

“Reviews Blues”—SDBR (847 words)

Diana Y. Paul

May 1, 2016

I want what all writers want: to know if I’m any good. I needed to know if I was just fooling myself. After my galleys (or ARCs= Advance Review Copies) had been printed with beautiful covers and were ready to send out to reviewers, bloggers, and NetGalley (a giant online review site for pdf versions of the ARC), the thing I looked forward to, more than anything, were my first reviews.

The reviews on Goodreads and Amazon were overwhelmingly positive. Four and five-star reviews make me sound like the next big literary star. I truly appreciated these, but it is the lone one-star and, I admit, even the two-star reviews that shocked me! I reread them to make sure I understood. Then I wanted to hide my head under a blanket. I took a deep breath. Because let’s be perfectly honest here: I knew this was going to happen. All my author friends warned me to be prepared. Somebody is going to hate your book – and if you let it, that little 1-star review will have the power to obliterate all the 4- and 5-star reviews that came before it. Here are excerpts from a 1-star and 2-star review I received:

“After reading this book, I felt one emotion: disgust. The family is made up of awful, horrible people. There was not a single character that I was rooting for.”

I thought it was going to be a tale of three siblings overcoming their differences to manage their over-spending parents. Instead, it was a tale of the most dysfunctional family that I had ever read. Each character was so severely flawed that it was tough to find anything to like about anyone. It’s not a good thing that I was cheering when each parent died.

First of all, my intention was to breathe life and raw, ferocious emotions into characters none of us hope to meet but most of us know. These reviewers reacted very strongly to the characters in *Things Unsaid*, my first novel, and that is very difficult to accomplish. I never expected my readers to even consider being a friend with the characters. Rather, my targeted reader would understand that and relish their flaws. So, time to move on.

Second, I wondered how other authors handle the inevitable bad reviews. So, I searched three of my favorite authors and looked at some of their one and two star reviews. I was horrified. My cherished iconic novelists had suffered the same ignominious experience. Here are a few I found recently on Amazon:

“Horrible and probably not worth even the one star. While it's true Strout writes with depth, precision, and intensity it isn't to uplift or edify the reader. It's more like exploratory surgery to find the rottenest part of our souls and dig it out for examination.”

Review of *Olive Kitteridge*, winner of the Pulitzer Prize by Elizabeth Strout

“Well, Mrs. Bridge doesn't really change over the course of the novel, doesn't learn anything, doesn't ever realize how sheltered and irritating she is.” Review of *Mrs. Bridge* by Evan S. Connell

“Unfortunately, I didn't like any but three of the characters in this bitter, recriminatory family-disintegration drama, and their dialogue, though well-written and believable, told a tale that came to no good end.” Review of “**August: Osage County**”, Pulitzer Prize winning play by Tracy Letts.

All the while I was obsessing over these three negative reviews (yes, maybe even whining a bit), I recalled a quote by Stephen King in *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*: “You can't please all of the readers all of the time; you can't please even some of the readers all of the time, but you really ought to try to please at least some of the readers some of the time.”

Yes, negative reviews do sting. Recovery is almost a form of therapy that perhaps only authors can truly identify with. And a 1-star review feels like an attack. Our books are our book babies and, just as you never expect anyone to say your baby is funny looking, the author doesn't expect the reader to do the equivalent.

But, then the author has to go out and ask readers to write reviews. Any

review is publicity. The more reviews, the more readers will come out to read the book. The number one reason for writing is to find readers who become engrossed in the world we create and through the narrative, complete the characters' arcs from their own experiences and interpretations. Opinions and perspectives vary. Because people don't read books the same way, --they have different backgrounds and preferences—each reader completes the story and connects the dots of the scenes and subplots in personal and original ways.

So, now I have to hope for more reviewers—even though I dread the occasional one and two stars—in order to reach out to my intended audience. There is no way around it. My solution: I reread the ones that make my heart soar with appreciation and excitement: words such as suspenseful, imaginative, compelling, powerful. And I savor the comments by making a list to inspire me to write on. These are special readers and reviewers out there who really get what I'm trying to create.