SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT WRITING

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by Thomas Sowell

From time to time, I get a letter from some aspiring young writer, asking about how to write or how to get published. My usual response is that the only way I know to become a good writer is to be a bad writer and keep on improving. However, even after you reach the point where you are writing well—and that can take many years—the battle is not over. There are still publishers to contend with. Then there are editors and, worst of all, copy-editors.

Finally, the last hurdle are the book reviewers, only some of whom actually review the book. These people are all part of the gauntlet that the writer has to run, in order to reach the person for whom his writing was intended from the outset—the reader. All too often, you never know if your book has reached the reader in any sense other than the fact that it was bought. It could be gathering dust on a table or a shelf. In some cases, however, heartfelt letters come in, telling you that your book has reached readers in the sense in which you wanted it to reach them. That makes all the struggle seem worthwhile.

WRITING

People who want to be complimentary sometimes tell me that I have a "gift" for writing. But it is hard for me to regard as a gift something that I worked at for more than a decade—unsuccessfully—before finally breaking into print. Nor was this a case of unrecognized talent. It was a case of quickly recognized incompetence.

In the early years, my manuscripts came back to me by return mail, which was a lot faster in those days. To drop a manuscript in the mail on the way to work Monday morning and find it waiting when you returned home from work Tuesday night really told you something—or should have.

Some young would-be writers may lament their misfortune in living out in the boondocks, instead of being at the heart of the publishing industry in New York. When I first started writing, in my teens, I lived in New York City and worked in downtown Manhattan. That is how I got my rejection slips back so fast. If I had lived out in Podunk, I could have dreamed on, in a fool's Paradise, from Monday morning until Thursday or Friday evening, before the brutal truth caught up with me.

Learning to write by trial and error not only calls for patience on the writer's part, it also taxes the patience of wives, landlords, and creditors. Whenever someone, especially a young person, tells me of an ambition to become a writer, my heart goes out to him or her immediately—and my spirits sink. There is seldom a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, even for those who become established writers eventually—and a lot can happen between now and eventually, like broken marriages, eviction for non-payment of rent, and the like.

Even the mechanics or logistics of writing can be a challenge to figure out. Some of the most productive writers have followed the disciplined practice of sitting down at fixed times each day and turning out the words. Anthony Trollope followed this regimen in the nineteenth century and Paul Johnson with equal (or greater) success in the twentieth century. Alas, however, human beings differ and some of us are

never going to be Anthony Trollope or Paul Johnson, in this respect or any other.

Instead of trying to be someone that you are not, be the best at what you are. My own writing practices are the direct opposite of that followed by these prolific and renowned writers. I write only when I have something to say. The big disadvantage of this is that it can mean a lot of down time. There are manuscripts of mine that sat around gathering dust for years without a word being added to them. How then have I managed to write more than 20 books within the Biblical threescore and ten years?

My own particular idiosyncracy is writing several books at once. I may reach the point where I have nothing whatever to add to a manuscript on Marxism or affirmative action, but am bursting with things to say about late-talking children. I go with what has seized my attention and inspired my thoughts at the time. There are days, perhaps even weeks, when I have nothing worth saying in print about anything. I keep a backlog of unpublished newspaper columns on hand to send out to the syndicate during such times, while I go to Yosemite or just hang around the house printing photographs or otherwise trying to keep out of mischief.

Because of this way of working, I don't sign a contract in advance to write a book, so I never have pressure to write when I have nothing to say, in order to meet a deadline or keep on a schedule. Instead, I wait until the book is already written and then send the manuscript off to my agent, telling her to call me when it is over and she has a contract from a publisher.

The big advantage of this off-beat way of working is that what I write is written when I am full of ideas and enthusiasm about the subject—even if these periods occur only at intervals, with months or even years in between for a given book. Some of my favorite books came from manuscripts that I thought would never get finished.

