

Books and Book Reviewing, or Why All Press Is Good Press

by Katherine Dalton



When Bob Woodward published *Veil: The Secret Wars of the CIA*, in October of 1987, two things made that book news. One was his assertion that William Casey, the late director of the CIA, had admitted to knowing about the transfer of funds in the Iran-contra deal. The other was the skepticism over Woodward's claim to have interviewed Casey in the hospital. Casey's widow and daughter insisted that one or the other of them was with Casey almost all the time he was recovering from brain surgery, when Woodward says he visited, and that in any case Casey was too sick to have had substantive conversations with anyone—much less with a hostile journalist. Woodward would provide no details, but stuck to his story.

With the prepublication of several chapters in *Newsweek*, the *Veil* controversy had broken by the time David C. Martin came out with his review in *The New York Times Book Review* on October 18. Martin, CBS News' Pentagon correspondent, was reviewing a highly-touted book about a top-secret subject on page one of the *Book Review*. The crux of the matter had to be whether or not Woodward was lying about the biggest revelations in his book. Surely addressing that would make up the heart of Martin's review.

But that is not the heart of Martin's review. The heart of Martin's review goes like this:

... the revelations are not what is so captivating about this book, which reads much better in full length than in the excerpts which have appeared in newspapers and magazines. The revelations are merely the bold strokes in a penetrating, profane

and sometimes brilliant portrait of what textbooks dryly call "the intelligence community."

Elsewhere he writes, "Mr. Woodward, an assistant managing editor of *The Washington Post*, has got into the belly of the beast. It's all here . . ."

This unstinting praise, a page one rave for a book that would go on to be a best-seller. Martin does have some quibbles—but after those laudatory sentences, how serious can they be? How "extensively did Mr. Woodward rely on the word of a man for whom 'to lie was nothing'?" Martin asks. It is a question he cannot answer. After faulting Woodward for a few mistakes, and dismissing them as "small matters," he does wonder if Woodward substantiated more vital parts of his story. But Martin gets no further than wondering; CBS's man on the scene at the Pentagon has no evidence that Woodward has or has not double-checked. Martin's praise is concrete, but with his questions we are just left hanging.

Martin's was only one of the 2,000 or so book reviews that *The New York Times Book Review* publishes every year. As there are problems in this lead *Times* review, so are there problems in the shorter *Times* reviews, and as *The New York Times* is the nation's most influential reviewer (with the sole exception, in academic circles, of *The New York Review of Books*), so the problems it has are universal.

There is nothing peculiar about Martin's review; this is what reviewing is like. Maybe it's laziness more than anything; Martin's review is clearly an oak-paneled-room job—no legwork here—though as a CBS correspondent surely he has resources, some way of looking into this little problem of questionable credibility. If that's not the reason,

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there's also cronydom, the unwillingness to criticize a fellow celebrity journalist, especially when it's his word against that of the grieving widow of the late CIA director. Or maybe Martin is simply imbued with the modern notion that every bit of journalism must be balanced: a quibble here, yes, but oh, the merits . . .

Poor, benighted book reviewing—it's been in bad odor for a good 300 years, or ever since the first English-language review, the *Historical Account of Books and Transactions in the Learned World*, came out in Edinburgh in 1688.

During the late 18th century publishers paid to have their books reviewed. The venality of the business was notorious, and journalism in general was no place for gentlemen. In his *History of England*, Horace Walpole wrote that "as late as 1808, the Benchers of Lincoln's Inn made a bye-law excluding all persons who had written for the daily papers from being called to the Bar." Such a climate was one of the reasons why Sydney Smith and Francis Jeffrey and the other founders of the famous *Edinburgh Review* (1802) did not sign their articles.

Modern problems are a little different. But venality comes in all varieties, and is always happy to modernize. If people are no longer penning their own reviews, the way Poe did ("works of the most notable character"), and Whitman of course ("An American bard at last!"), and even Conrad Aiken (who was quite harsh with himself), they are still reviewing their friends. One of the few positive reviews Jay McInerney (of *Bright Lights, Big City* fame) got for his new novel, *Story of My Life*, was written by his friend P.J. O'Rourke in *The Wall Street Journal* back in September. ("I liked it a lot," said O'Rourke when questioned about the propriety of reviewing a friend's book. "But its subject will bring out the envious and puritanical streak in most reviewers. So I reviewed it as a favor to the book, not Jay.") In a piece he wrote for *The New York Times*, one of its daily reviewers, John Leonard, spoke very frankly about reviewing a friend's book. "I try to give it a good review," he said. "If I don't like the way his mind works, why is he my friend?"

