

The Literary World How Book Reviews Make or Break Books —Or Have No Impact

Feuds, Intrigue and Inveigling
Abound in Unusual Field;
'Catch-22' and 'Love Story'
'Enormous Egos, Thin Skins'

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NEW YORK—Some blurbs for new books you'll never see in the publishers' ads:

"Here's a book so transcendently bad it makes us fear not only for the condition of the novel in this country, but for the country itself."—New York Times on Chandler Brossard's "Wake Up. We're Almost There."

"A contemptible example of the misuse of access to the public prints . . . the starkest example of irresponsible publishing to come to our attention."—Saturday Review on William Powell's "The Anarchist Cookbook."

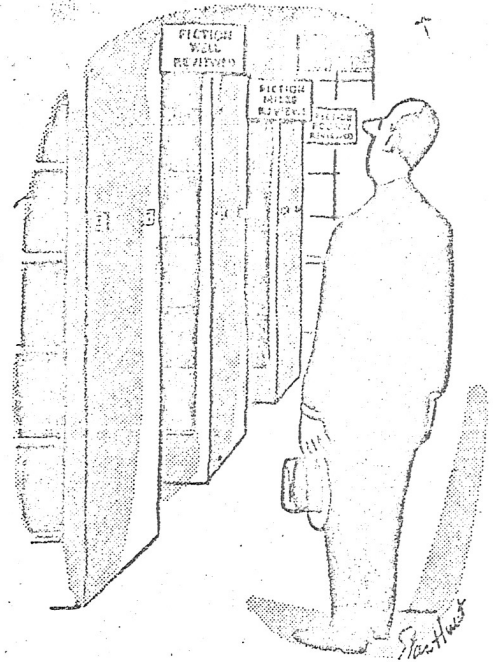
"Eight hundred pages long and two inches thick, the book is an imposing object that should find many uses. It could serve, for instance, as . . . a dead weight that could instantly sink a prosperous 68-year-old author into the East River."—Time magazine on Irving Stone's "The Passions of the Mind."

As these excerpts show, book reviews sometimes are as verbally violent as the bloodiest Western. But unlike fictional frontier sheriffs, book reviewers don't always get their man. The unfavorable New York Times review of the Brossard novel has practically shut off bookstore orders, publisher Richard W. Baron laments. But "The Anarchist Cookbook," which includes instructions to revolutionaries on how to make bombs, is going into its fourth printing. "This is a highly controversial book, made by news reports and novelty," says publisher Lyle Stuart. "A good review can't sell it, and a bad review can't kill it."

Irving Stone's "The Passions of the Mind," a fictionalized biography of Sigmund Freud, has shrugged off knocks from Time and other New York-based periodicals (reviews elsewhere have generally been favorable) and is No. 1 on major best-seller lists. Explains Kenneth McCormick, Mr. Stone's editor at Doubleday: "A good percentage of Stone fans and others buying the book don't read reviews or, if they do, aren't influenced by them."

The response to the reviews of these three spring books shows that the relationship between a book's critical reception and its sales success or failure can be mysterious and unpredictable. Most books, including "Wake Up. We're Almost There," can't survive bad reviews. A few, like "The Anarchist Cookbook," can. Reviews can help novellists like Mr. Stone become popular. But once the authors have made their reputations and won large, loyal followings, bad reviews hurt their egos more than their royalties.

Though bad reviews don't always break a book (and good reviews don't always make it),



Drawing by Stan Hunt © 1961
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no reviews at all usually spell disaster—especially for a work of fiction. Bookstores and libraries seldom order books that don't get reviewed, and potential readers are unaware of their existence because publishers usually can't afford to advertise them extensively. To try to avoid launching a book into a void, publishers make every effort to get reviews. They swamp editors and reviewers with hundreds of review copies of the typical title. Doubleday, for example, sent out 450 review copies of the \$10 Stone novel.

But so great is the flood of review copies that even the most conscientious review editor has to ignore most of them. Library Journal, a publication for librarians that reviews about as many books as any periodical, reviewed only 6,000 of the 24,000 new titles published in the U.S. last year. The New York Times Book Review, generally considered the most prestigious and influential review medium, reported on fewer than 3,000.

To lower the high odds against getting a review, publishers usually go beyond sending out review copies. They line up enthusiastic blurbs from literary celebrities to impress editors and

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reviewers with a book's importance. They make friendly phone calls, pass the word at cocktail parties and take reviewers to lunch.

Farrar, Straus & Giroux had 35 reviewers in for dinner last March to meet one of its authors, Walker Percy, whose third novel, "Love in the Ruins," was published last month. "Reviewers are more likely to acknowledge a book when they know the author," a Farrar-Straus spokesman explains.

