

True or False? The Role of Ethics in Book Reviewing

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CAN, OR SHOULD, LITERARY CRITICISM EVER BE ENTIRELY FREE OF ETHICAL JUDGEMENT? And what does it mean to talk about the place of ethics in criticism? As a literary scholar with an interest in a wide range of fiction in English, and a book reviewer, I am implicitly confronted with these questions whenever I set out to write about literature in either essay or review form. Although the book review and the literary essay are different types of endeavour in many ways, this problem is common to both.

The compass of the ethical is, of course, broad, but the kind of questions I have in mind include whether the critic believes that an author has a duty to express or imply a particular set of social or political beliefs, or even that an author must not do so. They can especially bedevil criticism of historical works. Is it legitimate to criticise Jane Austen for failing to write more about the slaves in the West Indies upon whom the comfortable existence of the Bertram family in *Mansfield Park* depends? If Charles Dickens was sexist, should we excuse him because of the prevailing attitudes of his time? A whole critical tradition of reassessing classics of literature has examined these questions and it can be enlightening if it is done with subtlety and sensitivity to the prevailing morality at the time the works were written: judging literary works out of their historical context can never be either useful or fair.

Beyond the ethical interpretations of what novels are *about*, there is a body of literary and philosophical scholarship which proposes that the act of reading is in itself a means of moral improvement. Wayne Booth, in *The Company We Keep*, proposes that reading makes us better people by promoting empathy with literary characters. Further, he asks himself the very question with which I began this essay, and responds in the affirmative:

even those critics who work hard to purge themselves of all but the most abstract formal interest turn out to have an ethical program in mind—a belief that a given way of reading, or a given kind of genuine literature, is what will do us most good. (5)

Simon Stow, writing about the heated ‘ethical criticism debate’ between Booth, Richard Posner and Martha Nussbaum, remarks that ‘there is something irresistibly appealing about having something as pleasurable as reading also be *good for us* as well’ (194). What he believes these writers all ignore, however, is the extent to which their unstated and perhaps unacknowledged political beliefs colour their attitudes to the question of how, and how far, ethics should affect literary criticism. This is a question that should give any thoughtful cultural critic pause. Stanley Cavell writes, ‘The problem of the critic, as of the artist, is not to discount his (*sic*) subjectivity, but to include it; not to overcome it in agreement, but to master it in exemplary ways’ (94). Quite what it means to master one’s subjectivity ‘in exemplary ways’ is something I will attempt to untangle.

There is, in a sense, more at stake when one’s subject is a recent book by a contemporary writer. Authors are likely to read and react to the reviews which come out in newspapers and magazines following publication of their work. Critics may, therefore, have a direct influence, for good or ill, on an author’s work and indeed their morale. For this reason, I will restrict my remarks in this essay to the specific context of reviews published in edited periodicals, either newspapers, magazines or scholarly journals, in response to the publication of a book, rather than scholarly literary criticism in peer-reviewed articles or monographs on the one hand, or crowd-sourced commentary on sites like Goodreads on the other hand. I don’t intend to discuss ‘external’ questions, like whether you should review a friend’s book, or whether you should be influenced by an author’s reputation. I am interested in the judgements a reviewer makes about a book, and whether those judgements can ever be free of any ethical stance.

The definition of ‘ethics’ I want to rely on is simply that in the *Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary*: ‘moral principles; rules of conduct’, where ‘moral’ means ‘concerned with accepted rules and standards of human behaviour’. In this context, I am interested in the ethical standards that a reviewer, explicitly or implicitly, uses to judge a book and its author. Basically, I am referring to the

question of the reviewer's idea of what a literary work should do, rather than what it should be.

I have been in the reviewing game now for about 15 years. There have been stretches of weeks or months over the past decade when I rarely had fewer than five books on my reviewing pile, with each deadline springing up to replace the last with a regularity that I remember finding reassuring. I have also been a book reviews editor for two very different periodicals—a locally-published monthly magazine and an academic literary journal. I relished the challenge of finding a good match between book and reviewer, and bore the drudgery of copy-editing without too much complaint. I don't enjoy conflict, so the inevitable stoushes made me want to crawl into a hole and hide, but I have usually done what I could to defend the reviewer against the angry author, and taken it on the chin if it was genuine editorial misjudgement. But I rarely feel the need to apologise to an author for a review I have written or published, even though reviews can fracture friendships and sever collegial bonds.

