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## The Curious Case of Criticism



By Marty Kaplan



TOM MERTON VIA GETTY IMAGES

What do you say to a friend whose work has been panned by a critic?

Until I actually read it, I was thrilled to see a review of the new book by an author I've known since college on the front page of the Arts section of the *New York Times*, written by the paper's top daily book critic, Michiko Kakutani. They even ran a picture of him. Over his career he's written novels, short stories and essays; other reviews have acclaimed his literary talent and ambition; he's won an award that many, including me, would kill for. But when I read this review, I was heartsick.

I won't quote it; I don't want to amplify her voice. It's not a hatchet job — she doles out a few passive-aggressive words of approval along the way — but it amounts to: Don't bother. It's (sigh) too uneven, too mawkish, to be worth your time or money.

This has happened over the years to a number of my friends who are writers, filmmakers, performers, artists. Sometimes I don't mention it, as though I never saw the review. Sometimes I talk smack about the reviewer. She's jealous! He's a hack! Sometimes I'm a contrarian. Wow! The front page! No one reads actually them. What counts is the big-gun treatment you got. And that picture — you look marvelous!

What I want to say — but I don't, because it risks seeming too abstract at such an emotionally fraught moment for them — is that the whole enterprise of reviewing is so strange.

For a dozen years, I was an executive and then a writer-producer at Disney. Whenever a movie I was involved with was released, the marketing department would put me on the distribution list for reviews. Thick packets fastened by industrial-grade staples would hit my desk day after day — hundreds and hundreds of reviews, from some sources I'd heard of and plenty more I never knew existed.

And whether the movie was commercially successful or a dud, there was one thing I could be sure of. Any aspect of any film that any critic had singled out for praise would also, inevitably, and just as confidently, be totally trashed by another reviewer. It didn't matter whether the films or the critics were highbrow or lowbrow, name brands or nobodies. The one thing I could count on was that for every critical reaction, there was always an equal and opposite reaction.

You can see that operate in microcosm at the *Times*, which not only runs daily book reviews, but also publishes a Sunday Book Review. Since daily and Sunday operate independently, it's not that rare to find the same book reviewed by both sections. Recently, for example, a new biography of Roger Ailes, Gabriel Sherman's *The Loudest Voice in the Room*, got a daily review from *Times* book critic Janet Maslin and a Sunday review by Jacob Weisberg, editor-in-chief of the *Washington Post's* Slate Group. The two pieces are matter and anti-matter, though which is which is up for grabs.

Maslin's opening salvo — her first line — labels the book “disingenuous.” Indignant at the number of Sherman's sources who wouldn't let their names be used, she bemoans “the untrustworthiness” of “this kind of journalism.” The “frisson of menace” which the people around Ailes exude is “perhaps not enough to explain all those blind items,” because though Ailes may be “very fond of making threats, [i]t's not clear how much he bothers with follow-through.” She calls Sherman's 2011 profile of Ailes in *New York Magazine* “nasty”; “understandably,” she says, Ailes refused to be interviewed for this “too unauthorized” book, which she writes off as not “thoughtful” enough, “tepid,” “rote,” “a great wasted opportunity.”

Weisberg uses the word “disingenuous,” too, but he applies it to Fox News' “manufactured indignation” and “victimhood pose,” not to the book. Fox owner Rupert Murdoch “has always played the outrage game to drive circulation and ratings”; Ailes, “on the other hand, seems to be genuinely seething with resentment, often at his friends as much as his enemies.” Weisberg says Sherman has produced an “actually fair and balanced, carefully documented biography,” written, “it bears noting, without the cooperation of his subject, who set a new benchmark for biographical obstruction by working with the journalist Zev Chafets to rush a more sympathetic portrayal out first.” It's no mystery why many of Sherman's sources refused to go on the record; Ailes is “a rage-a-holic who can't control himself.”

Any two reviewers can cite the same evidence to make opposite points. This doesn't mean that neither is valuable; it means that criticism is a curious kind of discourse. We're long past believing that critics are objective voices articulating timeless truths. Whether they acknowledge it or not, they're enmeshed in the politics of their times, their class and their tribes. Every review is a kind of advocacy — for a canon, a hierarchy, a particular system of distinguishing genius from mediocrity, a ranking of pleasures from base to sublime. Reviews throw a spotlight on work we might ignore, and they can embed that work in a context and tradition we might only dimly be aware of. They're gambits in a continuing cultural conversation, invitations to consider and reconsider, constructions of reality to embrace or dispute.

The problem is that reviews also function as commodities. They're monetized by their publishers. They drive attention and commerce. They can make or break reputations, open or close doors to distributors, spell the difference between a career and a hobby. They're classy gossip, status markers, taste-mongering framed as analysis. They're also a bullshitter's best friend. In an age of information overload, they're a way to cope; knowing-about may not be as good as knowing, but it's arguably a step up from being clueless.

Don't get me wrong: I enjoy reading reviews, and some of them dazzle me with their brilliance. I just wish they didn't turn me into a coward when they diss my posse.

While I was still dithering over what, if anything, to tell my writer friend about Michiko Kakutani, he mentioned her review to me in an email. So what did I say to him? Actually, you've just read it. Oh — and you really do look fabulous in that picture.

*This is a crosspost of my column in the Jewish Journal of Los Angeles, where you can email me if you'd like.*

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