BULLCRIT

The Reading Disorder Of the Literary Fast Lane

BY RICHARD ROSEN

IN THE WELL-EDUCATED, GOSSIP-RICH WORLD OF THE MEDIA, in the circles that process and recycle and enhance with rumor all manner of literary and crypto-literary data—how to put this delicately?—nobody who can help it reads books anymore.

This, naturally, doesn't stop anyone from talking about books. In a culturally acquisitive milieu, there is nothing worse than—no egg so yolky on one's face as—not knowing what the writers people are talking about are writing about in the books we are not reading. So we refer more than ever to the universe of secondary and tertiary information about books—reviews of books, movies based on books, gossip about authors, gossip about publication parties—as if they were the books themselves.

At a recent weekend house party where five of the six assembled were media professionals, the dinner conversation turned to a new nonfiction book, Charles Kaiser's *1968 in America*.

"I saw the review," said the editor of a popular national magazine, expertly summarizing the contents of the *New York Times Book Review* coverage.

"I was at a book party for him," a writer for one of the newsweeklies said, offering a brief anecdote.

"Someone I know," I volunteered, "thinks that all this nostalgia for the late sixties is"—and I vaguely paraphrased a theory that I had heard secondhand and that itself had been hastily concocted by its originator.

At this juncture, the only person present for whom books are in no sense a business said, "You know, I read the book——"

And he stopped, startled by the dark silence that suddenly descended over the dinner table.

"You read the book?" I said, breaking the awkward pause. "Well, then, I don't think you're qualified to pass judgment on it."

"You have an obvious emotional investment in it," added the editor. "Your prejudice is unmistakable."

"Anything you say," the network television producer told him, "would merely be your opinion."

Any phenomenon so pervasive that it is already being satirized by some of its perpetrators desperately needs an identity. So, to the increasingly popular mode of discourse that combines all the virtues of literary expertise with none of the inconveniences of reading book-length material we may finally give a name: Bullcrit.

BULLCRIT IS JUDGMENTALISM WITHOUT JUDGMENT, familiarity without knowledge, received wisdom without emotional response, informedness without information. In a world clogged with cultural artifacts, this species of specious profundity has come to dominate and define certain civilized discussions. It is the spicy patter of media people who have the time only to know *about* things. It is not insight but outsight. In our widely spaced moments of intellectual reckoning, what we dimly know ourselves to be is Bullcrit artists.

"My extremely well defended, morally correct, absolutely committed, and frequently expressed opinion of Bret Easton Ellis's work," says Daniel Okrent, a former New York book editor and now editor of *New England Monthly*, "is based on the fact that I haven't read him."

"I was talking to my editor on a magazine piece I was doing," one New York writer confessed to me, "and the subject of Mona Simpson's novel *Anywhere but Here* came up. I mentioned that I thought she was really good and had a big imagination, etc., and I hate to admit it, but it was only when my editor remarked that she had actually read the novel that it occurred to me that I hadn't."

Over dinner at a French restaurant in Manhattan—there were four of us—the subject of Ayn Rand came up, and the air was soon full of thoughtful remarks about "enlightened self-interest" and "the way Fascism and libertarianism meet each other halfway in her books." Under subsequent mutual

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interrogation, we all confessed that Rand was among the authors we had always meant to read. One guilty diner tried to win the court's sympathy by saying, "Well, my best friend in high school read everything Ayn Rand wrote."

"Hey," says an editor of a national monthly magazine, "that's why we're all in journalism, isn't it? It's a Bullcrit profession. We've made an adult strategy out of normal adolescent bulls--- behavior."

Yet it would be a mistake to think of Bullcrit as mere intellectual window dressing. "I had a conversation the other morning with a writer about Susan Sontag's book on AIDS," a successful free-lance writer told me over lunch. "That afternoon, I happened to be talking with another writer about the book, and I got a chance to sharpen my ideas. I began to feel passionate about it. The point is, I got what it was all about. But"—she smiled faintly and shrugged—"who knows what's in the book? Does it even matter? I may not have been debating anything Sontag actually wrote, but I was feeling it all very deeply."

In the mediacracy, which thrives on the bulk consumption and recitation of premium tidbits, an investment on the scale of reading an entire book—how undergraduate!—could not possibly pay a conversational and informational dividend high enough to make it worthwhile. Indeed, intimate knowledge of a book's contents can severely limit the reader's range of cocktail-party commentary on it.

"Look," Okrent says, "if I invest four to six hours in reading a book, I feel I have to like it and defend it from attack. When you're familiar enough with a book to say in conversation, 'He makes a very interesting point in the penultimate chapter,' when you're in that deep, you can't say it's wrong or bad. But if you spend only ten minutes reading a review of the same book, then you can say anything you like."

"If you read a book," Ruth Adams Bronz, owner and chef of Manhattan's Miss Ruby's Café, says with admirable logic, "in all conscience, you're obliged to defend it from dumb reviews. If you don't read it, for all you know all the juicy negative stuff in the reviews just might be true."