Spy magazine has a running monthly feature called "Logrolling," which chronicles an ongoing series of mutual admiration societies: John Cheever and John Updike, Gore Vidal and Italo Calvino, Anthony Burgess and Robertson Davies, with special notice to D.M. Thomas and Erica Jong. "A tour de force," Thomas wrote of her *Serenissima*. "A treat for Erica Jong's legion of readers." And she in return praised his *Summit* by writing it "will delight and amuse even Thomas's most devoted readers. I am one." Clearly, if before folks did their logrolling anonymously, now they do it in public.

One of the last bastions of anonymity, the London *Times Literary Supplement*, only started running signed reviews in June of 1974. It was one of the major decisions its new editor, John Gross, made. He stated, in an editorial explaining the change, that for him the "principle of personal accountability comes first," i.e., authors have to stand by what they have written, and stand by it publicly. But as he also pointed out, you could argue just as well that anonymity helped ensure honesty: "When critics write under their own name, or so the argument runs, they are liable to be

inhibited by all kinds of social and personal considerations from saying exactly what they feel."

We are not suffering, in the book business, from too much honesty. It is all this admiration that's the problem. Long gone is the day when Byron could say, even facetiously, that Keats was killed by an article. (Both *Blackwood's Magazine* and the more respectable and restrained *Quarterly Review* blasted *Endymion* in 1818.) Compare Francis Jeffrey's famous piece on Wordsworth in the *Edinburgh Review*, which began so archly, "This will never do," with the carefully worded caveats in the *Times*.

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Think of the *Times* taking up the *Edinburgh Review's* motto: *judex damnatur cum nocens absovitur*, or "the judge is condemned when the guilty is acquitted." It strains the imagination. In an effort to be "balanced," *Times* reviewers will often couch their criticism in so much fluff that any caveat gets suffocated, even when the problems are major; *Veil* is the perfect example. What would have been biting, perhaps even *ad hominem*, criticism in the *Edinburgh Review* or *Blackwood's* or Poe's *Broadway Journal* is, in the *Times*, an oppressive lack of enthusiasm. That's it. And as I've mentioned, as *The New York Times Book Review* goes, so goes the rest of the nation.

All this has something to do with the modern notion of journalistic "objectivity," with the idea that there is some way of reporting a story or providing cultural coverage that is "completely fair" and "unbiased," and that this is done by presenting "both sides." The *Times* would never countenance the idea that it is and should admit to reviewing—or reporting—from a certain point of view; it is the nation's chronicler and, everywhere but the editorial page, cleanly nonpartisan.

Newspapers and magazines didn't always assume this mantle of objectivity and restraint. "Treasure this maxim in your thoughts for ever: A critic must be just as well as clever," wrote Sir Alexander Boswell, in an "Epistle to the Edinburgh reviewers" he published in 1803. Byron wrote his "English Bards and Scotch Reviewers" in reaction to a patronizing notice in the *Edinburgh Review*. He fought fire with fire: "I too can hunt a Poetaster down" he says in his closing lines. Coleridge was quite bitter about the treatment he received. "For as long as there are readers to be delighted

with calumny there will be found reviewers to calumniate," he wrote in *Biographia Literaria*. Many of these attacks had a political basis. One of the reasons for the *Edinburgh Review's* critiques of Wordsworth and Coleridge and even its friend and contributor Walter Scott was political; the *Review* was Whig, and they were Tories. When the Tory *Blackwood's Magazine* awarded Keats a diploma from Leigh Hunt's "Cockney school" of poetry, it may have had something to do with the fact that Keats was the son of a stable keeper; on the other hand, when Jeffrey championed Keats in the *Edinburgh Review* it was more because of that same association with Hunt, than because of the poetry.