The manuscript of *Basic Economics* sat around for about a decade. From time to time, something that I saw in a newspaper or magazine or

on television would set me off and I would see an economic principle that it illustrated or a fallacy that needed to be corrected—usually the latter. But, once I had written whatever it took to deal with that particular issue, I felt no compulsion to continue writing *Basic Economics*. Only after the manuscript had grown to a considerable size over the years did I start re-organizing it and filling in the missing subjects that would turn it into an introduction to economics for the general public. During this long span of years, many dramatic illustrations and quotations turned up from time to time and were added to spice up the discussion at the places where they fitted in.

Similarly with *The Quest for Cosmic Justice*, which took even longer to emerge from the pipeline. It began as a paper delivered in Switzerland in 1982, turned into a mathematical exercise a couple of years later, and then—after both devastating criticisms and encouragement to continue working on it by Milton Friedman—the whole subject lay dormant until the spring of 1996. At that point, some incredibly fatuous remarks by a colleague at Stanford University so infuriated me that I realized that there were many confused mush heads like him out there who needed to be straightened out. The net result was a sustained period of writing on the subject, leading to a popular lecture in New Zealand in the fall of 1996 and a book published in the fall of 1999—17 years after the lecture that first introduced the basic ideas in the book.

This system may not work for everybody. It may not even work for as many people as the more demanding system used by Anthony Trollope or Paul Johnson. But it is one possibility. My way certainly will not work for an assistant professor on a three-year contract, who needs to publish before he perishes. It is also unlikely to work for the writer whose bills are piling up while threatening letters are arriving in the mail from creditors. But, if it works for you, that is all that you need to be concerned about.

Even when a writer is successful, it is seldom overnight success, and it may be success at getting into print more so than success in getting rich. Even writers who have gone on to win prizes and make the best-

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seller lists often spent years collecting rejection slips. My own experience may not be unusual. I first tried to sell something that I had written when I was 17 years old. I first succeeded when I was 30. I first made any serious money from writing—enough to buy an automobile—when I was 40. I first made enough money from writing in a year to live on for a year when I was 52. Fortunately, I had other jobs, usually in academia, to keep a roof over my head and food on the table during all those years.

Incidentally, agents can be very valuable in freeing up your time for writing, as well as in getting you better deals than you are likely to get for yourself. Paying them 15 percent of your royalties is usually well worth it. To put it in extreme terms, it is better to have 85 percent of something than 100 percent of nothing. Writers can, of course, sell their own manuscripts and most of us have no choice but to do so early in our careers, because good agents can pick and choose which writers to represent—which tend to be writers with established track records, and whose book sales make a 15 percent commission add up to a worthwhile amount.

What can an agent do that a writer cannot do? First of all, an agent can get a manuscript read by a senior editor at a publishing house, rather than by some lowly reader who is assigned the thankless job of looking for a needle in a haystack among the tons of manuscripts that come in “over the transom” from would-be writers that nobody ever heard of. But why will a senior editor take a manuscript from an agent more seriously? Because the agent pre-screens manuscripts and sends only the ones that will justify the editor’s continuing to take the agent seriously. For those manuscripts that fall below this level, the agent can offer advice to the writer, ranging from a few changes here and there to a suggestion that taking up carpentry might offer a better way of making a living.

The biggest advantage that an agent has over a writer is in sheer knowledge of the publishing industry in general and the individuals in it in particular. Like other things, a given manuscript has a different

value to different people. A cookbook is worth far more to an editor who is a gourmet cook and knows all the leading gourmet magazines and TV shows where a good cookbook can be marketed than the same cookbook is to an editor who is great at sports but whose knowledge of food does not go much beyond hamburgers and fried chicken.

Because editors are constantly changing jobs from one publisher to another, just keeping track of all these musical chairs is a job in itself. A writer cannot hope to keep track of such things but an agent can and must, in order to direct manuscripts to where they will have the best chance of being accepted and getting large advances. The same manuscript may be rejected immediately by four or five publishers, while two or three other publishers are frantically bidding against each other to sign a contract for it.

As a battle-scarred veteran of four decades of publishing, I am especially pleased when readers and reviewers comment on how easy it is to read my writing. Part of that, of course, is due to experience—"experience" being a fancy word for all the damn fool mistakes that you finally realized you were making. However, another "secret" of readable writing is fighting to keep editors from messing it up after you have finally gotten it right.

