

On book reviewing

I

In *American Book Review* (May/June 2008), editor and publisher Jeffrey Di Leo wrote: “It is more difficult--and dangerous--to write a critical review. The most obvious reason for this is that a critical review justifiably raises the spectre of retaliation from the reviewed author and his or her affiliates” (“A Good Reviewer is Hard to Find,” 2). Reviewers have never needed to work hard at making themselves enemies of authors; it’s automatic. David Markson, in *The Last Novel* (2007), said: “Taking no more account of the wind that comes out of their mouths than that which they expel from their lower parts. Leonardo described his response to critics as” (165). Earlier, in *Vanishing Point* (2004), Markson wittily updated a biblical phrase: “Now Barrabas was a book reviewer” (121).

The “spectre” Di Leo refers to is familiar to many reviewers. After reading a critical review of mine, the writer of the book took the time to find my e-mail address, and then wrote a vaguely ominous letter with portents of bad luck in my future. Acolytes of writers are almost as bad. Someone complained I had gotten a writer wrong, and took me to task for not recognizing that His Eminence enjoyed the respect of many Authority Figures. Unfortunately, this kind of bowing to those considered great is common; what makes it worse is that the fan hadn’t read the book I was reviewing, nor the review I wrote, though both were easily accessible.

In Canada, reviewers have the reputation of being nicer, milder, with no Dale Peck in sight. One reason is because, with the firmament so close to the land, you can reach up and actually touch, or pull, on the stars, though they might come crashing down on you, or you might need them at some point (because most reviewers have an unpublished novel in their desk drawer). To tick them off--or more likely, their publishers and supporters--could harm your career. There are a few reasons the *Globe and Mail’s* book section on Saturday is toothless and thin, and one reason, I think, is this awe and fear, as well as not wishing to cause a disturbance, or to be seriously interested in literary works. The other is the frame of the reviews. A 600-word review that gives you a plot summary instead of looking at the structure, the sentences, the technical devices, the mood, and/or the philosophy of the book, is either advertising fluff dressed up to look like criticism, or a sketch of a book that does disservice to the author and the form of the review.

I began book reviewing with Auberon Waugh’s *Literary Review*. I ventured to the offices for the first time in August 1988 after sending a letter and getting a reply meant to dissuade, and to lower expectations, and there I met a few of the staff, as well as the headmaster. No conversation to recall, nothing witty, or pertinent, more along the lines of: “Is there anything for me to review?” “Yes. Here.” Over a few months they accepted three reviews, but my fourth probably struck them as too downbeat. The novel was *The Sleepless Summer* by Ferdinand Dennis, which I found very boring; taking my cue from a popular London street finder, I titled my review “London from A to Zzzzzz.”

My writing for *Literary Review* ended because I left England not long after submitting that last review in the spring of 1989. I didn’t review again until 2001. I had realized how easy it is to be cheaply smart at someone’s expense, and while I meant what I wrote, I found out, belatedly, that being smart-mouthed wasn’t helpful to a reader or a writer, and certainly not to me. Not because I was afraid of offending anyone, but because it could become habitual to look for a line that could zing, one that you’d hope, in a dark corner of your heart, would be more memorable than the book. When that happens the review becomes all about the reviewer. Who hasn’t read

that sort of thing, and wondered why Mr. X has decided to play around with the efforts of a writer when what you hoped to find was something about the book?

Other reviewers take a different approach. The book under discussion--and this is common with non-fiction--is in the reviewer's field of speciality, so the reviewer tells us what he knows (it's invariably a man), ignoring the book as one does a springboard after clearing it. What's most amazing about that kind of review is that its style has been accepted as respectful.

A third kind is the 'Coetzee special,' named that not because he invented it or is the only one who proceeds along a certain track, but he does it quite often: he likes to rewrite the books he reviews, suggesting--as he did when reviewing Harry Mulisch's *The Discovery of Heaven*--how they could have been improved if he had written them. He almost sounds regretful that his brain couldn't come up with those ideas, but can only generate superior ones written in superior fashion. There are many kinds of odious reviews. This kind is singular.

When asked to consider reviewing books again in the late 1990s by someone connected to *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* I declined, certain that old habits would resurface, and that the book under consideration would suffer. There are many people who'd not want to write reviews for that reason, or because they would find it morally objectionable to write any kind of review. Many consider it a loathsome occupation, while others merely consider it parasitic.

