

11/11/66

Dear Mr. Fremont-Smith,

Gracious, how brilliant you are! (The Effect of Books). Dazzling! Illuminating as the aurora borealis at the equator! Your intellectual Judo is absolutely brown-belt!

Much of it is clear to me, like how the only book that has conclusions has none ("called for no specific action"), how "truthfulness" is measured, what is "acceptable" ("trustworthy, respectable, safe", although I concede this is a novel definite of stoolpidgeonry a la Wesley Liebeler), and what is "offensive". It is to your credit that you spell it out, and in the pages of the New York Times.

So significant is your analysis that I am confident Cornell will not complain that its masters thesis was awarded Harvard. Being both unmentionable and nonexistent, I have difficulty understanding whether you intend this for classification under "trustworthy, respectable, safe" or "truthfulness".

There are two things I believe the readers of the New York Times, if you will indulge my assumption of the critic's prerogative of self-appointment, would find illuminating. One is just how getting "some documents transferred to the National Archives", by which I understand you to mean something more than moving them from the west side of Seventh Street to the East side, "seems victory enough for a book" or for anything else. Tell us, please, how important it is that the national heritage is augmented by the addition of subscriptions blanks, unused, to "Life", Marina Oswald's sewing basket, child-care, cookery, embroidery, crocheting and sewing ("Simplicity") literature, two paperback editions of Ian Fleming and an absolutely elevating collection of Christmas and greeting cards, used and unused, with and without envelopes. Explain, as only you can, how ennobling it is that Mrs. Oswald's sewing basket contained a religious medal (in parenthesis, medal, religious), a Mexican coin and a nail file. Should your young hero be unable to supply you with the entire list (a situation less surprising than you might offhand consider), be my guest.

Then tell us how all this tremendous influence was brought to bear by a book so rapidly abandoned by its hardback publisher and readers that it was being reminded about two months after publication date and was actually available in paperback within three months.

There are other jewels of knowledge you could impart, like how "Inquest" was "attacking the Commission's findings" when it assumes all their basic assumptions and in that slight and well-iffed area outside this basic premise, according to the best expert, the author, before your articles appeared, is wrong.

As a fitting sequel to your articles on "The Effect of Books" may I suggest a series on "The Effect of Reviewers"?

Sincerely yours,

Harold Weisberg
Hyattstown, Md. 20734

The New York Times

TIMES SQUARE NEW YORK NY 10036

Nov. 14, 1966

Dear Mr. Weisberg:

Gracious, what a funny letter! But let me try to clear up a couple of points you raise. Judging from the letter, I'm afraid the article was not as clear as I intended. I wished only to show how, and to what small degree, one book was effective. A factor involved with the Epstein book, it seemed to me, was that it came from within the Establishment. I did not say that this should be a factor involved, only that it was--and that this explained in important part why that book was the first to reach a powerful but hitherto silent and uncommitted audience. In the same vein, when I said that what is acceptable to that audience was what it considered "trustworthy, respectable, safe," I was stating what I believe to be fact, not endorsing it. That the sarcasm here escaped you surprises me. Obviously, safety should have little to do with book or news or any other kind of appraisal; obviously, it has all too much to do with it. As for results--the point I was trying to make was not how wonderfully effective this book had been, but how small the effects are even of a particularly effective polemical book: it was (has been credited so, at any rate) effective in getting some documents transferred to the National Archives, nothing more that is measurable. Books do of course have effects; but the burden of the piece was that the effects are specifically far more modest than is commonly supposed.

You are of course right about the non-Harvard thesis; a stupid error on my part which I regret.

I think you are right, too, about the appropriateness of a piece on the effect of reviewers. I have been planning for some time to write such a piece, and hope to complete it shortly.

Sincerely,

Eliot Fremont-Smith
Eliot Fremont-Smith

Mr. Harold Weisberg
Hyattstown, Md. 20734

20734

November 18, 1966

Dear Mr. Fremont-Smith,

At the risk of losing what benefit might accrue to have discovered the medium that does not give you offense ("funny") I abandon it for reptition of the question: please tell us, in the Times, or even just me, by letter, what great benefit flows from the placing in the archive of the pictures and Xrays now said to be those of the assassination of three years ago?

You may, as you have, credit Epstein with this accomplishment. I would suggest that it came about despite the addications of the printed press and because of the pressures put upon various people by the electronic media, especially by Merk Lane and me on it, and not as a national boon but as a combination continued suppression and public-relations ploy. Frankly, I am astounded that one of your deep and penetrating understanding of this entire field, your total recall of the fact of which you write with such force and eloquence, and above all your clear grasp of the political realities of our day and this situation, allowed this possibility to escape you.

In this event your reference is exclusive of that other great ennoblement of the national heritage, the transfer of certain documents and objects from the west side of Ninth Street to its East, from the Department of Justice to the Archives, first let me give Epstein credit for that, too, for you (ably assisted by your gracious colleagues) have taught me it is better to give than to receive and I am by now quite happy with the attribution to others of what I first did (and often did alone).

So I would like to broaden the question, giving it two parts, and I humbly look forward to the edifying explanation that you can no doubt summon.

Sincerely,

Harold Weisberg

For your piece on the effect of reviewers, I would encourage you to broaden it also from what I had in mind and canvass the wholesalers to compare the sales of Inquest in the metropolitan New York area with those of WHITEWASH the week Epstein enjoyed Goodwin's review and I was, customarily, ignored in the papers. I will be honest with you: I know the answer.