeback Mountain," the basis for the acclaimed movie which starred

Heath Ledger, and for Paul Monette's "Becoming a Man," winner of a National Book Award in 1992.

The "glitch" has even turned on former Amazon favorites, among them M.J. Rose's "Lip Service," promoted back in 1999 as a self-published novel which found an audience on Amazon.

"Through Amazon.com Advantage ... Rose was able to market and distribute her book directly to Amazon.com customers so successfully that the Doubleday Book Club selected it as a featured alternate," Amazon announced in August 1999. "After enrolling in the Advantage program, 'Lip Service' generated such a buzz from the large volume of positive reader reviews that the publishing industry was forced to take notice."

Still ranked were such bloody novels as Chuck Palahniuk's "Fight Club" and Bret Easton Ellis' "American Psycho." Also intact were two novels banned for decades because of their language and erotic content: D.H. Lawrence's "Lady Chatterley's Lover" and Henry Miller's "Tropic of Cancer."

News of the [glitch](#) emerged around the same time that the American Library Association announced the death of Judith Krug, the head of the ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom and founder of Banned Books Week, which features an annual list of the books most often criticized or removed.

"It isn't fair to say that [Amazon](#) is actually censoring books, but you can't help draw the parallels, simply because the same kinds of books are involved," said Deborah Caldwell-Stone, deputy director of the library association's intellectual freedom office.

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