What is important now is not book reading but book sightings: to spot mentions of a book in print and conversation and report these sightings in still other conversations, thereby helping create a book's "buzz." In this atmosphere, nothing could be more lethal to a book's reputation than its being read.

GRANTED, LYING ABOUT WHAT YOU'VE READ HAS ALWAYS been one of those natural social instincts, like padding your income or lowering the age at which your children began sleeping through the night. The truly alarming development is that among members of the mediacracy, all pretense has been dropped. The rules have changed. *There is no longer any need to pretend that one has read a book, because it is a social and intellectual disadvantage to have done so.* In the time it takes to read a book, you could be consuming enough magazines, newspapers, and television shows to arm yourself for months of cocktail-party battle. No, the act of reading a book today requires an almost archaic gentility, a nineteenth-century obliviousness to the lava of product belching out of this nation's publishers, film studios, and television networks.

Bullcrit is the quick, efficient way of coping with media overload, a problem exacerbated in media circles by the preference for creating culture over appreciating it. As Gore Vidal put it fifteen years ago, "It has always been true that in the United States the people who ought to read books write them." In certain loosely defined New York circles, you can reach a point while still in your thirties where you do not even have the time to *skim* all the new books written by friends and acquaintances, let alone attempt that old cover-to-cover thing. As a matter of sheer etiquette, it becomes second nature to affect a familiarity with unopened books. Bullcrit allows us to squeeze still more into what Daniel Boorstin 30 years ago called our "overpopulated consciousness."

On a deeper level, Bullcrit "resolves" the contradiction between people's need to feel a community of literary interests and the forbidding facts that there are too many books and too little time to achieve any unity. Once you get beyond a few best-sellers—a *Bonfire of the Vanities* or a *Presumed Innocent*—it's a hopelessly atomized situation. New York's media elite often turn out to have little in common except their privileged role as cogs in the well-oiled wheels of cultural commerce. Sadly, the pleasures that books give to readers in the hinterlands are rarely enjoyed at headquarters. Pathetic as it may be, Bullcrit is our noble attempt to preserve for book reading, that most private cultural experience, an acceptable public dimension.

That public dimension is increasingly absent even from the publishing industry itself. A book editor I know served not long ago as a fiction judge for the National Book Award and was sent almost every serious novel of that particular year. "For once, I was extremely well read," he says. "I'd have lunch with literary agents and be able to say, 'Oh, you represent so-and-so; I loved his book.' I'd really read it! And the agents would say to me, 'I can't tell you how nice it is to meet someone in publishing who's really read the book.' And I couldn't admit that I'd read it because I had to."

BOOK REVIEWS ARE THE BEDROCK OF BULLCRIT. BY providing instant secondhand opinions handsomely designed for cocktail parties and intellectual self-aggrandizement, book reviews render an invaluable service. (Even when reviewers themselves are Bullcritting. According to a National Book Critics Circle survey reported in January 1988, 36 percent of book reviewers said it was sometimes ethical to review a book without having finished it. How many more, one wonders, think it's unethical but do it anyway?) In the reading of any book review, there is a critical point we might call the Release—that glorious, cathartic moment at which you realize you have now absorbed enough information about the book to feel released from the obligation to read it.

To paraphrase Emily Dickinson, there is no frigate like a book review, to take us lands away.

The Bullcrit artist's bible is *The New York Times Book Review*, the chief maker, keeper, and destroyer of literary reputation. To be able to quote, paraphrase, or, failing that, fake the gist of a book review in that publication has become a leading mark of erudition. To tell an author at a Manhattan get-together that you "saw the review" is considered tantamount to having read—and liked—the book itself.

"At a party to celebrate the publication of my last novel," says a New York author, "an editor I've known for years sidled up to me and said, 'Well, I can see that you're really coming up in the world. Your first novel wasn't reviewed at all in the *Times*, your second was given an "In Short" review, and this one was reviewed in the daily *Times*.' The fact that he had diligently tracked my review history in the New York *Times* was intended as the very highest praise. Mind you, I've never had the slightest shred of evidence that he's read a single word of any of my books. Generally, when people say to me, 'I saw the review'—and you'd be amazed how many people say that and nothing else—I always want to reply, 'Thank you, but I didn't write that. I wrote the book.' But I usually hold my tongue, because I know that books are meant to be seen and not read."

The rise of Bullcrit has been smoothed by a couple of other factors, the dominant one being the influence of the cultural standards set by television and the movies. The communal experience denied adult readers is readily available to moviegoers and television watchers. A line from a screenplay

can within weeks enjoy a national familiarity only a few lines of Shakespeare have achieved in centuries. Kevin Costner's egregious line from *Bull Durham*—"I believe in long, slow, deep, soft, wet kisses that last for three days"—was recently canonized by *People* magazine for its 23 million readers as "the most repeated movie quote of the year." The disparity between the impact made by even the worst movie and all but a very few books has created a growing pressure on books to behave, if they want to be noticed, like creatures of the movie world. In a recent ad for a new book, *The DeMilles: An American Family*, by Anne Edwards, the publisher chose as the ad's headline a quotation from the *Publishers Weekly* review: "A great story . . . the kind [Cecil B.] would have optioned for the movies." The breathless question most often asked by those to whom I have just been introduced as someone who writes novels is "Are they going to be made into movies?" Often, this is not only the first question asked but the only one. In the questioner's voice I can hear the hidden panic: "Novels? For God's sake, man, are they going to get it into a form my system can tolerate?"