EDITING

To say that my relationship with editors has not always been a happy one would be to completely understate the situation. To me, the fact that I have never killed an editor is proof that the death penalty deters. However, since nowadays we are all supposed to confess to shameful episodes in our past, I must admit that I was once an editor. Only once. And I didn't inhale.

It was the most painful kind of editing—editing academic writers. Too many academics write as if plain English is beneath their dignity and some seem to regard logic as an unconstitutional infringement of their freedom of speech. Others love to document the obvious and

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arbitrarily assume what is crucial. A typical work of this genre might read something like this:

> As surely as the world is round (Columbus, 1492), and as surely as what goes up must come down (Newton, 1687), when Ronald Reagan was elected President (Cronkite, 1980) and then re-elected (Rather, 1984), it signaled a change in the political climate (Brinkley, 1980–88). Since then, we have seen exploitation (Marx, 1867) and sexism (Steinem, 1981) on the rise.

But no attempt to parody academic writing can match an actual sample from a scholarly journal:

> Transnationalization further fragmented the industrial sector. If the dominant position of immigrant enterprises is held to have reduced the political impact of an expanding industrial entrepreneurate, the arrival of multinational corporations possibly neutralized the consolidation of sectoral homogeneity anticipated in the demise of the artisanate.[1]

You can't make that up.

If academic writings were difficult because of the deep thoughts involved, that might be understandable, even if frustrating. Seldom is that the case, however. Jaw-breaking words often cover up very sloppy thinking. It is not uncommon in academic writings to read about people "living below subsistence."

The academic writers I edited seemed to have great difficulty accepting my novel and controversial literary doctrine that the whole purpose of writing is so that people can read the stuff later on and know what you are trying to say. These professors seemed to feel that, once they put their priceless contributions to mankind on paper, a sacred obligation fell upon the reader to do his damndest to try to figure out what they could possibly mean.

A special corruption that has crept into academic writings in recent

1. Colin Lewis, "Immigrant Entrepreneurs, Manufacturing and Industrial Policy in the Argentine, 1922–28," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (October 1987), p. 90.

times is the pseudo-footnote. This is the footnote that seems to direct the reader to the source substantiating some statement, but which in fact does no such thing. For example, one author told her readers that *The Bell Curve* declares blacks to be racially inferior in intelligence and footnoted this statement. However, the footnote itself listed the authors of *The Bell Curve*, the city where it was published, the publisher, and the date of publication—but no page. In other words, she could cite nothing whatsoever to back up her claim, but chose to create the illusion that she could with a pseudo-footnote. Sometimes it is legitimate to cite a book without a page, as when one refers to the general history of the Chinese minorities in various southeast Asian countries and then cites *The Chinese in Southeast Asia* by Victor Purcell. But a pageless cite to a specific claim is a pseudo-footnote.

A pseudo-footnote is more than a lapse in good form. It is a betrayal of the reader that casts in doubt everything else that the writer says. Who, after all, can check up on every other statement the writer makes, even when these have legitimate footnotes? The pseudo-footnote, however, can be a valuable clue to the character of the writer. After all, you don't need to eat a whole egg to know that it is rotten.

While my brief stint as an editor made me understand the necessity for such people, it provided no blanket excuse for all their behavior. Pointing out unclear passages, or even suggesting a complete reorganization of a manuscript, are legitimate editorial functions. Becoming an unwanted co-author is not. But by far the worst thing that editors do is to unleash those anonymous vandals known as copy-editors.

While I cannot match Jacques Barzun's exquisite horror stories about changes made by copy-editors,[2] a couple of those that I have encountered may illustrate what is wrong. In an essay that I wrote for

2. Jacques Barzun, "Behind the Blue Pencil: Censorship or Creeping Creativity?" Jacques Barzun, *On Writing, Editing, and Publishing,* 2nd edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 103–112; Jacques Barzun, "A Copy Editor's Anthology," Jacques Barzun, *A Word or Two Before You Go* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1986), pp. 85–91; "Dialogue in C Sharp," *Ibid.*, pp. 115–117.