Editors don't always know which books will be important. Ralph Nader's "Unsafe at Any Speed," which launched the consumer-protection movement in 1955, was ignored by Life, Time, Newsweek and most newspapers. An enthusiastic review in The New York Times was buried at the end of a column on books about auto racing and sports cars.

Some authors get so upset at being ignored that they cast aside protocol and actively lobby for reviews. Don Kurzman, whose history of the 1948 Arab-Israeli War fell flat upon publication a year ago, says that "if I hadn't gotten into the act, practically nobody would have known the book existed. After pouring three years of my blood and soul into the book, I wasn't going to let it go down the drain."

Getting Attention and Sales

While Mr. Kurzman's agent touted the book to Jewish journals and organizations ("I must have made 50 phone calls," she says), the author stumped the country for four months, appearing on TV interview shows, dropping in on bookstores and dropping off review copies at newspapers in two dozen cities. So far, the book has sold a respectable 16,000 copies. When he learned the New York Times Book Review had assigned a review of the book but didn't plan to run it, he pressured the editors to reconsider. They did so, and six months after publication ran the review—one of the few knocks received by the book, called "Genesis 1948: The First Arab-Israeli War."

"I was disappointed, of course, but it's still better to have an unfavorable review than none at all," Mr. Kurzman says. "There's nothing worse than being unnoticed."

Not everybody agrees with that, however—including Mr. Kurzman's own publisher. "A bad review of a sex novel can be a selling review, but no review of a serious book like this is better than a bad review," says Tom Cervasi, publicity director of World Publishing. For one thing, he says, prospective paperback reprinters and reviewers of Mr. Kurzman's future books may look up the unfavorable Times review and be swayed by it.

A favorable Times review, on the other hand, can send a book back to press even before the review appears. When an advance copy of the Times Book Review with a front page rave of P. G. Wodehouse's "The Girl in Blue" reached Simon & Schuster recently, the delighted publisher immediately ordered a second printing of 7,500 copies on top of the first printing of 12,500.

John Leonard, who became editor of the New York Times Book Review last January after a stint as one of the paper's daily reviewers, claims Times about is overrated. "Any late night TV talk show can sell more books than the front page of the Review," he insists.

Respectability for Reuben

That may be, but without good reviews a non-established author can't always get a talk show invitation. Publisher David McKay attributes the enormous success of "Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex—But Were Afraid to Ask" largely to author David Reuben's TV and radio appearances. But until Life magazine reviewed the book a month after publication, "we couldn't persuade anyone on TV or radio to touch him," recalls the publisher's publicity director, Carolyn Anthony. "Life gave the book respectability and really made it."

On the other hand, Life hasn't been able to unmake books by already established "big money" novelists like Irving Stone, Harold Robbins and Irving Wallace. When Mr. Wallace's "The Seven Minutes" appeared, Life instructed its reviewer to review the novel without first reading it. "If Wallace can sell a book to a publisher and to Hollywood before he writes it, why shouldn't a reviewer review it before he reads it?" asks David Scherman, the magazine's reviews editor.

The sneering review that resulted may have struck Mr. Scherman and Life readers as funny, but not Mr. Wallace. In a subsequent polemic against book reviewers, he posed the question: Why should a book reviewer impugn the motives and talent of wealthy writers, when art, theater and dance critics judge Picasso, Olivier and Nureyev on their art alone?

"In the literary world, money is equated with corruption," he wrote. "A novelist may perform many abnormal, illegal, or antisocial acts. He may admit to homosexuality, alcoholism, addiction to drugs, a penchant for mistresses; he may beat his wife and kick small animals; and somehow this is acceptable, even colorful, and somehow it enhances the literary image. But money, never money, the root of all evil—including evil reviews."

A Basket of Crabs

Jacqueline Susann, author of the best-selling "Valley of the Dolls" and "The Love Machine," charges that reviewers have a vested interest in knocking big money novelists. "You never make a name for yourself by writing good reviews, but by being caustic and turning a phrase at the author's expense," she says. "Why should some guy who's never written anything more in his life than a book on bird watching in Africa, and sold 27 copies, be assigned to review a novel by Leon Uris? There's built-in jealousy, envy, spite in that kind of system."

Envy and spite seem endemic in New York's tight little literary world. "It's a basket of crabs—everyone biting at one another,"

disliked the book but that we disliked the review. It was stylistically pretentious, substantively banal and unintelligent about the novel's Jewish content."

