

Great Toothbrush, Pity About the Novel

- David Free

How good is the average customer review on Amazon, and what does its quality tell us about the health of Western civilization? Or, to ask a less boring version of the same question, how bad is the average *below-average* review on Amazon, and exactly how fucked are we? Below, selected entirely not at random, is a customer review from the Amazon page devoted to *Lucky Jim*. The review is entitled “Time Have Changed My Perception.” Feel free to insert your own *sics*:

Years ago, when I had the first opportunity to read this book, it seemed to be real fun, while today it is just description of general problems of academic environment, it looks that nothing have really change or will change. The stagnation of academia is a permanent dilemma: today teachings are the absolute truths, defended by the old guards.

Reading this, I had a brief dilemma of my own. On one hand, I wanted to do what any good post-modern citizen should do when presented with a display of embarrassing inadequacy: I wanted to look the other way. After all, it's only an Amazon review. And maybe English is not the guy's native tongue. Maybe he can speak five other languages besides it. Maybe he's a refugee from some war-torn hell-hole. Maybe in his chosen field – welding? extreme fighting? – he can perform feats that you and I couldn't dream of emulating.

But the highbrow in me refuses to let the matter rest there. It insists that this sort of thing can't be allowed to stand, because it's part of an insidious net-wide trend. The illiterate literary critic has become as firm a fixture of the web as the Texan pornographer, or the Russian rectifier of penis size. The forums and blogs are being over-run by a bizarre species of pundit who can't spell or think straight, has no evident affinity for the written word, and yet has this strange urge to go around passing judgement – often very harsh judgement – on serious works of literature. Don't ask me why such people are drawn to literature, or what they can possibly get out of it. What did a guy like that think he was doing reading *Lucky Jim* – *twice*? But apparently he did.

The author of the above-quoted review supplies his full name on Amazon, but I'm disinclined to give it here. For one thing he sounds like a bit of a wacko, and I don't want him Googling himself and reading what I just said about him. Also he isn't a professional critic, so there's no point in going after him personally. But he is an amateur critic, and that is no longer a negligible thing to be. The amateur critics are moving in from the margins. Not even scientists are safe from them. In the “debate” about global warming, for example, we seem to have reached a point where the scepticism of the amateurs – such as my hairdresser – is somehow thought to exist on the same plane as the views of professional climatologists, who spend all day every day looking at models and data and core samples of ice they've personally extracted from the North Pole. So what chance do we stand in the literary field, where even people *inside* the academy have wantonly embraced the idea that no person's textual “reading” is any more valid than anyone else's? The amateurs are getting noisier and more amateurish by the day. They insist that their views must be heard. Well, if we have to listen to them, we also have every right to reply.

Let's compromise then, and call the guy by his initials, which are JG. Mr JG's profile indicates that he's reviewed a total of four Amazon products in his time. *Lucky Jim* is the lone book among these. The other items are a toothbrush, a hedge trimmer, and some kind of oil filter for cars. These products are not made out of words, so Mr JG's manifest inability to speak English properly doesn't disqualify him from having useful things to say about them. On the subject of the Philips Sonicare Elite toothbrush he's positively illuminating, pointing out that a bonus head clearly depicted in the Amazon GIF failed to turn up in his box. As for the

Remington 17-inch hedge trimmer, JG doesn't hesitate to award it the maximum five stars ("I can recommend without second guess").

Exploring JG's profile further, you can read what other Amazon customers have had to say about him – the amateur reviews of his amateur reviews. There are two responses to his strictures on Lucky Jim. The first one says:

You're an idiot. The book utterly transcends the 'academe' theme – your reading is childishly superficial. Any page of this brilliant book is practically spilling over with insight into the human condition, the complexities of human relationships, and the kinds of mental imbroglios everyday people get themselves into. It's a masterwork.

And then a third guy, responding to this second guy, weighs in with:

You, sir, are the real idiot. This book isn't funny; nor does it "explore the complexities of the human spirit". We already know about all this. Why do we need to read a novel to learn about the human condition? Reality check: We are all humans!