The Weekly Standard about Cornell University in the 1960s, I referred to people there who "had entree to Perkins," the university president at that time. An editor changed that to "had entry to Perkins." In the last essay I wrote for the *Wall Street Journal*—I do not mean my most recent essay—some anonymous copy-editor changed "omissions" to "admissions," even though the previous sentence referred to things that had been omitted and this sentence then referred to "these omissions." For reasons unknown, some copy-editors seem to think that words with similar sounds are substitutes for one another. But there is a big difference between Londonderry air and London derriere.

Then there are those copy-editors who are politically correct. They don't want you to use words like fireman or businessman or even to say that someone mastered a subject, because these are all words deriving from a male-dominated world instead of being "gender neutral." And of course you cannot refer to someone's having welshed on a deal or even say that he has a chink in his armor or that there is a nip in the air, because all of these terms are considered ethnically offensive, at least by politically correct copy-editors.

But these are just two kinds of absurdities from the rich spectrum of the absurdities of copy-editors. Where Shakespeare wrote, "To be or not to be, that is the question," a copy-editor would substitute: "The issue is one of existence versus non-existence." Where Lincoln said, "Fourscore and seven years ago," a copy-editor would change that to: "It has been 87 years since . . ." Where the Bible said, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth," a copy-editor would run a blue pencil through the first three words as redundant.

Pedestrian uniformity and shriveled brevity are the holy grail of copy-editors, the bureaucrats of the publishing industry. Like other bureaucrats, copy-editors tend to have a dedication to rules and a tin ear for anything beyond the rules. Seldom is there even the pretense that their editorial tinkerings are going to make the writing easier for the reader to follow, more graceful, more enjoyable, or more memorable.

Self-justifying rules and job-justifying busy work are the only visible goals of copy-editors.

If, through extra-sensory perception or some other miraculous process, a writer could determine in advance the copy-editor's stylistic preferences and slavishly followed them in his writing, the manuscript would still come back with changes. Making changes is what copy-editors do. An old song from the musical "Showboat" said, "fish gotta swim, birds gotta fly." Editors gotta edit.

In all of this, the style manual is an instrument of power for the copy-editor, while engaging in a compulsive activity in which readers have long since been forgotten. There is nothing wrong with style manuals. But, as with so many other aspects of life, good principles can become terrible as fetishes—and fetishes are what the style manuals have become in the hands of copy-editors, who treat them as if they had come down from Mount Sinai on tablets of stone.

Cast in this role, style manuals have become *anti-style* manuals. Since style is a variation on a convention, rigid conformity is the antithesis of style. Ironically, the University of Chicago *Manual of Style* itself says: "Few of the rules contained in this book are inviolable."[3] But that is the one part of the manual that is never quoted by editors or copy-editors.

One of the many fetishes of copy-editors is getting rid of hyphens. As hyphens are exterminated like vermin, readers find themselves forced to pause to confront puzzling new words that might be pronounced "rein' vest" or "cow' orkers" instead of re-invest and co-workers. To ask what useful purpose is served by such practices is to betray ignorance of the *zeitgeist* of the bureaucrat. It is rules for rules' sake, like art for art's sake.

When it comes to book publishers, neither principal editors nor copy-editors are held personally responsible for the quality of the writing

3. "Preface," *A Manual of Style*, 11th edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), p. v.

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when they finish with it. When something inaccurate, stupid, clumsy, or insipid appears under an author's name, nobody blames the editor. They blame the author. Some people have the courage of their convictions. Book editors have the courage of their anonymity.

Under these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that some editors are so courageous. "How courageous are they?" as Johnny Carson used to say. Well, British editors aren't supposed to be as officious as American editors, but some bold genius at the well-known British publishing house Allen & Unwin changed "capitalists" to "workers" at one point in the British version of a book of mine—and published it that way, without even bothering to check with me. That's not a small change, especially in a book on Marxism.