A couple of views on reviewing, one from Gilbert Sorrentino (1929-2006), another from Paul West (b. 1930), state lessons learned, or impressions gained, from their experiences of being reviewed:

... the exercise of criticism is at best--in that delicious old phrase--a mug's game. The critic is either subsumed in his criticism, the latter becoming, relentlessly and imperceptibly, a kind of natural effusion of the collective intelligence; or he is forever identified as "the one who said that..." and reviled for such rank stupidity. Either way, he is denied his reality, becoming in the first instance a public idea that everybody held all the time, and in the second, an idiot whose pronouncements are contemptible when they are not hilarious (Sorrentino, "Preface," *Something Said*, viii).

Another essay from the same collection adds to this. "The perfect comment on the book is the book itself. But since it cannot comment on itself, critics comment on it... Problem: Comment which begins as ancillary to the book may ultimately displace the book, or pretend that the book has no reality without it" ("Writing and Writers: *Disjecta Membra*," 354). Certainly, in the case of those who sideline the book in favour of their own ideas, the book in question has little chance of being addressed. Instead of dialogue, there's a monologue.

Sorrentino continues:

Reviewers who don't understand the work under review, or who are intimidated by this lack of understanding, are shameless in their admission of this. Most of them, in fact, can hardly wait to admit it. Their admission of ignorance, however, neither silences nor dissuades them from their tasks. On the contrary, they spend the space of their reviews pointing to the incomprehensible work before them, and this gesture is displayed as a kind of self-bestowed nobility. The work, of course, is always at fault, since the book reviewer is a bona fide literary person, perhaps an expert, else why would he be reviewing books? To admit his incapacity to review the book would never do. The book must die ("Writing and Writers: *Disjecta Membra*," 355).

As Sorrentino knew, most reviewers are not experts. Anyone reading a journal put out by a university knows that grad students do a lot of the work, and many times they write reviews. Sometimes they appear in the pages of small national publications as well. These are the grounds they practice on until they become fully-fledged MAs, PhDs or something equivalent. But at that stage, to return to Di Leo, the newly degreed ascend to a higher plane. "In academia, book reviews are often either disdained as unworthy forms of publication or considered something to be done in-between other projects. Many humanities departments do not even regard reviews as scholarship" (2). While the pool below the new professors can still be drawn from, the MLA has recently said--and Di Leo agrees--that "the profession... should encourage scholars at all levels to write substantive book reviews" (2). Some of those scholars do write book reviews, and they can be of variable quality. Looking at the language many scholars write in, I'm surprised a book sells to more than just the author's family. (Not that most members of an author's family will get behind him or her.) "Even the field of the humanities now imagines itself through a dense, mechanical jargon that, if you could drop it, would go 'clank'" (Curtis White, *The Middle Mind: Why Americans Don't Think for Themselves*, 110).

Paul West is worth quoting on reviewers for the niceness of expression, the roundness of the condemnation, and the accuracy of the remarks. "Imagine a profit-driven industry addicted to reactionary, minimalistic fiction confronting innovative work posited on style or absurdity. Reviewed if at all by understandably obscure boy professors and petits maîtres of the poisoned quill" ("Of Morrow and Tomorrow," *Sheer Fiction Volume 4*, 180). Let's consider this. It's true that there's generally very little reward--in the sense of financial benefit, or respect (from authors, almost none, as must be evident even with so few examples)--for simply *reading a book*: all one gets at the lower levels is the equivalent of an honourarium (maybe), the (free) book itself--if it's a galley copy, the published version will be wanted--and the writing credit.

(On the matter of money, try telling unemployment officials, interested in every dollar earned, what it takes to write reviews. Their attitude is that one ought to be able to break that task down into hours. You should be able to keep track of how long it takes to read the book, and how long it takes to write the review. They mean physically write, not think about it as one walks up and down supermarket aisles. Their minds work as follows: "Think of this reviewing as like being at an office, only with a book instead of all these papers you see on my desk. What time did you get here? What time did you leave? I have to ask: Did you take lunch? And did you use both breaks?" They mean, just to underline this, that a pleasurable activity--and if reading a book meant for review isn't in some way pleasurable, something is wrong--ought to be made to fit into a defined timetable.)

So the reviewers aren't "expert" in the sense that Sorrentino sort of hopes that they will be. Nor are they broadminded, as West relates. He goes on:

I cannot count how many times, mostly in reviews, I have seen a sentence similar to this (found an hour ago): "There are few flashy phrases, no authorial showiness." *Fui*. That is the stuff our literature is based on, and one wonders if this, not a backlash but a thousand-fold flutter of the dominatrix's fleecy whip, is the true backlash, aimed at teaching us to evict most of literature from its throne, asking us to write as if we were Himmler, feeding SS youths on porridge to keep them lean, taut, spare, and all the other stuff he wanted for a good SS. They are certainly among us, but not of us, these killjoys who want to denature the literary arts, deny the mind its amplitude

and flair, these dogs and bitches of the manger who to use Roy Campbell's phrase, know all about bit and snaffle but have lost the bloody horse ("Backlash Against the Novel," *Sheer Fiction Volume 4*, 165).