While I have written hundreds of reviews and edited more, and have conducted classes on review-writing, I haven't spent much time theorising about book reviews, much less formulating lists of rules. I've reviewed a range of general non-fiction, but mostly I've covered fiction and creative non-fiction, and it is these reviews that concern me here.

The best reviews of creative writing speak to me personally. They follow no predictable formula. In defiance of the various rule-makers—and lists of rules are easily found on the Internet—as both reader and editor I don't care whether they discuss the epigraph, the title, the author's previous work, the voicing, the technique, the editing, or any other specific aspect of a book. They can include some plot summary, as long as it serves the needs of the review; and this may be controversial, but I can't see why disclosing the ending of a novel is so frowned-upon.

What I do care about is whether reviewers express their opinions about the book and give some idea why they think as they do. Kerryn Goldsworthy, in her blog *Still Life with Cat*, rather than formulating a list of rules, sets out a list of people to whom the reviewer has a responsibility. She prefaces it by saying 'It was a list whose length surprised even me': it includes the review's readers, the book's potential readers, the author of the book, the editor and the publication who have requested the review, literary culture in general, and yourself. Some of these responsibilities are concerned with conducting oneself professionally, but under 'the writer(s) or editor(s) of the book in question', she includes, 'to read the book carefully and comment on it thoughtfully; ... not to misrepresent it, and ... not to say anything that will actually make them want to slash their wrists'. To yourself,

she writes, you have a responsibility ‘to refuse to say anything you don’t mean’. In a book review, in contrast to academic literary criticism, ‘saying what you mean’ involves providing an explicit evaluation of the work. Without evaluation, a review is either pure description or waffle and is of little use or interest to readers.

To make an evaluation which, however subjective it may be, is still fair, it is essential to let the book approach you as much on its own terms as possible, giving it time to open itself up to you before deciding what you think. Delaying the decision (‘decide’ comes from Latin *de* + *caedere* = ‘to cut off’) is vital if you are going to write a fair review. Deciding *what* you think comes first for me, before deciding *why* you think it. And that doesn’t work if you have a checklist of explicit criteria to measure the work against. Nevertheless, a review is in important ways a judgement of value and therefore the critic must have a set of standards, however inchoate and unacknowledged.

Many of these standards are—or at least appear to be—in the realm of aesthetics rather than ethics: questions of structure, plotting, narrative pacing and so on. Characterisation might seem a purely aesthetic issue as well, but this is where ethics begins to show. It can be a matter of how authors ‘treat’ their characters: whether they invent ‘dispensable’ people—particularly common in crime fiction—whether they include or exclude minority groups, or treat them with respect. The question of the author’s relation to their material is also important, particularly when the work is in the form of memoir.

As I have noted, there is much advice available for would-be reviewers. Scanning the Internet offerings on ‘how to write a book review’, perhaps the most immediately appealing advice I found was, ‘Review the book you read—not the book you wish the author had written’ (Asenjo). But like many seemingly common-sense statements, on further thought this injunction might have little practical meaning. One could certainly take the author’s intentions into account (*pace* Wimsatt and Beardsley¹) if they are obvious or easily discoverable, but one might still legitimately deplore the nature of the book the author has chosen to write, and express a wish they had used their talents in another way.