Despite airs of father-knows-best that seem to go with the job, many editors not only happen to be ignorant, but are necessarily ignorant, of many of the things that they tinker with. Not all are as grossly ignorant as the editor who changed "earnings" to "income" on some of my statistical tables to make them uniform with the headings on the other tables. But an editor for a major publishing house or a general magazine is certain to be editing material on a range of subjects far beyond anyone's personal competence.

In every field, there are words that have special meanings and special connotations, and there are ways of presenting things which are easier to follow and harder to follow, phrases that facilitate understanding and phrases that invite misunderstanding. An author familiar with the subject he is writing about is far more likely to make the right choices of words, even without being conscious of it, than is an editor whose confidence outruns his competence.

Obviously, if a copy-editor could be a successful writer, he would not be a copy-editor. This is not an occupation that can be accused of attracting more than its fair share of literary talent. However, the issue is not even whether the editor or the author is a better writer. "Too many cooks spoil the broth." Committee-written works are seldom noted for their clarity or consistency, much less for grace and charm.

If there is any rhyme or reason to the way editing varies from one editor to another, it seems to be this: The less the editor has written under his own name, the more he wants to write under someone else's name. An editor who has written a couple of best sellers is likely to be much less intrusive than an English major fresh out of college.

The best editor I ever had was Midge Decter, who has written books of her own. She had very little to say and what she said made sense—both of which should qualify her for the editors' hall of fame. Indeed, I went back to her for advice years later, long after she had left editing, and re-organized *The Vision of the Anointed* on her advice. But she never tried to micro-manage my style.

One phrase for which there is no rhyme or reason is "light editing." You are better off believing in the tooth fairy than believing that these words have any concrete meaning. Whatever the particular editor is used to doing will be called "light editing."

To those of us who believe in the innate depravity of man, the behavior of editors is not hard to explain. What is difficult to understand is why writers put up with it. Perhaps a new writer is so anxious to see his name in print that he will submit to anything to achieve that transient glory. But there are writers of reputation and renown who whine helplessly to friends and colleagues about how some editor has butchered their work.

The real secret of the editor's power, in a situation where the writer has the last word on editorial suggestions, is the editor's ability to waste the writer's time. When a book-length manuscript is sent back to the author with several hundred editorial changes, the deck is already stacked in favor of accepting a fait accompli. But there are ways of neutralizing that leverage. Having a rubber stamp made up with the word "STET" on it can help, for example, especially if one gets a red ink pad to use with it.

The crucial point in whatever strategy is used is to minimize the editor's ability to waste your time, especially via the copy-editor, who has much more time available. When a copy-editor is talking with you

on the phone about a manuscript, he is at work, getting paid—and preventing you from doing your other work. Changing that asymmetry is the key. It isn't easy, and I haven't always been successful, but it might be useful to look at one case where a counter-strategy worked.

Some years ago, a copy-edited, book-length manuscript was returned to me with literally hundreds of little tabs attached to the pages, in addition to the usual stylistic vandalism in the text. These tabs contained all sorts of questions—and suggestions disguised as questions. Their quality was not commensurate with their quantity, to put it very charitably.

Remembering General MacArthur's warning against getting bogged down in a land war in Asia, I decided not to become engaged with the copy-editor over all these changes, and instead wrote directly to the principal editor. In a brief note, I explained that the duties of my regular job did not permit me the luxury of spending time educating an obviously ignorant copy-editor. However, in the spirit of compromise and reasonableness, I enclosed a fresh, unedited manuscript and declared myself ready to resume work on the book just as soon as I received this new manuscript back, copy-edited in a wholly different spirit by a different copy-editor.

The editor's reply expressed great surprise and shock—and, of course, a vote of confidence in the copy-editor. It was impossible to meet my demand, he said. It seemed only fair to reciprocate his candor by pointing out that the manuscript would sit on the shelf gathering dust until he did.

Several months passed. Then, one day, I was surprised to receive in the mail a couple of chess books from the same publisher. The editor knew that I was a chess enthusiast (not to be confused with a good player). A few days later, he phoned. The conversation ran something like this:

"Hi, Tom. This is Ed. Did you get the chess books we sent?"

