

Blurb praise and hot takes

Criticism in an age of publicity

by James Jiang (</abr-online/archive/2021/author/12460-jamesjiang>)

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Because my background is academic (and in English studies), certain disciplinary conventions still find their way into my review writing. In fact, it's hard for me to think of my reviewing as *reviewing* rather than as *criticism* in that more university-bound sense: that is, as having something to do with the art of interpretation. It may help that most of the books I review – works of contemporary poetry and literary criticism – are considered 'hard' or at least esoteric, and thus in need of a little explaining. The persona I hear most recognisably in my journalistic prose is that of my former lecturer-self (a good lecture, like a good review, strikes the right balance between granular analysis and makeshift generalisation). I suppose I still think of the primary goal of my reviewing as teaching something about how to read.

So, old habits die hard. I should say that I don't regard teaching as an 'obligation or responsibility' of the critic; it's merely a desire (perhaps, a narcissistic one). But it's a desire that does feed into an essential requirement, namely, that of saying something *new* about a book. On the face of it, this may seem another academic prejudice; reviewing, after all, isn't research. But the need is even more pressing – and perhaps just as difficult – because the marketing strategy of most commercially viable books is to create a kind of consensus in advance of their publication. Hence, the flurry of media releases (which are often all that an editor has to go on when

commissioning a review) and author interviews (or ‘human-interest’ stories) in weekend broadsheets (taking up precious space that a review or two might otherwise have occupied).

I’m not saying that all marketing and publicity are bad or gratuitous; culture in this stage of late capitalism probably can’t survive without the culture industry (of which I am now a paid-up member, having quit academia), but if the ‘culture’ in that very phrase is to mean anything at all, then it ought to be the role of criticism to wedge itself between those two words and help ventilate the wheelhouse of consumer advice overheated by blurb praise and hot takes.

While I’m at it, there’s a point about stylistic complicity that I want to make: a journalistic idiom is characterised by its privileging of punchiness and pith. It’s a style that’s easy to enjoy – though far from easy to pull off – but the *ease* is part of the point; it’s a style that’s meant to model a kind of democratic ethos of accessibility. But it’s equally motivated by the limitations of space and conventions of layout in print media. While the advent of digital platforms has been a blessing for the word count-challenged, I have not seen a corresponding diversification of critical prose styles through, say, a revival of the long, languorous, and eminently unquotable sentence à la George Meredith or Gerald Murnane. Twitter hasn’t helped in this regard; and the emphasis on rhetorical point, as it used to be called, tightens the circuit between the critic and marketing departments, which are likely to emblazon the former’s trenchant phrases on the covers of their next release.

So a critic’s job is to say something new, preferably in a way that is new (by that I don’t mean fashionable and thus self-preeningly new, but a manner that resists or challenges the prevailing sensibilities). And the reason for doing this is not to be then sucked into the same publicity cycle that the books themselves inhabit, but rather to model the kind of critical responsiveness that, for a culture to thrive, needs to be enacted at every level of engagement. If criticism is what keeps the two words in ‘culture industry’ sufficiently apart for that phrase to be meaningful (that is, for the media to

have something to *mediate*), it also makes a tautology of ‘critical culture’. For a culture only exists to the extent that it is critical through and through; it is not exclusively the province of that class of professionals called ‘critics’.

The reason why I have dwelt so long on publicity and marketing is that the energy and resources that get poured into these activities have detracted from the critical function performed by editors. (This, I should add, is merely a hunch; I don’t have the data, but I would be interested in seeing what the budget for publicity and marketing is in a typical commercial publisher as compared to that devoted to its editing.) Let me put this as bluntly as I can: you don’t want your best critics to be your reviewers (who, as a species, are too far downstream to change much about the ecology they live in). Your best critics should be your editors, those doing the commissioning, making acquisitions, and working with authors on manuscripts – all those upstream activities that provide the ecology with its primary nutrients.