I am not suggesting that we return to the days when the *London Times'* editor Thomas Barnes ordered an attack on *The Oration of Demosthenes Upon the Crown*, by his former friend Henry Lord Brougham (who'd begun his literary career at the *Edinburgh Review*), which ran over five separate days and 20,000 words—longer than the book itself. But there is something to the argument that a review that is against nothing can't be for much. As Edgar Allan Poe put it (in a magazine piece), "As far as I can understand the 'loving our enemies,' it implies the hating our friends."

Today you can tell a paper that is willing to take a stand not from its willingness to praise, but from its willingness to blame. In America the only publications that will take a stand on a book are the ones that acknowledge their partisanship. *The Wall Street Journal's* arts page editor Raymond Sokolov wrote a harsh review of Tama Janowitz's *Slaves of New York*, a book that received more than the

usual hype in 1987. *The Village Voice* ran a similar piece reviewing Janowitz's next book (along with Bret "Less Than Zero" Ellis's second novel). But the *Journal* and the *Voice* have the advantage of being openly partisan papers. No one expects a *Journal* or *Voice* editorial to be "objective"—both papers will make the best case they can for their respective conservative or lefty-New York City Democrat points of view. And that freedom to be partisan spills over into the arts pages.

The same holds for *The New York Review of Books*. The left-wing *New York Review* is freer to love and hate than the *Times*, and runs longer reviews and takes longer to write them, which means an occasional article is more in-depth. In the case of the Woodward book, in the *New York Review* Thomas Powers pointed out, as Martin in the *Times* did not, that this famous final scene with Casey, even as Woodward reported it, was at best inconclusive. Powers also took a harder look at Woodward's sources. Nonetheless, Powers praised the book in general, which would be expected from a magazine of the same ideological bent as Woodward, and happy to take his credentials at their face value, as sufficient proof of his uprightness.

The final, essential problem with reviewing is not that *The New York Times* is partial in its less-than-thorough way, or that it gives books to review to people who are competitors, or that its reviewers occasionally out-and-out admit (as one did of a biography about the Bingham family of Louisville) that they have no way of checking the book's premise or historical accuracy. The problem, especially with the *Times*, is that it has no equal as a tastemaker. Martin's review of *Veil* was the single review that mattered most. "[T]here is a prevalent feeling that if your star book has not been reviewed in either the daily or Sunday *Times*, it has not been reviewed, period," wrote Richard Kluger, president of the small trade house Charterhouse, back in 1973. That is just as true, if not more so, today.

Forget cronyism, reviews by interested parties, brown-nosing, and even laziness. Next to this monopoly on taste all other problems are nothing. And what is strangest about the *Times* is that this is institutional clout; people remember Smith and Jeffrey because they made the *Edinburgh Review*, but Christopher Lehman-Haupt and Anatole Broyard because the *Times* made them.

Which brings me back, one last time, to Martin's review of *Veil*. He concludes with a piece of advice to Mrs. Casey:

Casey's widow claims the deathbed scene never took place and that her late husband was too much a patriot to reveal secrets to a journalist or speak ill of the President. She is a poignant figure, blindsided in her mourning by a hard-nosed reporter, but Sophia Casey has been too quick to denounce what is largely a sympathetic portrait . . .

Martin is saying, isn't he? that even if Mrs. Casey is convinced that Woodward is *lying*, she should be glad that her husband is "sympathetically" drawn. This whole business of Woodward's book and its surrounding hoopla is not about "ethics"—not to Martin. This is Washington, after all, where (he chides Mrs. Casey) "ethics" are extraneous. What's a bit of misrepresentation when you get top billing in Bob Woodward's first draft of history?