Bullcrit has important roots in the movie industry. Hollywood has always reviled writers, no matter how indispensable they may be, and long ago institutionalized a kind of smiling contempt for them. As Neal Gabler reminds us in his excellent recent book, *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood* (all right, I saw the review), the Warner brothers and their fellow moguls, despite their high cultural claims for movies, were not readers. After getting a wire from director Mervyn LeRoy telling him to read Hervey Allen's long-winded 1933 best-seller, *Anthony Adverse*, Jack Warner cabled back, "Read it? I can't even lift it." Today's equivalent of this story? When the producer of a hit television show tells you several months after he receives your five-page treatment for an episode that it is "too long to read" and asks if it can be condensed to a single paragraph.

"You know," says Dongan Lowndes, the half-broken-down writer in Robert Stone's 1985 novel *Children of Light*, "a lot of times when Hollywood people tell you they like a book it turns out they're referring to the studio synopsis." Gore Vidal, who once boasted that "I am that rarest of reviewers who actually reads every word, and rather slowly," wrote in 1973 that "there is evidence that a recent best-seller by a well-known writer was never read by its publisher or by the book club that took it or by the film company that optioned it."

SKIMMING

There Is Something Chilling About a Culture in Which the Purpose of a Book Is Not Tied Up With the Reading of It.

THERE IS SOMETHING CHILLING ABOUT A CULTURE IN WHICH the purpose of a book is no longer presumed by many to be tied up with the reading of it. More than ever, books are status symbols, fashion accessories, interior-decorative touches, matching gewgaws; they accent the coffee tables of our consciousness. A foot or so of color-coded Vintage Contemporary paperbacks on your shelf is the macramé wall hanging of the late eighties. When Kirk Douglas was on the *Tonight Show* recently, guest host Jay Leno thanked him for an inscribed copy of Douglas's autobiography, *The Ragman's Son*, not by saying, "I look forward to reading it" but by saying, "It'll go right up there on my bookshelf."

"You hear it all the time," says critic Stephen Schiff. "Somebody says, 'That's a great book. I saw it on the *Today* show.' "

The advertising for the comedy film *The Naked Gun* reads: "You've read the ad. Now see the movie." It's a gag that inadvertently underlines the degree to which advertising copy is this country's preferred reading material.

In a recent article about Italian novelist Umberto Eco and the publication of his new book, *Foucault's Pendulum*, Eco "estimated that *The Name of the Rose*"—his previous novel—"had a potential audience of 16 million. 'Let's be completely pessimistic and say that only 10 percent actually read it,' he said. 'That's 1.6 million people. All right, that's not bad for a writer, having 1.6 million friends.' " But it's still one out of ten.

"Why do authors bother?" *New Republic* editor Michael Kinsley lamented only half-facetiously in 1985. "As a magazine editor, I often beg journalists who contemplate spending a year or two writing a book on some worthwhile or even important subject to save themselves the agony, cut out the middleman, and just write the review."

OR, BETTER YET, WRITE THE blurb. The rise of the blurb culture is the second major factor underlying Bullcrit. As *Spy* magazine has been documenting regularly, we live in a you-scratch-my-book-jacket-and-I'll-scratch-yours world. (Example: Robert Coover on Angela Carter's *Saints and Strangers:* "One of the greatest prose masters of our time." Carter on Coover's *Gerald's Party:* "A master.") A culture in which book-jacket blurbs are prized by the publishing industry even though they are widely understood to be little more than a system of favors extended and debts discharged is a culture that has already begun to falsify the whole idea of literary appraisal. In the blurbocracy, all blurbs are created equally meaningless. As the mystery writer Robert B. Parker, quoting John Kenneth Galbraith, likes to say to novelists petitioning him for a line of praise, "I'll blurb your book or I'll read it, but not both."

Bullcrit is the conversational form of blurb, used to assign some largely random value to books and other cultural artifacts as they cruise silently across our radar screens. In an era shamelessly defined by celebrity journalism and the trivial pursuit of informed gossip, the object of book writing is now to provide a pretext for the meta-experience by which the book is known.

Under the circumstances, Bullcrit is almost impossible to resist. Wherever the knowing meet, one is liable to feel the symptoms—tightness in the chest, brain coughing up some idle judgment, lips twitching in reluctant anticipation of uttering it to hold one's own in the Bullcrit session. To this peer pressure Andrew Heyward, executive producer of CBS's *48 Hours*, has given the name "gangst." "It's that horrible feeling," Heyward says, "almost matched by that agonizing second just after you've given in and made your comment, during which you're wondering, 'Did I get away with it again?' "

Of course you got away with it. In a world of shattered attention spans, Bullcrit has taken its place as a new aesthetic of knowledge. It attests—like State Department spokesmen and answering machines—to the sacredness of the secondhand. ▬