Curtis White again: "What troubles literary artists in particular is the idea that the most attentive segment of their audience, the professional literary critic, is unconcerned with what it means to make something well" (*The Middle Mind*, 75). And Di Leo once more: "We should also remember that the publication of book reviews is an important type of public intellectualism" (2); reviewers can "share with the public the critical exchanges and differences of opinion that keep our profession vital" (2).

From these comments, it can be seen that reviewing is not a profession anyone is going to be thanked for, no matter how seriously reviewers might regard themselves as performing acts of "public intellectualism," because writers, on the whole, at some point in their writing lives have had poor experiences with critics who didn't raise their thinking above the facile level. With such misunderstanding, and after being maligned, ignored, and having their works trodden into the muck, why would writers like such "dogs and bitches"? And why would anyone want to be considered so poorly?

II

An editor at *Quarter After Eight* asked for a contribution in 2001, some fiction, or a review, and I considered the possibility of the second. No title suggested itself until after I read three novels in succession: *The Corrections* (Jonathan Franzen), *House of Leaves* (Mark Danielewski), and *The Persian Bride* (James Buchan). I was finishing the last as the overthrow of the Afghanistan government began, and the content of the book fit the war-filled times. It occurred to me that it would be positive to engage with works that provoked thought and had a resonance in the wider world, post-September 11, 2001. Perhaps such an approach, partly moulded by external conditions, would help me write a better review than I'd written before. The result marked an improvement in how I felt about reviewing, and showed a maturation of sensibility and sensitivity, though I had a fair way to go yet (and still do, in other ways). There was something in these three books that seemed to speak to the times, and I could become engaged in writing earnestly about novels three different authors had put a lot of work into.

When *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* asked me to review a book by Cesare Pavese, and sent me the guidelines, two key things came together: my desire to improve what I did, and Dalkey's policy on negative reviews. They didn't want puff pieces, and they discouraged people from reviewing books they didn't like. That helped me figure out that I could pay attention to the salient factors of a book, or the ones I could see, whether or not I was enthusiastic about the book.

This shift proved significant, and I felt more confident about being able to produce a respectful review (to the author, the book, the reader, and the venue the review would appear in), one that highlighted features that I felt would be of most interest. "On the contrary, they spend the space of their reviews pointing to the incomprehensible work before them, and this gesture is displayed as a kind of self-bestowed nobility. The work, of course, is always at fault, since the book reviewer is a bona fide literary person, perhaps an expert, else why would he be reviewing books?" It would be a while before I read Sorrentino's words, but I had taken a step away from faulting the author or the book, declaring myself an expert, and the work incomprehensible.

III

When William Gaddis' last two books came out, *The Rush for Second Place* and *Agapē Agape*, it seemed unlikely that Canadian literary publications would comment on them. He's a writer I particularly admire, and I wanted to get these works noticed in Canada. *Books in Canada--The Canadian Review of Books* accepted the review I sent almost out of the blue; from then until its cessation in 2008 I wrote 40 reviews (of 45 books) for *BiC*. During those years its editor, Olga Stein, only once assigned a book, and graciously accepted almost every suggestion. Gaddis was followed by other writers I had been curious about, liked, or who seemed interesting: Sorrentino, Joseph McElroy, John Cowper Powys, David Markson, and William Vollmann joined translated works by Harry Mulisch, Joseph Roth, Thomas Bernhard, Mati Unt, and Blaise Cendrars, among others. The freedom to choose what I would review meant that the reading remained enjoyable without ever turning into a duty, and this, I think, is essential for any pleasure to be had in the process. Excitement over finding an author like Mati Unt (*Things in the Night*) ought to be shared; keeping cool about it wouldn't do justice to the work. As a professor of mine once said, without the "Ah!" moment, what importance is a book? Assigned books are much less likely to be greeted with pleasurable anticipation.

At the same time I kept reviewing for *RCF*, but in this case welcomed the list of titles its book editors suggested in e-mail-outs to a slate of reviewers. Most authors were completely unknown to me, and in this way I read things I normally wouldn't hear about. The format for *RCF* is tight: 300 words and no more, whereas *BiC* could be anywhere from 600 to 1,500 words. Condensing a book by the delightful Raymond Queneau into 300 words means the focus has to be on elements of writing, not the plot. The reviewer can't get in the way, and becomes secondary to the work, and I think that's fitting.

