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Letter from Oklahoma

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Profiles Encouraged:

Katina Strauch



Born and lived: Columbia, SC. My father was a college professor for most of my childhood so when people ask me where I'm from, I say the Southeast. We moved every year until my family finally settled in Richmond, VA, in 1960.

Then what: Not long after, I went to college at UNC-Greensboro (the first year that it wasn't WC — Women's College) for two years and then transferred to UNC-Chapel Hill where I graduated in 1969. Stayed on there to get my MSLS in 1972.

First jobs: I worked as a student worker (\$1 an hour) in a biology lab before moving to the Catalog Maintenance Department of the L.R. Wilson Library at UNC-CH. In the summers, I volunteered to help in the children's department of the Richmond County Public Library. They were so shocked, they let me.

Job experience: I started professional life as a medical librarian and was Head of the Duke University School of Nursing Library for seven years, my favorite job of all time. Then I decided I needed to get a job where I didn't think I had every disease I did a computer search on, so I became an acquisitions librarian when they couldn't find anyone else. I would have never guessed I would love the job so much.

Current residence: Charleston, SC, since 1977.

Family: A wonderful long-suffering husband, Bruce, son Raymond (22) and daughter, Ileana (13). Also a Jack Russell terrier named Cleo (1).

Pet peeve: People who say "no," or "can't." Though my staff says I am big on using these words with them ...

Literary tastes: Eclectic, varied, and at times scandalous. My hero is Horace Rumpole, but I adored *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, *War and Peace*, and *Gone With the Wind*.

Passions: Movies and publishing. I love to go to the movies, all types. And to dream up plots. I never like to be stuck without a pencil and a piece of paper.

Philosophy of life: If you can't have fun, don't do it.

Favorite quote of all time: Damn the torpedoes and full speed ahead!

Letter from Oklahoma

About Book Reviews

by Tom Leonhardt (University of Oklahoma)
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"About Books" is a C-Span program about books and authors. Recently, I happened to catch part of a discussion about book reviewing. The most interesting person on the show and the one who had the most to say was Anne Truitt, an artist and author who became a book reviewer, too. She spoke about how much work it was to review art books, more time and effort than she was paid for. But she enjoyed it, even though reviewing, she said, "is being thrust into a procrustean bed." She added that it is easier, as a reviewer, to mock than to critique and that it is easier to criticize than to create.

Those may seem like obvious observations but it is helpful from time to time, to state the obvious if only to oneself. The reviewer and the reader of reviews need to be aware of these perils and they also need to be conscious of the reviewer's right to hurt but while being "fair, generous in information about the book, and involved."

Truitt thinks that a reviewer's take on a book is crucial and is the very heart of a good review. Her favorite reviewer, who always has a good take on a book, is John Updike. He is an ideal model, but there is only one Updike. Nevertheless, ideals are useful even if we never achieve them.

As a sometimes reviewer, I take the job seriously, but am always in a quandary when I find something about a book that I don't like. In the world of librarianship it is not uncommon to know an author either personally or by reputation. That is fine as long as you are just a reader. You can dismiss the book as so much clap-trap with impunity as long as you don't do it publicly. But what if you are reviewing a book for publication? Then you must be on your best behavior. You can't write the first thing that comes to mind or if you do, you must take care to edit it so that your words are fair, accurate, and about the book. Book reviewers need not tell us how smart they are, how erudite and witty and above the nonsense that they have been forced to read for the sake of a review.

The book reviewer should give the book review reader a good take on the book, as Anne Truitt suggests. What is the book about, what did the author set out to do, how well was the goal achieved? A good review will almost substitute for the book itself and will allow the reader to know if the book is worth reading at all, worth reading immediately, worth reading at another time, or not worth the time of day.

Although the reviewer should not insinuate himself into the review — it is about the book and the author's craftsmanship — it is important that the reviewer know what he is writing about. In *Deadline For a Critic*, by William X. Kienzle, several victims of a reviewer, wish him dead. Somewhere in the book a character suggests that reviewers ought to be licensed and that license ought to be revoked the first time the reviewer pans something he knows nothing about.

Book review editors don't issue actual licenses but they do serve as gatekeepers and should have some sense of a reviewer's qualifications. There may be no license to pull, but the editor can stop sending books to a reviewer who demonstrates either a lack of knowledge, personally attacks the author, or who fails to give the reader a take on the book.

Personal attacks have no business in a book review but when a book is not up to snuff, the reviewer has an obligation to say so, but in a way that gives credit for the effort that went into the book. No matter how bad, a lot of effort went into the book. A little charity goes a long way.

What if you know the author? Should you automatically decline to review a book by a friend or acquaintance? Some would say yes because to go ahead and review a friend's book is a conflict of interest. While honesty may be the best policy, in the interests of friendship some things should not be said. Return the book if it is not going to get an enthusiastic review. But if the review is too enthusiastic? That won't cost a friendship but it could result in a loss of credibility if the review is not honest. One does not incontrovertibly lose one's critical judgment just because an author is a friend or acquaintance, but if the point of view, the take on the book, is clouded by personal feelings, the review should be someone else's responsibility.

Worse than giving a friend an undeserved good review is panning the work of someone you don't like. There is no excuse for accepting a book by someone you will not be able to treat fairly. Even if you think that your personal feelings can be set aside and an honest reading of the book can follow, you should not review the book. Or review the book, have it certified as a miracle, and you will be on your way to sainthood. I don't think so.

A well-written review is its own reward — and you get to keep the book, too. 🐾