This is the net in a nutshell. First you have that all-too-brief cameo from someone who knows roughly what he's talking about: the muffled sound of a sensible voice, issuing a faint version of the truth from underneath all the rubble. Such outbursts of good taste shouldn't be ignored. There really are a lot of intelligent web surfers out there. (Out of Lucky Jim's 72 reviewers, 50 had the decency to give it five stars.)

But then, just as you start to feel that civilization isn't crumbling after all, that second voice intervenes, that voice so swaggeringly typical of the online fray: savvy without being smart; not outright illiterate but brashly philistine; infinitely knowing, but never turning out to know very much, except for a couple of obnoxious catchphrases like "reality check." By calling up a full list of this third guy's reviews, you can find out what his idea of a satisfactory novelist is. It's Ian Fleming. This is another classic theme of web punditry: the moment when the amateur hatchet-man, having finished heaping scorn on some indubitably great writer, at last comes clean about his own literary touchstones. They always turn out to be people like Stephen King, or Tolkien.

What evidence, what signs from the outer world, persuade such people that they're even *slightly* qualified to go around dropping their cracked plastic pearls of clueless wisdom? But here they come: the wizened grammarian who gravely informs you that it's impermissible to start an English sentence with the word "but"; the swami of spelling and punctuation who insists that he's paid his "do's"; the suavely cultivated New Yorker who deems Kingsley Amis provincial, but doesn't know the difference between England and Britain; the excoriator of *Hamlet* who – I swear this is true – advises readers to spurn that over-rated play and check out the far superior *Titus Andronicus* instead. Morons don't know that they're morons. In the real world, it took me many years and a lot of inconvenience to work this principle out. On the net, you can have it rammed home to you in about fifteen minutes.

The work of the cyberpundit, like the work of the moron in general, is done by assertion – preferably very loud assertion – rather than by argument. This is one of the reasons why most online critiques are so *short*. They certainly don't have to be. The technology of the net, unlike print technology, imposes no length limit on your prose. It gives a writer infinite elbow room. So you might have thought, way back at the internet's birth, that the prevailing tone of online writing would be rambling, expansive, unhurried, hippyishly laid-back. This of course is hilariously not the case. Hypertext has led to hyperprose. The online ambience, even on sites that consider themselves literary, tends to be noisy and hysterical. This is the great paradox of the web. It's a realm of infinite space: but so much of the stuff that's on it is cramped, frantic, fragmentary. Why?

I can think of a few answers. One is that most online writers aren't real writers at all. Real writers aren't just people with an opinion. They don't just tell you whether they like something or hate it. They use language to justify their position, to work it out, to nail down its complexities and ambiguities. If they don't like something, they explain *exactly why* they don't like it. There's a moment in *Lucky Jim* when the hero, Dixon, considers delivering a "reasoned denunciation" of his rival Bertrand. How quaintly old-fashioned that adjective – *reasoned* – is starting to sound in the cyberage! Certainly there's a lot of denunciation going on – a lot of road rage on the superhighway. But reason is ailing even out there in the real world, and the internet is pressing the pillow down on its face. Reasoning takes time, and nobody these days seems to have any. It

takes effort, and not many people are up for that either. And it takes up space. Newspapers don't give professional critics nearly enough of that any more, and web critics – who do have the space – don't seem inclined to use it. In this respect the internet, which was supposed to blur the line between the proper writer and the amateur dabbler, actually serves to sharpen it. A proper writer – like a proper bricklayer, or a proper engineer – is someone who's willing to put a lot of time and effort into the difficult job of getting things right. A non-writer is someone who isn't. The web is egalitarian in structure: it lets everyone, or nearly everyone, have a say. But by doing that, it has the effect of proving, in giant italics, that we're not all equally capable of saying useful things. There really *is*, after all, something to the wheezy old-time notion that some people are more worth listening to than others. In fact, as long as we're out here on this tightrope, let's venture right out to the quivering middle, and quote – with full approval – Lichtenberg's suggestion that a book is like a mirror: if an ape looks into it, an apostle is hardly likely to look out. Reading literature and writing about it aren't easy, and a lot of people just aren't cut out for things that aren't easy. In the space of two or three lines, most web critics will have written down every single thought that they have about a book, and they'll be ready to move on and put the boot into the next one. Their idea of what a proper review consists of doesn't come from what they've read in a newspaper anyway, let alone in a book. It comes from other two-line reviews they've read on the net. The shard, the fragment, has established itself as the online critic's ideal form.