An obvious example of the imposition of a critic’s moral view on the whole conception of a novel is a review of Amy T. Matthews’ *End of the Night Girl* (2011). Matthew’s novel has a double narrative in which a present-day Adelaide waiter, Molly, is obsessed by an account which she is herself writing of a young Polish victim of the Holocaust. It is a novel of great subtlety and moral complexity, and, in Matthews’ own words, ‘is in essence ... a novel about the ethics of fictionalising

¹ William K. Wimsatt, and Monroe C. Beardsley argued in their influential article ‘The Intentional Fallacy’ that ‘the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art.’

the Holocaust' (Dooley, 'Walking'). This is difficult and contested territory, as Matthews is well aware, and to some degree, critical misgivings might be anticipated. Esther Marion points out that 'writing on the Nazi genocide has been marked by the tension between rupture and continuity', and there is certainly an acknowledgement of this tension in Matthews' novel. I was therefore taken aback by what Christopher Bantick wrote in the *Australian*: 'this is a bold novel, yet I can't help thinking Matthews should have written a stand-alone story about the Holocaust and not attempted to splice the contemporary with the historical. *Gienia's story matters; Molly's does not*' (22, emphasis added). Until the last sentence this could have been a criticism of a risky undertaking which failed for aesthetic or technical reasons. But to explicitly discount the value of one woman's life like this is questionable, especially when the novel is itself a struggle with the ethics of writing about great suffering from a position of safety and privilege.

But am I immune to making similarly questionable ethical judgements? In 2012, I reviewed the thriller *Thirst* by L.A. Larkin, set in Antarctica. This book conformed to every stereotype of the genre—in fact I based my review on these stereotypes:

The story proceeds from predicament to predicament, clichés mounting till they threaten to bury us in an avalanche. The dialogue is stilted, the heroics are overdone, the environmental preaching heavy-handed.

My impatience with the thriller genre is palpable in my review. A book like this is, clearly, written to very specific formula and aims only for light entertainment. However, there was more to my objection than irritation with generic conventions:

For me, the biggest surprise about this book came at the very end, when I read the author's bio and found that the writer (with a carefully non-gender-specific name) is actually female. I suppose one could read a small victory for feminism into a woman making inroads into a male-dominated genre, but even that is undercut by the confirmation of gender stereotypes at every turn. OK, Maddie is tough, but she has to depend on Luke to save her life. Of course, one could argue that this is a thriller, not a tract. But there is explicit moralising throughout, and it is a little disappointing that in Larkin's imagination we still need a maladjusted six foot three male to save the world.

My criticism here could be boiled down to my exasperation with a female author colluding in the sexism of the thriller genre. If the book had been written by a male author, my review would still have expressed impatience with the stereotypes and the tedious predictability of the sensational plot. The sex of the author added

indignation to my assessment. In principle perhaps it shouldn't matter who the author of a novel is, and my criticism should be gender blind: it is not any particular author's duty to speak on behalf of their own sex, race, nationality, or sexual orientation. In practice, it was just the last straw. Perhaps I should allow for the fact that Bantick's moral objections in his review of Matthews' novel are equally valid, but on reflection, I don't regret the position I took. If the book had any aesthetically redeeming features—if it was well-written, or well-structured—I might have made allowances for the sexism, but even so it seemed outrageous to me that a woman should perpetuate such stereotypes. There is an interaction between aesthetics and morality which is hard to disentangle. I think in this case I failed to master my subjectivity. On the other hand, I also refused to say what I didn't mean: and after giving it some thought I did say what I did mean.

This leads me to some reviews I am a little less comfortable about, though I still stand by them. Early in my reviewing career I reviewed the travel book *Llama for Lunch* by Lydia Laube. I concluded the review,

Llama for Lunch is a work of breathtaking solipsism with few beauties of style or wit to recommend it and I ... feel a little embarrassed that a fellow Australian could expect, apparently with confidence, to entertain us with such facile rubbish.

One of my criticisms is that Laube writes of her travels in South American but reveals very little about herself. I started the second paragraph of my review by asking, 'Who is Lydia Laube?', and ended it by saying, 'I'm sorry if this is a secret which she would prefer wasn't known, but Lydia Laube was born in 1948'. This was information easily obtained from an external source, and I thought it was relevant because I was ready to forgive her some of the immaturity of the book if she had been younger. But again, to what extent is it legitimate to base criticism on a writer's sex, or age, or other personal characteristics? Is it because a travel book in particular seems to require a personal investment, some candour about the author's own life and situation? Unless it's a factual guide book, it's a kind of memoir. If the traveller says nothing about herself, it is hard for her to enlist our interest in her travels, and we are left with poorly contextualised, ill-informed and sometimes insulting trivia. Once again, my ethical criticism is closely linked to aesthetic judgement: the words 'facile' and 'trivia' denote a failure to pay proper attention to the places and people who are the ostensible subjects of the work, and in my judgement, the book just becomes a vehicle for the incurious and vacant gaze of someone we know nothing about.