These two venues allowed me to concentrate on what I thought were a book's essential ingredients--its form, the sensibility of the narrative, the style--as well as give some context for the book and the author (when there was space). Guessing what a reader would like to know would be "a mug's game," to use Sorrentino's phrase, and it seemed better not to try and read the minds of a potential audience. So I wrote about what I saw, never thinking that that was all there was to see. I hoped a reader would find that my review communicated excitement, or intellectual interest, and explain why that book succeeded, or where it almost did. To do this, the book and author had to be placed first.

It's rare that I write a negative review, but some books deserve to be argued with because they appear so wayward or false. Because of the freedom allowed at *BiC*, I could search for books that promised to be in my line of interest, or for authors with whom I shared a certain sympathy or was curious about. *Only Revolutions* by Mark Danielewski (whose *House of Leaves* I very much liked) didn't catch my imagination, and consequently I didn't attempt a review of it. In this frame of mind, without some level of interest present, I'm bound not to see the work clearly, and I won't be able to set down my thoughts without revealing, on some level, what a chore the whole process was.

Title suggestions come from different places. In most instances--and this applies with *American Book Review* and *Rain Taxi*--I've found the books and approached the review outlets. Writing the publisher for a review copy is usually successful, but this does break down the wall between reviewer and editor. Gail Pool, in her overview and analysis of United Statesian book reviewing, comments on this: "Review editors, by tradition, try to keep reviewers and publicists

apart, handling all correspondence with publishers themselves” (*Faint Praise: The Plight of Book Reviewing in America*, 104). While her point is understandable, if I had let others control my reading I would not have been so interested in the books. Also, there is the unavoidable fact that some review outlets can’t afford to send books to reviewers who live outside their country. In terms of efficiency, if I see a book I think worth commenting on, I can write the publisher more swiftly than an editor who, Pool’s book illustrates, is already quite busy. The book will arrive sooner, and then the time factor--editors are “under pressure to be current” (Pool, 81)--will be reduced.

Some people would think that by getting in touch with a publisher a reviewer is then pressured, subtly or heavily, to dole out praise rather than be critical in the most positive sense. This can happen, certainly. But if one isn’t making a living at reviewing--and few people do--and are independent-minded, then the pressure is much less. Perhaps a reviewer might wonder if he or she will offend someone, choose to be overly kind, might be afraid a source of free books will dry up, or annoy a review editor by supplying negative reviews. Much depends on the character of the reviewer. Negative reviews are difficult (or easy, depending on your nature) to write; critical ones that engage with the book, and point out what has gone right and wrong (in one person’s opinion), are what ought to be encouraged. People can try and kill a book, but getting into it and seeing what its elements are is more rewarding all around, if harder, and less immediately satisfactory for those who want a thumb up or down.

A writer wanted me to review one of his books, but phrased the request this way:

I guess that as far as a review of [title deleted] goes..., if you really don’t like it I’d appreciate your not doing the review, but if you feel tied down by that I won’t be offended and you may not want to go to the effort of reading a collection that you you [*sic*] may not end up reviewing. In the normal course of events, the author doesn’t go out asking for reviews, so I’ll feel pretty silly if you don’t like it, but I need the reviews.

I declined the opportunity. It didn’t start off good, and would have gotten worse for the author and myself. But I have reviewed a few books by people I know, and I believe that the reviews didn’t suffer from this personal acquaintance or friendship. I made sure to check this out with the editor in charge on such occasions, and that person’s role was to see if any biases intruded into the text. Pool’s remark about keeping reviewers and publishers apart is important; however, it’s not always workable nor always a moral cesspool into which reviewers sink.

IV

Now and then I hear of this or that person who has read one of my reviews, and some publishers have selected quotes from them for publicity purposes. Some authors have reacted to them. Whether they help a reader decide what to read, or not read, is unknown. “At a time when the number of books is soaring and interest in literary works falling, when anti-elitists claim that quality is relative and every book is good in its own way, the need is greater than ever for critical guidance that will not only help sort the good from the bad but show why the difference matters” (Pool, 140). Maybe that’s partly why I write them, to nudge people to books and authors I think worthwhile, those that might not get noticed as much as others. When I’ve read reviews myself, I’ve sometimes ordered the book, whether or not the review was favourable. Certainly, taking

part in a conversation about books is what keeps most reviewers going (it isn't the pay, or the renown), since that means they are part of the literary republic's activity, even if what is said is subordinate, and justly so, to the main events. For those reasons, and others that are still vague right now, I'll keep writing them. They're conversations that aren't closed.