

Of Making Many Book Reviews

By Nina King

“YOUR JOB must be very difficult,” commented my hostess at a recent party, “having to get good reviews for Bob Woodward.”

Wrong on two counts: First, it's not that difficult to get good reviews for Woodward, who is, after all, one of the most celebrated American journalists. Second, that's not my job.

My job, I said to my hostess, is to get respectable reviews for all the authors whose works are selected for review in *Book World*, my prolific *Post* colleague Woodward included. By respectable, I mean a review by a knowledgeable and intelligent writer, who is neither friend nor rival of the author, who has no discernible ax to grind, and who can write lively and succinct prose.

And that can be hard.

My friend's comment represented the cynical extreme of misconceptions about the way *Book World* operates: the belief that our reviews are tainted by favoritism or advertising, that we are part of a conspiracy to promote our writing friends while trashing our—or their—enemies. Not true. But neither is the other, naive extreme, which imagines *Book World*'s editors and writers spending long, languid afternoons reading the latest John Grisham or the new Annie Proulx while consuming a lot of bonbons. Mine is a great job but not that great.

Bonbons (and chocolate chip cookies) do go fast in *Book World*, but so does time. Most of our reading and writing takes place at home after regular office hours. During office hours we pick books for review and assign them to reviewers. As the reviews arrive we edit them for length, style, internal logic and consistency, consulting the reviewer about changes. The deputy and assistant editors also spend a lot of time serving the gods of the new technology—by inserting the commands that control type size and style before the reviews are exported to art director Fran-

cis Tanabe's layouts. To do this they must speak the several languages of our hybrid software and hardware systems—a veritable babble of Road Runner, Microsoft Word and Quark XPress.

While my colleagues are at play—in some cases reluctantly—in the *Brave New Electronic World*, I'm planning ahead for next week and next month and next season, while trying to keep up with the mountain of paper—budgets, schedules, letters, complaints, et al.—that is the middle manager's lot even in the electronic era. I read new reviews as they come in and write comments on them; I also proofread the final version of each review as we prepare to close the issue on Friday.

But the most important and challenging part of my job—and my colleagues'—is selecting the books to be reviewed (perhaps 1,800 of the 40,000-plus titles published in the United States each year) and deciding

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who is to review them. The books, usually in the shape of uncorrected proof copies, are sent to us by their publishers several months in advance of publication. Certain categories are eliminated immediately: how-to, self-help, very technical or specialized books, also those that have been self-published. Such eliminations are expedient rather than elitist, ways of reducing the mountains of books. In choosing from the many thousands that remain, we seek a balance—or a series of balances—between the literary and the commercial, scholarship and journalism, poetry and prose, politics and art.

I make preliminary choices based on advance material from publishers, previews in the trade press, the author's track record, word of mouth, etc. I go through the new books that come in every day and add titles to the “possible” table—as do the



ILLUSTRATION BY GARY BASEMAN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

“Every editor who’s ever worked at Book World has had the experience of having to run a negative review of a good friend’s book. Or should I say former good friend?”

other staffers. During the course of the week I amass a pile of five or six books for each editor to focus on during our regular Monday morning planning session, which is attended by the five editors, critic Jonathan Yardley and editorial assistant Edna Mae Storti.

The first item of business on Monday is to decide on the “lead review,” the review that will be featured on the front of the next issue. Usually that’s the best-written, most timely review on hand of a book of some depth or with broad appeal.

After making a few other decisions about the content of the next issue, we turn to assigning. Each editor presents the books on his or her pile and suggests reviewers. No holds are barred in the discussion that follows; no reputation is sacred. Must we really review the new volume by Ed Gibbon, or is everyone bored with Roman politics?

THE CLICHE IN THE CARPET (OR HARBORS OF THE HEART OF DARKNESS)

Like the headline writer, the regular book reviewer must resist the temptation of certain overused literary allusions that sooner or later will spring unbidden into his lead. Here, in ascending order of exhaustion, are Book World's Top Five:

5. "The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there." (L.P. Hartley, *The Go-Between*)

4. "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession

of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife." (Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*)

3. "Of making many books there is no end . . ." (*Ecclesiastes* X11.12)

2. "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." (Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*)

1. "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." (Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*)

—Nina King

Surely Thoreau and Emerson are too close friends for reviewing comfort? And Hemingway is getting really weird on the subject of Fitzgerald. Speaking of weird: Does anybody know a whale person? There's this fat new book by the author of *Typee* we need to send out this week . . .

POOLING facts and fancies, we seek for each book a reviewer who will be fair, knowledgeable and maybe even fun. Most of our reviewers are experienced writers with expertise in the book's subject. In making assignments, we are concerned to avoid conflicts of interest, real or apparent—especially hidden conflicts. Reviewers are welcome to have strong opinions, but they should not try to pass off those opinions as fact. And they should support them with evidence drawn from the book, so that the reader can make up his own mind. Individual reviewers speak only for themselves and not for Book World or The Washington Post, despite what the quotes on dust jackets may imply. The side-effects of this can be painful. Every editor who's ever worked at Book World has had the experience of having to run a negative review of a good friend's book. Or should I say former good friend?

Despite our best efforts to avoid conflicts of interest, occasionally we do get burned. Asked if she knew the distinguished male historian whose latest work Book World was offering her, the almost as distinguished female historian murmured something about having met him once at a cocktail party.

It must have been quite a party. We later learned that reviewer and author had enjoyed a very public love affair, and that Book World's assignment was briefly the laughing-stock of history departments all over the country.

The degree of acquaintance that consti-

tutes conflict of interest is a continuing subject of debate. We fretted a lot about one reviewer who acknowledged that, although he didn't know the author of the book we were offering him, his teenage son had dated the author's daughter. We assigned him the book anyway because he'd been trustworthy in the past.

The communal high point of the Book World week often is the Thursday meeting in which the editors write headlines for the whole issue. This task prompts flights of free association, which frequently lead to the nomination of one of the classic, all-purpose Book World headlines such as "Harbors of the Heart." No one can remember if we ever actually used that headline, but we've almost used it dozens of times.

"Heart" headlines are a particular temptation: Heart of Darkness, In the Heart of the Heart of the Country, The Heart of the Matter, The Heart Has Its Reasons. Other headlines that have earned a place on our dishonor roll of cliches: Through a Glass Darkly (numerous variations possible), Passage to India, Out of Africa, Make It New, Brave New World, All in the Family, The Sound and the Fury, The Burden of the Past, The Figure in the Carpet, A Room of One's Own.

In both headlines and reviews, any allusion to the following works should be carefully vetted: *Heart of Darkness*, "The Second Coming," "The Waste Land," *Alice in Wonderland*, "Dover Beach" and "The Tempest."

I'm reluctant to continue in this revealing vein for fear that scores of Alert Readers are sharpening their pencils to circle examples of these and other cliches in this very issue of Book World. Such are the hazards of one of the best jobs in the world. ■