Another travel book I reviewed was *The Veiled Lands* by Christine Hogan. My review drips with contempt. It is very short—less than 200 words—but I managed to fit in the following sentence:

Ostensibly bent on researching women in Islam, she would ask questions if she happened to run across a female, but usually this flirtatious woman of a certain age was quite happy being squired by the handsome male companions who she lined up to escort her.

Was this unduly harsh, or worse, did it cross the line between legitimate criticism of the work and personal attack? Hogan certainly thought so, and wrote me an indignant email complaining about what I had said. Perhaps my expectations were unreasonable, though in a case like this they are set up by the author in the title and introduction to a book and I think a critic is entitled to complain if they are not fulfilled. However, I think I did go too far here and would not write in that way now. My tone was insulting and ungenerous, and I allowed the author little credit for the aspects of the book which were interesting and worthwhile. Peter Craven believes that one should avoid 'second-guessing of the "I don't like it but you might" kind, which is both factitiously obvious ... and which patronises the reader' (quoted in Goldsworthy). I tend to agree: although this would be a way of signalling to the reader that what you are offering is based on a subjective opinion, it is, or should be, redundant and from a practical point of view, uses up space which one would rarely like to surrender.

In reviewing fiction, there are obvious pitfalls to avoid, such as conflating the narrator and the author and assuming that characters' opinions (even those of sympathetic characters) are shared by the author. Irony can be notoriously difficult to detect, and expert critics' interpretations can diverge widely. I find it refreshing and sometimes chastening to hear novelists speaking frankly about how they go about writing and where ethics comes in. I interviewed Melbourne novelist Andrea Goldsmith in 2014, and asked her, 'To what extent is your choice of multiple points of view an ethical rather than just a technical one?' Her response was very revealing:

AG: I don't really understand what you mean.

GD: ... it's making sure that you're giving people equal weight, that you're doing justice to everyone.

AG: Oh, no, I'm not worried about that, oh, goodness, no! They work for me, but mostly they work for the novel. ... Everything is in service to the overall coherence of the novel. I don't believe that novels are fair or politically correct and I don't think they ought to be. I've always believed that you can get away with a hell of a lot more in fiction than you ever can in non-fiction. I had a paedophile in *Reunion*, a sympathetic paedophile, and I got away with it. I couldn't have in non-

fiction. ... That's what fiction can do—silence as well as challenge the most basic values and attitudes. I love that subversive but very powerful aspect of fiction. (Dooley, "They All Begin" 6-7)

One of my main reasons for establishing the electronic journal *Writers in Conversation* was to publish exactly these types of exchanges—a kind of 'reality check' for literary critics like me who get into the habit of making assumptions about the ethics of fiction. Another forum which I have found particularly enlightening in this respect is novelist Charlotte Wood's *The Writer's Room*, an online subscription series in which Wood speaks candidly and at length with other writers about their craft.² In her interview with Tegan Bennett Daylight, for example, there were many surprising moments, including a discussion of 'killing' characters:

CW: You can get away with a lot if you kill someone. Especially a young person. And it is sort of suspect.

TBD: Yeah, that's right. That's what I mean about people being mesmerised. It's like, 'Oh, my god! He's so sick and he's dying. Chemotherapy!'

CW: I've done that—killed babies, a couple of times. In a horrible way it's a sort of guaranteed crowd-pleaser.

TBD: It's a bit of a cheap trick, isn't it? [laughs] Oh god.