It may seem as if I’m letting reviewers off the hook here; and in a way I am. The expense of critical effort is typically underpaid, severely so if you’re to do it properly (since it entails a fair bit of extra reading). As a result, ‘critical culture’ in Australia is largely epiphenomenal, a secondary effervescence of intellectual life drawing on the room left over by creative writing, teaching and research, or, indeed, publishing; it is, by and large, a side hustle. But reviewers are visible in a way that their critical counterparts on the other side of the veil, editors, are not and thus they appear to hoard the cultural capital associated with making public statements of aesthetic value.

It is not clear to me, however, that readers much care for, or even take seriously, aesthetic reflection, even as a critic may raise their hackles when she throws aside the very pretence that that’s what reviews are for. I think that’s why Jessie Tu’s writing has hit such a nerve; the point of her pieces is less a discriminating account of the book under review than a survey of the book’s likely receptive milieu. They offer a vernacular distillation of what academics like to call the ‘sociology of taste’: why do white people love Sally Rooney? In what ways can a non-white, non-model-student, non-Surry

Hills-residing, non-charity-donating woman identify with Bridie Jabour? Who, besides irredeemable normies, wants to read about marriage? Some version of this kind of reductionist thinking goes on in the heads of publicists, and what Tu's reviews show up in slightly (and only slightly) modified form are the cynical acts of interpellation that drive the publishing industry.

Tu may end up paying the price, of course. Some of the writers Tu has reviewed (or their editors) may end up on the panel for the next grant or award she seeks. But it's not only the reckless who suffer from systemic risks: a poet who occupied a key editorial role recently told me that the critical scruples they exercised in that position now seemed 'impolitic'. Australian publishing is a small and insular environment in which groups of writers move through various institutions as a virtual cohort. It gives our literary culture a clubby feel and the meliorist tone of a less than rigorous creative writing workshop. In that kind of context, 'impolitic' may be the highest compliment we can pay our critics.

This piece was originally delivered at a 'Review Culture' roundtable hosted by the University of Melbourne's English and Theatre Studies seminar in September 2021.

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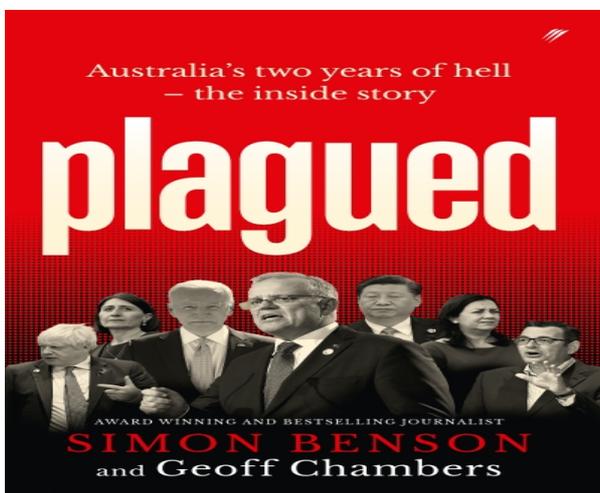
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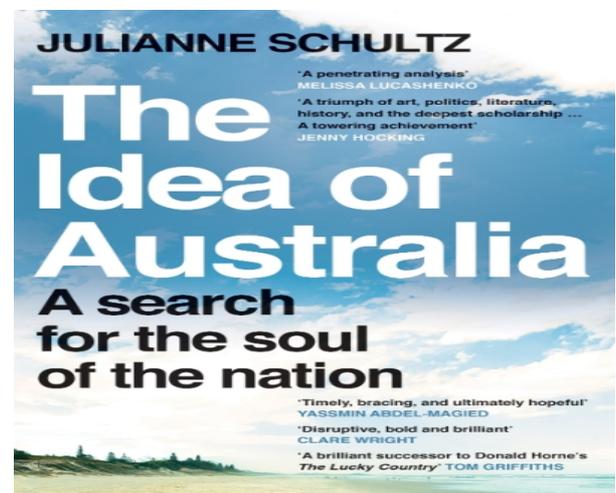


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