The rough handling of Chandler Brossard's novel, "Wake Up, We're Almost There," was the work of an alleged personal enemy. The reviewer who labeled the book "transcendently bad" was Anatole Broyard, who, it turns out, once was author Brossard's closest friend and was best man at his wedding in 1948. Soon afterward the two fell out, and Mr. Brossard's first novel, published in 1951, contained a contemptible character said to be based on Mr. Broyard. According to Mr. Brossard, Mr. Broyard evened the score 20 years later with his demolition job on Mr. Brossard's fourth novel.

Mr. Broyard denies that any animosity for Mr. Brossard influenced his judgment on "Wake Up, We're Almost There." John Leonard, the editor of the Times Book Review, which published the review, says he didn't know the two men were acquainted. "I have no doubts about Broyard's integrity," he says, "but it may have been a mistake for him to review this book, because his review was subject to misinterpretation."

Book review editors sometimes make the mistake of giving a scholarly book to a specialist who, because of his own related work, has a vested interest in praising or attacking the book's thesis. And some editors aren't above assigning a book on a political issue or figure to a reviewer whose known partisanship makes the tenor of his review pretty predictable. On the other hand, the Saturday Review went to unusual lengths recently to avoid being one-sided in reviewing "Boss," a critical biography of Chicago Mayor Richard Daley. It assigned it to two reviewers—a Daley foe who praised the book and a Daley admirer who panned it.

Many reviewers refuse to review books they think are bad, though for varying reasons. Critic Lionel Trilling read Irving Stone's "The Passions of the Mind" but declined to review it for the Times Book Review on the ground it wasn't worth his time. Walter Clemens, a Times staff reviewer and editor, agrees that it's "a waste of energy to fulminate against bad books." Gay Talese says he's "in such sympathy with writing, and the difficulty of writing, that I respect anyone who can finish a book. If I don't like a book, I recognize that my reasons might be very personal and not worth putting in writing for other people to read."

Most reviewers are particularly loath to cut down first novels. "I never review a bad first novel because I believe every writer is entitled to a second chance," says John Barkham, whose reviews are syndicated to some 46 daily newspapers by the Saturday Review.

But Charles Menaghan, editor of Book World, which is published by the Washington Post and the Chicago Tribune, thinks "codding a first novel isn't a wise idea for the future of the genre. Seventy-five percent of all novels published shouldn't see the light of day," he declares. "A good tanning once in a while teaches a lesson and helps discourage people from publishing crap."

A few first novels succeed despite critical apathy or hostility. Joseph Heller's "Catch-22" caught on in the face of a New York Times three-paragraph review that complained that the World War II novel "grips for want of craft and sensibility" and is "repetitive and monotonous."

More recently, first novelist Erich Segal hit

the jackpot with "Love Story" despite mixed reviews. Time ignored the book until after it became a bestseller, and Newsweek said it "skips from cliché to cliché with an abandon that would chill even the blood of a True Romance editor."

Book reviewing isn't a particularly lucrative trade. Reviewers for most newspapers except the very largest get only the book and a byline. The same for the scholars who review for Library Journal. The Nation pays \$25 to \$50 for a review, The New York Times \$100 to \$350, and Life magazine \$300.

Many newspaper reviews bear such a close resemblance to publicity and jacket copy that publishers suspect the reviewers didn't open their free copy. Even big league reviewers are sometimes so accused. After a Saturday Review reviewer five times misidentified the protagonist of Dalton Trumbo's reissued novel "Johnny Got His Gun" as Johnny, a reader wrote in to point out that the hero's name is actually Joe.

A Harper's review of Peter Matthiessen's "At Play in the Fields of the Lord" so garbled the novel's plot that one reader complained the reviewer "did little except fumble through the pages," and a second charged that the reviewer "demonstrates unmistakably that he hasn't even read the book." Harper's ran the letters—and this note from the reviewer, Redrick Cook:

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"I have just reread the book that I thought I had read, and am appalled that I could have blundered so carelessly in reporting the plot as I did. I would like to apologize unequivocally to Mr. Matthiessen and his publishers; and I would like to refer anyone who has been misled by my review to the better informed reviews of this book that have appeared elsewhere."

One reviewer, Gerald Walker, says he has skipped parts of some books in "sheer self-defense. You don't have to read all of a bad book to know it's bad," he declares. But most reviewers claim to read every word. "I don't skim or skip," says Barbara Eason, a Publishers' Weekly editor and reviewer who can zip through three novels in a single afternoon.

Few reviewers admit having taken speed-reading instruction. "I was speed-reading a decade before these courses came into existence," boasts Mr. Barkham of the Saturday Review Syndicate. Mr. Barkham grinds out a weekly quota of four to five book reviews and an 800-word author interview. "I work seven days a week and even take books along on vacation," he says. "If I didn't have to read books for the job, I'd read them for pleasure."