"Yes. Thank you very much. It was a very pleasant surprise."

"What do you think of them?"

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"They're wonderful. I'm sure they will improve my game a lot."

"Listen, Tom. When can we get started on publishing that book of yours?"

"Any time, Ed."

"Really?"

"Yes—just as soon as I get the fresh manuscript back from a new copy-editor."

Several more months passed. Another shipment of chess books arrived. Another brief telephone conversation took place. By now, more than a year had passed. But no time was being lost from my other work.

There was a clause in my contract providing that the manuscript reverted to me if it were not published within two years. However, things never got to that point. After a mere 18 months, a new copy-edited manuscript suddenly arrived in the mail unannounced. It had extremely few changes or questions. After the book was published, none of those hundreds of questions raised by the first copy-editor was ever raised by book reviewers or by readers. In fact, no one even questioned why the footnotes in a book published in 1975 almost all referred to publications no later than 1972.

A high price to pay? Not really. It all depends on what you've gotten for it. A one-day-at-a-time rationalist would say that I got my way on one book at the cost of a hassle. But he would be wrong, as such people often are. Anyone who grew up in a tough neighborhood knows that reputation is what keeps people from bothering you. (In my case, it was the reputation of my dog.) Years after this episode, the editor of a nationally prominent newspaper very tentatively offered one or two editorial suggestions on an article of mine, saying, "Your reputation has preceded you." That's what a reputation is supposed to do.

Fighting back always entails the possibility of losing. But, with intrusive editors, not fighting back guarantees that you will lose. After engaging in a tug-of-war with one publisher over their editorial fetishes, I simply offered to return the royalty advance and cancel our contract. He accepted. Months went by before I found another publisher—but it

was one offering a larger advance and less copy-editing. It didn't have to turn out that way, of course, but faint heart ne'er won fair lady.

I do not arbitrarily dismiss copy-editors' suggestions. I usually consider them and find them to be stupid beyond belief. That is hardly surprising. In fact, what is surprising is that anyone would authorize people who are not writers, and who do not know the subject matter, to over-ride people who are writers and who do know the subject matter. Add to this the fact that a book may be written and rewritten over a period of years, while the copy-editor has at most only a few weeks in which to second-guess all the stylistic decisions that were made by the author after far more deliberation.

Of all the reasons for intrusive editing, imposing a book publisher's standard "house style" is the silliest. For a newspaper or a magazine, a case might be made that it is advisable to avoid jarring the reader with abrupt changes in writing styles. But for a book publisher? It is hard to believe that any reader knows or cares what their house style is. Can you imagine someone going browsing in a bookstore, thinking: "I'm in the mood for a book from Random House" or "This is my Prentice-Hall day"? Maybe the reader is in the mood for a book by John Kenneth Galbraith (I never am) or Saul Bellow or Danielle Steel. But it is hard to imagine that anyone goes looking for a book written in the "house style" of Doubleday or Macmillan or Alfred A. Knopf. What then is the point of having a "house style," if nobody else really gives a damn?

Even for a magazine, the case for house style is seldom compelling. Where a magazine has a very distinctive style, as *Time* magazine did back in the days when founder Henry Luce was running it, then a house style made sense, because that was what readers expected when they bought the magazine. However, the old *Time* magazine style—speaking Lucely, as it were—was highly exceptional, even in its day. For most magazines, house style is just an arbitrary set of local fetishes that matter to no one but those insiders petty enough to care.

The one area in which editors have an important advantage over authors is in reading what is said without prior knowledge of what it

means. An author reviewing what he has written may automatically interpret ambiguous passages in the way he intended, while an editor can see that there are alternative meanings that accord with the words just as well as what the author had in mind. An author may also subconsciously interpolate missing words, while an editor can more easily see that some words are missing.

Typographical errors are likewise easier to spot by someone who is unaware of what was meant and therefore must go by what was said. This is an important function, because typos have an uncanny ability to survive readings and re-readings. If there is anything that could survive a nuclear attack, it is probably typographical errors.

