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Library Journal

Inside Track- What's a Review, Anyway?

FRANCINE FIALKOFF, EDITOR -- 7/1/2001

Blurring the lines between opinion and criticism

What Really Killed Rosebud?, asks the title of a recent book (Regent Pr.) by Claire Burch, a Berkeley, CA, documentary filmmaker. The answer is unequivocal for Burch and the Berkeley street people about whom she writes: Rosebud, who had a history of psychiatric problems, was shot to death intentionally by a policeman during a break-in at the home of the University of California chancellor. But the first customer review posted on Amazon.com comes from a police officer claiming he was at the scene and calling the book "self-serving" crap and "revisionist dribble."

The rest of the reviews, several from homeless people like Rosebud (according to a news release from Regent), attack the police and the society that rejected her. Says one, "[W]e heard that some cop had tried to squash the book...by trashing it on Amazon.com. Who is this cop who says he was there and why won't he give his name?"

Is the writer of the first "customer review" really a policeman? We don't know. Nor do we know if he was on the scene, as he claims. Even if he is what he claims, does that legitimize his comments about the book? As for the rest of the "reviews," they are equally partisan. It is possible that they could have been seeded by anyone who supports the book, the author, or the publisher.

In the best interpretation of Amazon.com's customer reviews, they offer a public commons for readers to congregate and comment. In the case of the Burch book, they are a forum for political commentary, an avenue for attack and counterattack. But one thing is certain: these aren't reviews in any traditional sense. They are merely one person's opinion.

What is a review? A recent essay by Saul Bellow biographer James Atlas sheds some light. At one time, says Atlas ("Everyone's a Critic," Brill's Content, 6/01), reviews "not only evaluated the work but used the occasion to range over wider issues and force a reconsideration of the author's oeuvre." No more, he says. Atlas argues that such reviews have disappeared, replaced by "the newsweeklies, middlebrow monthlies...local newspapers for consumer guidance." Witness the decision by the *San Francisco Chronicle* to switch to more feature book stories and author interviews and fewer traditional reviews.

There is plenty of current criticism that still fits the model Atlas describes, and few would agree with him that "coverage of books is almost too plentiful." Nevertheless, his comments serve to define both review and reviewer, in contrast to the customer reviews on Amazon.com. Essay-like reviews in, for instance, *The New York Times Book Review*, often do put the book in a broader context, shoot barbs at the writer or others, or give substantial commentary on the topic, as Atlas says reviews once did. The lengthy, erudite, multibook reviews in *The New York Review of Books* often ignore the books under consideration but discuss the topic in endless detail. Reviews can inform, entertain, educate, and they often do all of these things, depending on their audience and their bent.

Whatever the individual style, readers know what to expect from these publications and know, too, the credentials of the reviewers. The same is true for the library media. Readers know what to expect from an *LJ* review: a short format geared to the limited time busy librarians have; a brief summary that puts the books in context and often lists comparable titles; a pithy evaluation and recommendation written by librarians who know the field or sometimes by scholars.

Certainly, there is a place for the public forum that Amazon.com provides. Everyone is entitled to

an opinion; but contrary to the adage, *not* everyone is a critic. For those who need reviews to guide buying decisions, to justify challenged books, to aid reader's advisory, the legitimate review media do the job they were designed to do.

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