The same principle applies, alas, in the arena of the literary blog. Literary blogs have turned out to be a great disappointment. Once again we can't blame the technology for this. The technology imposes no limits, no shape. A literary blog can be anything you want it to be. It can even be literary. But market forces have spoken, in their usual monosyllabic way, and readers by now have certain pretty firm and deeply un-literary expectations of what a proper blog should look like. They expect to see a lot of bite-sized entries under separate headings. They expect to see bold-faced links strewn through the text like chocolate sprinkles. They expect to see fresh content at least once a day. They expect to see, even in a literary blog, lots of piccies. Of course you're perfectly free to go ahead and write a blog that defies all these conventions. You could post no pictures or links at all; you could update once a fortnight with a copiously footnoted 5,000 word essay. Nothing's stopping you – except the fact that nobody will read the thing, because it won't look like a blog.

What people really expect from a blog is trivia. If they can read trivia and convince themselves they're getting literary nourishment at the same time, better still. Consider *The Elegant Variation*, which is routinely hailed as the big daddy of literary blogs. Its author, Mark Sarvas, comes across as a sound enough guy. He can write, although he's the kind of writer who thinks it's a pretty amusing idea to keep using the royal “we.” His head seems to be screwed on; you'd never mention him in the same breath as Mr JG, for example. But his blog, it has to be said, is largely devoted to bookchat: snippets from other people's reviews and essays, links to other sites, reports of readings, news about who just got what award. It's a useful literary portal, but it's not literary in itself. Nobody would dream, for example, of getting its entries together and publishing them as a book. At least I hope they wouldn't dream of that. If there's a literary blog out there that does rise to that level – the level where its contents might realistically be thought to have permanent value – I must have missed it.

Not much of this is Sarvas's fault. He's just sticking to the unspoken rules, which have it that a blog should function as a kind of electronic clippings service. Perhaps it's a bit naïve of me to suggest that a blog could ever be anything else. But then a clippings service, when you think about it, is a pretty odd and arbitrary thing for the blog to have turned into. Why necessarily that? If the blog's evolution were wound back and replayed, would it come out the same way again? Or would it be something else equally strange instead? In any case, it's too late to change the rules now. There is now such a thing as a professional blogger – a blogger who gets paid to do nothing all day *except* blog. If amateur bloggers have a pretty good excuse for not doing much more than provide a set of links to other people's stuff – being amateurs, they're off all day doing paid work for someone else – the professionals don't. But they still do it anyway. Look at *The Daily Dish*, which was recently named the web's best blog. Andrew Sullivan, the professional blogger who runs it, presumably could write one long meditative essay a day – if he wanted to. But he prefers to crank out thirty or even forty tiny posts a day, a blizzard of pictures and quotes and links, with minimalist connecting material written in a kind of lazy short-hand. On TV, Sullivan comes across as a pretty formidable customer, capable of delivering a sustained and intelligent argument. You wouldn't know that from reading his blog. Does this mean that we've reached the point where TV – at least cable TV – is considered a more suitable venue for airing serious arguments than the blog? This is a bizarre position to be in, because the spoken word can only bear so much complexity. A thought travels from the brain to the mouth more or less instantly. It encounters no

resistance, nothing that might force it to grow up or improve itself. On its way to the fingertips, it at least has a moment or two to mature. If it happens to be idiotic, you can send it back for revision before it gets out. You can't do that on TV.