In all these ways, editors and copy-editors could perform a useful service—if they were not so preoccupied with becoming co-authors. It has been my experience that the most intrusive editors, when it comes to making stylistic changes, are the ones who let the most gross typos pass unnoticed.

But don't get me wrong. I don't believe that all editors should be shot at sunrise; Midge Decter is an exception. So is Jim Michaels, who edited *Forbes* magazine for many years. If I thought about it for another day or so, I might come up with a third example.

BOOK REVIEWS

Book reviewing is, in a sense, the final phase of the publishing process. After that, it is all up to the reading public. To say that book reviewing has its idiosyncracies is to put it politely—too politely.

There is, for example, a whole genre of log-rolling book reviews. *A* reviews *B*'s book with lavish praise today and, next year, *B* reciprocates with lavish praise of *A*'s new book. With computerized lists being so easy to maintain, one wonders why book review editors don't keep track of who has reviewed whom before assigning a new book to be reviewed. Revenge book reviews could also be minimized the same way.

Then there are those to whom book reviews are simply the contin-

uation of politics by other means. The point here is not to ask that reviewers be "fair" to writers. With all the world's troubles today, fairness to this minuscule segment of society must surely rank far down the list of priorities. The real issue is not fairness to writers but honesty with readers. Readers are, after all, the ultimate reason for writing, as well as the source of the money that pays to keep alive the magazines and newspapers in which book reviews appear. They are not paying to be lied to.

Unfavorable or even biased reviews are a fact of life for anyone who writes on controversial subjects. What is maddening to me (even when it is not my book) are the reviews that don't review.

The non-reviewing review seems to be considered chic these days. The first four or five paragraphs don't even mention the book that is the ostensible reason for the review. Instead, the reviewer puts the whole subject "in context" with lofty generalities and pre-emptive assertions. Then the book's title puts in a cameo appearance, followed by an analysis of what the author was "really" trying to do and the reviewer's comments on its appropriateness, originality, and consonance with his own ideological predispositions.

All this is often just a prelude to a long editorial by the reviewer on the subject raised by the book—or even on a tangential topic suggested by it. Sometimes it takes some shrewd reading between the lines to figure out whether the reviewer thought the book was good, bad, or indifferent. Sometimes even a shrewd reading draws a blank. One of the reasons some people cannot get to the point is that there is no point to get to. In non-reviewing reviews, the only point often seems to be a display of the reviewer's sense of superiority.

In addition to this ordinary garden variety of non-reviewing review, there is also the more imaginative non-review in which a steady stream of deep-sounding questions, miscellaneous sociological or psychological observations, and expressions of agonizing moral issues, all combine to conceal the simple fact that the reviewer hasn't read the book.

The longest review any of my books ever received—several thou-

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sand words, spread over two consecutive issues of *The New York Review of Books*—contained not one word referring to anything past the first chapter of *Ethnic America.* The reviewer's painful attempts to puzzle out the possible implications of this book would have been unnecessary if he had followed the more usual practice of reading the first *and last* chapters. The last chapter was titled, "Implications."

Ideological differences were involved in that case, but such differences are neither necessary nor sufficient to produce a non-reviewing review. An even worse example was a review in *The Public Interest*, with which I am usually in agreement and in which I have published articles of my own. This time the book was *Migrations and Cultures*, a history of migrations to countries around the world. Although this book covered everything from the Jews dispersing from Israel in ancient times to Germans migrating to Russia during the reign of Catherine the Great to people migrating from China to Southeast Asia during the era of European imperialism, the reviewer chose to represent it as a book about current immigration policy in the United States—a subject not even occupying ten pages in a 500-page book.

According to this non-reviewing review, *American* immigration history and contemporary policy were *central* to my concerns, though he noted in passing that the subtitle ("A World View") *suggests* that my "focus is broader than the United States." The fact that there were fourteen other countries covered in the book might also have suggested that—if he had read the book, though there was not a speck of evidence that he had. It so happens that contemporary American immigration policy was a subject that the reviewer had written about before—and apparently wanted to write about again, even if that meant making up a fictitious account of the book that he was supposedly reviewing.