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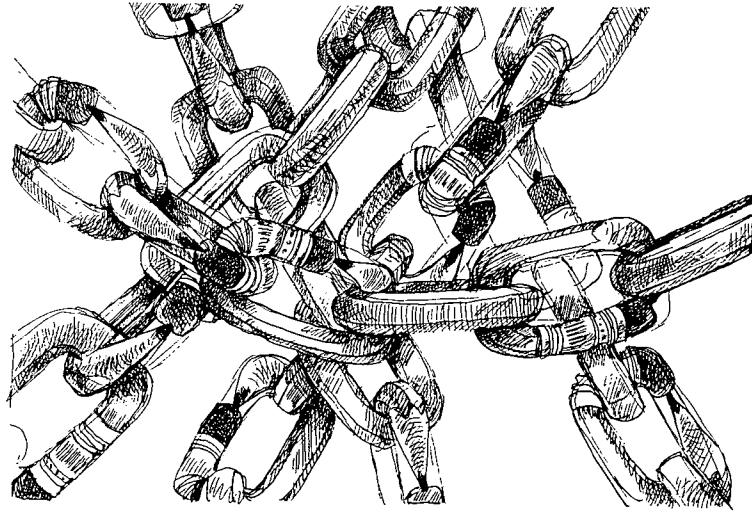
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Writers' Unions

by Momcilo Selic



“PEN international is working for your release,” my lawyer told me. In the bare, mean interview room of the Belgrade District Prison he smiled at me, and I smiled back, because the mikes could not pick *that* up. There were no TV cameras there, yet, to monitor our winks and nods—the language of slaves, as Karl Marx so aptly termed it.

PEN international, based in London, headed by Michael Scammell and held together by Ms. Elisabeth Paterson, an administrative secretary, and Mrs. Kathleen Simson, the secretary of the Writers in Prison Committee, was actually applying for *my* release. Writers like Mario Vargas Llosa, Heinrich Böll, Arthur Miller, Alan Sillitoe, Josef Skvorecky, and others, I thought, were concerned with the freedom of a Yugoslav who had written a pamphlet against President Tito (a good friend of Heinrich Böll’s at least).

My spirits rose. I paced in the darkness of my solitary swinging my arms, my US Army field jacket feeling like a steel breastplate. I sang, not too loudly (I’d heard the guards beating other prisoners for less). The tune was the *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, vaguely remembered from my American grade school days. “John Brown’s body lies a-mouldering in the grave,” I whispered, “while his soul goes marching on!”

Though I was not in a grave, but in cell No. 10, right behind the blower unit, the thought of PEN being on my side—a boost even more powerful than adoption by Amnesty International—made me smile at the guards when they came to take me out for the walk. In the exercise yard, I trotted past them limbering my arms, glad of the snowflakes touching the concrete.

In 1984, after emigrating from Yugoslavia, I found myself in London, doing a videotape on Yugoslav dissidents for the AI. I phoned PEN international and tried to see at least Mrs. Simson, only to find out that PEN was a part-time,

understaffed affair, not much different from the *Index on Censorship*—an outpost of Writers and Scholars International that helped harassed scribblers from totalitarian countries.

“Do you know,” my interrogators in Yugoslavia told me, “that both the Amnesty International and the International PEN are nothing but CIA operations, in a Special War against Yugoslavia and other socialist countries?”

Much later, in America, I was cautioned that both PEN international and AI (not to mention the Writers and Scholars International) are leftist conspiracies, bent on toppling democracy in the West. I thought of Ian Parker and Hugh Poulton at the Yugoslav desk of AI, who poured over newspapers in Cyrillic, looking for names of “politicals”; of Melanie Anderson who had written me in exile, asking about other Yugoslavs hounded by The Imagination of the [Yugoslav] State; of the founder of Amnesty International, Peter Benenson, whose father had rooted for a Yugoslavia in 1918, confident that it would become another Switzerland, and I found it hard to see anything in what they were trying to do but a search for freedom.

And, if Mrs. Simson of the International PEN was a Communist agent—she who had taken my story about a Belgrade neighborhood to *Index on Censorship*, where Karel Kyncl, an exile from post-1968 Czechoslovakia, had published it, with a blessing from another Czech survivor, editor George Theiner—then I was a Communist agent too, despite anything Tomislav Tacic, the warden of the Zabela Penitentiary and a ranking member of UDBA (the Yugoslav secret police) might have thought.

“Selic,” Tacic used to say, “you hate your people and you’re a traitor to your family and class. Too bad they didn’t give you more, like 15 years at least!”

Seven, however, was more than enough for me. I couldn’t really hate Tacic because he was earnest: when I told him I liked Nietzsche, he respectfully listened to his subordinate, the warden of the quarantine, who informed

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