CW: But I think doing that is perhaps a part of learning to write, don't you? Slowly learning to resist the easy manipulation of readers' feelings. (5)

Critics have every right to call out such 'cheap tricks', even if the author intended to use them. Authors use 'tricks' (cheap or not) all the time to influence readers' opinions or, perhaps more to the point, emotions. As critics, we can recognise and even applaud the skill with which they accomplish this without agreeing with them, but at the same time we can criticise the author's implied ethics if they offend us. Sometimes we might misinterpret their intentions, but I take comfort from the fact (or the hope) that I am not the only reviewer of any particular book. And authors are also learning their limits as they write, as Wood and Daylight show in their discussion above. Christos Tsiolkas, who was interviewed by Wood

² *The Writer's Room* ceased publication in December 2015 and the issues are no longer available online. Wood has now published a collection of the interviews from the series as a book.

in the December 2015 number of *The Writer's Room*, found the experience of writing his third novel, *Dead Europe*, 'completely frightening':

Frightening because when you unleash certain thoughts, they feel like you can't control them. That is the book where I learned that there are certain limits to what you should unleash. ... There may be readers who think I didn't make the right ethical choice, that I went too far, but I did actually learn the limit. And learned that there is a moral and right reason to set limits in what you do with writing a book. (7)

In this case, Tsiolkas is concerned with the danger a certain kind of writing can pose not just to readers but to writers themselves. Other writers are less concerned about the effect their writing has on their audience. Tabish Khair, interviewed in 2015, said, 'I think a creative writer should write as well as he can, and then let other people decide whether his work is relevant or not, preferably ten years after his death'. (Chaubey)

A more recognisable problem, and one that writers often mention, is the literal or naïve reading. Bennett Daylight told Wood,

when *Bombora* was published, a couple of people said to me, in a worried sort of way, 'It's not very feminist, is it?' I was stunned. I mean, *I'm* a feminist but life is complicated, people don't always behave in a feminist way, or if they do, then that's another story of darkness and weirdness and all that kind of stuff. (7)

Similarly, J.M. Coetzee received a letter from a reader complaining that he had included 'an anti-Semitic remark' in *Slow Man* (Auster and Coetzee 96). The remark was uttered by one of his characters and it would be a very naïve reader who would conflate the opinions of this particular author and character pair. However, in this case the reader was making a slightly different point: 'Your reference to "Jews" made in this derogatory way in no way furthered the story, and in my opinion should not have been used. For me an interesting book has been spoiled' (94). This criticism is akin to the common dislike of explicit sex or violence used 'gratuitously' in art. I would argue that Coetzee is about the least likely of authors to include gratuitous sex, violence or racism in his work—he seems to me to have a scrupulous regard for 'the overall coherence of the novel' (in Goldsmith's words), but clearly this reader disagreed—and felt strongly enough that he or she would write to a world-famous Nobel-Prize-winning author to tell him so. As a reviewer, I would hope to try and provide some guidance to readers about what fiction is and is not, what authors might be aiming to achieve, and the pitfalls of reading without some kind of awareness that the words on the page are not always intended to be interpreted simply and literally.

There is room for a variety of viewpoints among readers, although, as Rebecca Solnit has recently discovered, that is not apparent to everyone, in particular the man who responded to her statement that she identified with Nabokov's *Lolita* by saying, 'To read *Lolita* and "identify" with one of the characters is to entirely misunderstand Nabokov'. On the other hand, as she points out,

there's a currently popular argument that books help us feel empathy, but if they do so they do it by helping us imagine that we are people we are not. ... The popular argument that novels are good because they inculcate empathy assumes that we identify with characters.

This, of course, is the line taken by Booth, as discussed above. But Solnit points out the danger of this belief, because there are books in the canon that 'inculcate denigration and degradation of women as cool things to do'. This applies not only to women, of course, but to any less powerful beings, human or animal. Solnit cites Arthur C. Danto's work, arguing that 'art can inflict moral harm and often does, just as other books do good'. They can help us feel empathy but they can also help us fail in empathy if they just reinforce our existing beliefs by acting like an echo chamber. And they help perpetuate oppression by operating on the oppressed as well:

You read enough books in which people like you are disposable, or are dirt, or are silent, absent, or worthless, and it makes an impact on you. Because art makes the world, because it matters, because it makes us. Or breaks us. (Solnit)

There is of course no guarantee that a particular work of literature, once it has been published, will reach only those readers attuned to the ironic or satirical qualities of its author's particular voice. Should it be part of the critic's role to help make these readers understand that the attitudes expressed in a novel are not always shared by the author, and show them other, less judgemental, ways of reading literature?

