

THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair

Anonymous book reviews don't foster our literary culture

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What is lost and gained when book reviewers remain faceless? Scott Beale / Laughing Squid, laughingsquid.com

The Saturday Paper publishes anonymous book reviews and, occasionally, reviews by identified critics. That anonymity was a much-discussed feature when the paper launched in March, and the debate continues. Certainly, in running such reviews, the paper sacrifices a critical point of difference between mainstream media and the online world of trolls and fandom avatars.

Debating criticism

The debate here and overseas about our critical culture, whether in print or online, is interesting and vigorous.

Yet attribution is not a topic raised much, because most serious critics and their media outlets don't truck with anonymity. The critics own their words. They put a face to what they say.

And this is, apparently, what The Saturday Paper also values. Its editorial policy reads in part that, "it offers the biggest names and best writing ..."

Just not in its Books section.

Faceless bad reviews

Two principally negative reviews in the Saturday Paper of works by Craig Sherborne on April 5 and Angela Meyer on May 31 draw attention to the dangers of anonymous criticism. The reviews are attributed to "MM" and "DL".

Sherborne is an established writer with four books out, and a history of publishing articles and essays in The Monthly and elsewhere.

Angela Meyer is a young, first-time author publishing with a small independent press. Her collection Captives has received few reviews, and only one in the mainstream press – the Saturday Paper.

Why pan an emerging writer and a small press? There is no contribution being made here to the culture of criticism generally, or to the emerging writer. This is criticism at its laziest. As British critic Ruth Franklin writes, it's harder to critique a work you love than one you don't like.

Not surprisingly, the panning of Meyer's book drew negative comments on the article. Melbourne writer Miles Allinson posted:

I'm not sure why The Saturday Paper decided to devote a quarter of their entire review space to such a mean spirited review of such a humble little book. At best, it seems a misjudgement, in terms of both its target and its execution. At worst, (especially because it's anonymous) it just seems vindictive.





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The Saturday's anonymous reviews don't often strike a vindictive note, or strong notes at all. Possibly, anonymity and the associated lack of seriousness given to the enterprise by the paper encourages blandness. This is disappointing.

James Ley, editor of the Sydney Review of Books, speaking after his recent Pascal Prize award for best Australian critical writing, argues for a different effect:

[criticism's] imperative is to talk about not only literature but all forms of art and creativity in ways that are not necessarily didactic or polemical but which treats them as if they matter and in doing so reminds us why they do.

Restrictions of a small scene?

Some reviewers say that the smallness of the Australian arts community hinders free and bold speech. Critics and reviewers, in this view, are constrained by the possibility of encountering the subject in a future context.

It's happened to me: I reviewed a novel more or less positively but with some criticisms, and then soon after found myself at Varuna The Writer's House for a week's residency with the author. It was a little daunting for us both on the first evening, but the writer was magnanimous and we remain on friendly terms.

If the reason for lack of attribution is to encourage brave criticism then the focus on the author is misplaced. Precious few column inches are given to book criticism in print and online media: it is this that makes the community small, not the size of the Australian population.

More column inches, a critical culture that is engaged and supported by its publishers and editors, and a diversity of reviewers, judges, commissioning editors and readers are what is needed.

The blunt instrument of the angry review

Critics themselves debate the "gloves-off" approach to criticism. American critic and nonfiction writer (and fave of the Sydney Writers' Festival) Daniel Mendelsohn counters Salon.com Books editor Laura Miller's argument that book culture needs protection and encouragement. His conclusion is blunt:

Even the worst of the disparagements wielded by the reviewers in question paled in

comparison to the groundless vituperation and ad hominem abuse you regularly encounter in Amazon.com reviews or the “comments” sections of literary publications. “

Indeed, DL and MM's reviews are not so "flamboyantly negative", to quote Daniel Mendelsohn again, that they warrant anonymity in any context.

DL accuses Meyer of having poor syntax, yet writes, "Captives is also riddled with verisimilitude". Riddled with the appearance of truth? And, "Meyer hasn't bothered to go under the meniscus of character and place". Better to look through the lens, than crouch beneath it. This review is "undergraduate" writing, in the sense that the writer is experimenting with literary effects but through lack of skill and practice blunders occasionally.

A further ethical defence of anonymity might be that it is more important to speak honestly and to bring the truth to bear on a subject, than that the writer be identified. The half-dozen Saturday Paper's anonymous reviews I have read all share superficiality of critique, partly due to the short length but probably more as a result of the context.

They are also strangely similar in syntax, metaphor and non-specialist knowledge of the subject. Could MM, DL, FS, AF *et al* be the same person – or just two or three people? Who knows, they might all be Erik Jensen, The Saturday Paper's Editor, banging out the copy himself.

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