In the broadcast version of the non-reviewing review, the talk-show host conceals his non-reading of the book by keeping the author on the defensive with a steady stream of cutting accusations, based on the author's general reputation or previous writings. The writer may be accused of anything from political bias to personal dishonesty, or any

other charge that will lead to a heated, time-filling discussion. The natural tendency to defend yourself against a low blow is what gets authors sucked into this game.

Replies never catch up with accusations, however, as Senator Joe McCarthy demonstrated in his campaign of character-assassination back in the 1950s. Demagogues are defeated by counter-attacks, not by protestations of innocence. But counter-attacks are not always easy to manage, especially when you are a guest on someone else's show and playing a game at which you are an amateur facing a pro. However—another lesson from the old neighborhood—you don't have to win every fight to make people leave you alone. The mere prospect that you may inflict a bloody nose and a couple of nasty bruises may be enough to take all the fun out of picking on you.

Only after several talk-show hosts had played this game on me did I finally realize what was happening, and why. I counter-attacked on one of those long, night-time radio talk shows, when it became obvious that neither the host nor the critic on with me had read the book. At the end of the first hour, I announced to the listeners that we had now been on the air for one hour—and that neither of my questioners had yet mentioned a single thing that was actually in the book. Moreover, I predicted that neither of them would say anything in the second hour that would refer to anything in the book, because it was apparent that neither of them had read it.

Their indignant denials were followed by their addressing a new and more heated stream of general accusations at me, to all of which I replied serenely: "That's not in the book, either."

One talk-show host was honest enough to confess to me before we went on the air that he had not read the book. Since he did not try to play a game, I replied to his general questions during the broadcast with specific things from the book, and we both made it through the 15-minute interview, none the worse for wear.

Talk shows differ not only in the quality and honesty of their hosts, but also in their basic format and procedure. For a controversial author,

the real trap is being interviewed for a much longer period of time than the interview will take on the air. When the host has taped a one-hour interview, from which he can take out segments for a six-minute presentation on the air, he has you at his mercy. If the New York Mets could edit the videotape of the World Series in 2000, the viewer might come away thinking that the world championship banner was now flying in Shea Stadium instead of in Yankee Stadium.

Not only can the host lift what you said out of context; he can also splice in what your enemies have said about you, without your having an opportunity to reply. Television's "Sixty Minutes" is a master of this technique, among others. Once Mike Wallace asked me to be a guest on the show, pointing out what a wonderful opportunity it would be for me to get my message out to a huge audience. I replied that I would be delighted to go one-on-one with him anytime, provided that everything we said was broadcast just as we said it. He looked so pained at my distrust that I almost believed him.

In the print media, the author usually has an opportunity to reply to the reviewer, but it is a dangerous opportunity, because the reviewer has the last word in his rejoinder. Playing against these odds makes sense only when you can demonstrate conclusively, in a brief space, the utter fallacy or outright lie in what the reviewer has said—and when you can resist the temptation to add other things on which the reviewer was wrong-headed, but which can't be nailed down so readily. If you cannot resist the temptation to include the more debatable issues, then be prepared to see the reviewer ignore all the points on which you caught him red-handed and devote his whole reply to making the debatable issues crucial, even if they were tangential before.

The other danger in replying is that it may encourage some publications to print outrageous attacks on you, because they can then depend upon a free contribution from you in return. This temptation may be particularly strong for minor publications that you would not ordinarily write for, even if they paid you.

Over the years, I have come to find *writing* book reviews even more

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distasteful than reading them. Part of this is my own fault, for being one of those old-fashioned holdouts who still believes that you should actually read the book before reviewing it.

Sometimes I am only into the first 20 pages of a 500-page book when it becomes painfully clear that this one is a real dog. The rest of the ordeal is like crossing the Sahara Desert—except that often there are no oases. True, the reviewer gets to slaughter the author in print at the end of it all, but this merely appeases the desire for revenge, which only real blood would satisfy.

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