I do believe that a careful reading of a novel can sometimes tease out some opinions that are at least more in tune with their author's thinking than others, but why should this be important? I wonder if it has to do with a certain pervasive idea that art should be in some not altogether straightforward way 'truthful'. Iris Murdoch said that 'a novelist working well and honestly, and only saying what he (*sic*) knows and what he understands, will in fact tell a lot of important truths about his society' (W.K. Rose 18). She discussed the implications for criticism of this idea in her essay 'Art is the Imitation of Nature':

It is instructive in art to look at the critical vocabulary—what sort of things the critics say, most naturally, about the form of art. Some criticism of literature is purely formal, but very much more of it is, somehow, moral, and, in particular the critic may accuse the writer of some kind of lying or misrepresentation. Words used about novels such as ‘sentimental’, ‘pretentious’, ‘vulgar’, ‘trivial’, ‘banal’ and so on, impute a kind of falsehood. (245)

My own reviews certainly fit in this mould and I use most of these words from time to time to describe fiction that does not ring true to me. This is of course a subjective judgement. The example Murdoch often used when asked about bad fiction was Ian Fleming’s James Bond series:

they’re about the great popular hero who has lots of girls and is good looking, all-powerful, always successful, violent—this is indeed an image of the ego. In a great novel you don’t feel that the elementary, illusory values are the only thing that the novelist is interested in. He is not deceived by them, he is not simply displaying his egoistic fantasy life. If he mentions them, he will place them in some way. A good novelist does this instinctively: he shows the falseness of illusion. (Lesser 15)

And in turn, these words could equally be directed at book reviewers. In 2014 John Dale wrote a contentious article for *The Conversation* complaining about the Australian reviewing scene. In response, Peter Rose wrote: ‘What a clichéd, ungenerous and discreditable overview of book reviewing in this country, with its sentimental and predictable coda about mythic Manhattan standards’. So it seems that cliché, predictability, superficiality and sentimentality are common criticisms of literature, of reviews and even of critiques of reviewing.

What is at stake in this contest? Is the standard of criticism important because of the power of art to change the way we think, and falsity in art, and consequently in criticism of art, is therefore really dangerous? Experienced and thoughtful critics are, contrary to Dale’s opinion, abundant in Australian literary culture; and whatever their formal qualifications, they help their fellow readers navigate the nuances and ambiguities of literature not by instructing them in the ‘correct’ way of reading but by offering critiques based on informed attention to the individual work. I believe this is what Cavell means by mastering one’s subjectivity. The critiques of individual reviewers may be idiosyncratic and may contradict each other, and that’s as it should be, as long as one’s main object of attention is the work being reviewed. Peter Rose, in his riposte to Dale, quotes Frank Kermode’s introduction to his book *Pleasing Myself*: ‘So I educate myself in public, which I take

to be the reviewer's privilege' (Kermode viii). There is one point on which I differ from Rose, however:

Dale's article is full of arresting assertions. 'Book reviewing is about the reader', he confidently asserts. Which reader? Most of the critics I know feel a greater sense of obligation to the work itself, free of commercial or promotional considerations.

Although I know many people read book reviews to decide whether to buy a book, I agree that commercial and promotional considerations should never be allowed to colour one's judgement, and, in any case, we can't predict our various readers' expectations. Kerry Goldsworthy points out that

some readers regard book reviewing as a consumer guide, others as a form of entertainment, others as an intellectual contribution to the cultural conversation, and still others as a minor art form in itself.

But I do believe that as reviewers we pay close attention to the work in order to communicate our reflections and opinions to the potential readers of our reviews. 'Obligation to the work itself', in the sense of open-minded attention and disinterested assessment, is essential, but although creative writers may write without consciously considering their audience, as a reviewer I am undertaking a deliberate act of communication with fellow readers, from my particular coordinates of taste and experience, to offer them an example of engagement with this particular work, and to attempt to excise my ethical views from this communication would be another kind of falsity.

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