But the web is getting less and less textual, and more and more like TV, all the time. Even when we *do* use the internet to read things, the way we read them has a lot more in common with channel-hopping than it does with settling down in an armchair to crack open a Penguin Classic. During a typical online reading session I might have four or five browser windows open at one time, displaying four or five separate articles. In a sixth window, located somewhere towards the rear of the cascade, but readily clickable if someone should walk in on me, I might actually be doing some work. The meat-world equivalent would be having five separate books and newspapers cracked open in different parts of your room, and frog-hopping from one to the next the moment your interest started to flag. Whether this hyperactive way of reading is encouraged by the trivial nature of web prose, or whether it contributes to it, I'm not sure. Maybe we're stuck in a feedback loop in which each factor will continue to operate on the other until the written word finally dwindles out altogether, like the picture on a switched off TV – an *old-style* switched-off TV.

Certainly you can't go much further down the road to literary oblivion than Twitter. With Twitter, I feel, humankind is scraping the bottom of the craze barrel. Twitter advertises itself as a “microblogging” service, as if the blog wasn't micro enough already. I'm not fully wise to the ins and outs of Twitter, but its basic idea is to take the formal properties of the text message – which evolved in an environment in which it makes a fair bit of sense to keep your communications short and stupid – and shift them onto the web, where it doesn't. A Twitter post is not allowed to be more than 140 characters long, including spaces. The sentence you just read contains 70 characters. That's half a Twitter post. In other words, the Twitter people's response to the infinite potential of the internet is to impose a tiny and arbitrary word-limit in which it's nearly impossible to get anything interesting said, unless you happen to be a master of the chiselled, Spartan aphorism. The world's top Twitter-poster, or Tweeter, is Ashton Kutcher. Is Kutcher, one wonders, such an aphorist? Well, here's something he chiselled out on May 27:

Sitting in a trailer in atlanta waiting out the rain. Oh boy this is getting tedious.

For all I know, Kutcher's “followers” got an awful lot out of this. Perhaps there are people out there who feel that reading about Ashton Kutcher wasting his time is not a waste of their own. These are the kind of people for whom 140 characters must seem like *a lot of writing* – as much as they care to read, or glance at, in the one sitting. The rest of us, faced by a phenomenon like Twitter, should probably start asking ourselves some serious questions. Questions such as: What exactly is the deal with our species? What is the *go*? On the one hand, we can invent the technology of the World Wide Web. On the other, this is what we use it for. Twittering. The Tweet. Were we really this stupid to begin with? Or is the Internet shrinking the way we think?

Brevity might well be the soul of wit. But it's also the haven of the half-wit. *The human eye can't have evolved without the influence of some divine designer. 9/11 was the work of the CIA. Shakespeare wasn't actually Shakespeare.* A person who knows nothing can assert these things in the space of a single Twitter post. An expert can prove each of them untrue, but it'll take a hell of a lot more than two sentences to do it. Everyone is entitled to an opinion, but what exactly does that word “entitled” mean? It doesn't mean that you're entitled to be listened to, or to be automatically considered anything better than a fool. All it really means is that you can't, in our society, be shot or jailed for voicing your views. That's all. It certainly doesn't mean that all opinions are equally correct. Glance at any Amazon page and you'll see that they're not. Some people's opinions are worth more than other people's. They're more useful, they're more amusing, they're more enlightening, they're better argued, they're better *spelt*. The internet is relativist in structure, but the wildly varying quality of its contents is starting to prove the old-style elitist values right. You're starting to see exactly why we needed experts in the first place. We need them in science, because the half-informed enemies of fact are brutishly on the march. And we need them in literature, because someone who's spent an awful lot of time reading an awful lot of books is almost certainly going to be a better judge of literary merit than someone who hasn't. And yes, there *is* such a thing as merit, and it doesn't just exist in the eye of the beholder. I may not be able to prove to you that Evian tastes better than fetid ditch water, but it does, and we all know that it does. With books, the task of defining and detecting quality gets trickier, but that's no reason to abandon the idea that quality *exists*. What is it that Dixon thinks towards the end of *Lucky Jim*? Nice things are nicer than nasty ones, and there is no end to the ways in which they're nicer.

We look forward to comments or responses - write to us at mailbox@theember.com.au.

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