

REFLECTIONS

PRAISING OR BANNING

Robert Silverberg

John Updike was not only a splendid writer of novels and short stories—he even dabbled in science fiction, with two of his stories getting into the Year’s Best Science Fiction anthology—but was also a first-rate critic. For many years his lengthy essays on other writers’ books appeared in *The New Yorker*, discursive and penetrating pieces in which, more often than not, he fastened upon the work of some fairly obscure writer and brought it forward into well-deserved attention.

The one thing he never did, in these elegant and carefully considered critiques, is hold a book up to scorn. With one very conspicuous exception, Updike’s reviews were always positive ones. In his introduction to *Picked-Up Pieces* (1975), one of his books of collected essays, he set forth his philosophy of reviewing in a few brief maxims (“Review the book, not the reputation” and “Better to praise and share than blame and ban”), and proposed that critics not accept for review books that they were “pre-disposed to dislike, or committed by friendship to like.”

These may seem like overly soft-hearted rules to those of us who like to sit on the sidelines and watch some polemically minded critic demolish an unworthy novel with ferocious invective. Updike himself at least once was not immune to the temptation to excoriate. He let it be known that he was unable to read Tom Wolfe’s hugely successful *The Bonfire of the Vanities*—“The blatancy of the icy-hearted satire repelled me”—and in a celebrated 1998 review he went after Wolfe’s later novel, *A Man in Full*, calling it “entertainment, not literature, even literature in a modest, aspirant form.” This was only one salvo in a long feud between Wolfe and Updike, growing out of Wolfe’s hostility for Updike’s beloved *New Yorker* and fed by what even Updike suspected was Updike’s envy of Wolfe’s vast commercial success, which Updike thought stemmed from vulgar pandering to a lowbrow readership. That episode apart, Updike’s reviews were unfailingly informative and generous of spirit. He singled out books worth reading that most of us had never heard of, explained why they were worth reading, and sent us off to find and read them: a valuable public service. This, too, had its roots in Updike’s own career; in 1965 a critic named John Aldridge had taken out after one of his earliest novels, *Of the Farm*, and after Updike himself, saying, “He does not have an interesting mind. He does not possess remarkable narrative gifts or a distinguished style. . . . He does not challenge the imagination or stimulate, shock, or educate it. . . . Mr. Updike has nothing to say.” The Aldridge review left scars on the thirty-three-year-old Updike, as well it might, and he resolved thereupon never to inflict such wounds on a fellow practitioner in any criticism he might write himself (a resolution he seems to have waived only in the case of Tom Wolfe).

The science fiction world has had its own celebrated excoriators, and as a young would-be writer and then as a beginning professional I studied their fierce demolitions of our contemporaries with morbid fascination. Both were outstanding SF writers themselves: James Blish, who penned his furious critical essays under the not very carefully concealed pseudonym of William Atheling, Jr., and Damon Knight, who wrote his reviews under his own name. Blish’s essays are collected in two books, *The Issue at Hand* and *More Issues at Hand*, and a fair sample of his approach is this comment on a 1952 collaborative story: “I can only suggest that both authors—not their story, but the authors themselves—be piled in the middle of the floor and set

fire to." As for Knight, whose reviews can be found in the collection *In Search of Wonder*, he was best known for his savage attack on A.E. van Vogt's *The World of Null-A* ("one of the worst allegedly-adult science fiction stories ever published"), but he laid about him in all directions with equal might and main, and it was a rare writer who failed to feel the sting of his whip.

Neither Blish nor Knight was just a mere hatchet-man, of course, and their essays form a valuable compendium not simply of what not to do in writing science fiction, but what goals to strive for. As a fledgling writer myself (who had little to fear from their ferocity, since I was just a beginner), I studied their texts as though they were scripture, and learned an immense amount from them, as well as savoring the satisfying emotion of *schadenfreude* as I read their hearty attacks on X or Y or Z. Eventually, as I entered more fully into my own career, I did a little reviewing myself, and, since I took science fiction Very Seriously (as did, of course, Blish and Knight) I confess that I indulged in a little negative reviewing myself.

I slammed Edgar Rice Burroughs in a 1964 review, calling his work "silly and crude," and, still channeling my inner William Atheling, Jr., spoke of his work as "unmitigated trash, subliterate claptrap hardly worth the time of children," in another. The year before I said of Murray Leinster, a writer I actually admired quite a good deal, that "his inventiveness is outweighed by his repetitious plotting, molecule-deep characterization, and frequent tendency to lapse into a Mother Goose kind of narrative style." I found Algis Budrys' *Man of Earth* "a disappointingly thin effort" lacking any "vision of tomorrow," though I did note that Budrys, a good friend of mine, "writes here, as always, with care and integrity." I even dared to give the fearsome Damon Knight a dose of his own medicine, noting that as a critic he "has mercilessly and ferociously lambasted the false, the poorly written, and the cynical in science fiction," but, though "when a man has branded a ten-dollar bill as counterfeit, he is not therefore required to make good the bill out of his own pocket," a critic must "measure up to certain minimal standards of performance" when he writes a book himself. This Knight, I said, had signally failed to do in his latest novel ("a pale, insubstantial" book). And so on for two sharply worded pages.

But the science fiction world of fifty years ago was a small and intensely social one. Burroughs was dead, and Leinster, an old pro, would hardly care about my sniping at him, but Budrys and Knight and many of the other writers I was reviewing were my friends, and I began to wonder whether I really should be assailing their work so vehemently in public. Knight, at least, seemed not to mind. In 1958, when I first began doing reviews, he wrote to me, saying, "I expect you to carry on in the old tradition; any namby-pamby politeness, & I'll visit the Knight Curse on you." And when I took him at his word six years later, this is how he responded to my review: "I don't know how you could get any closer to what I would have written if the book had been written by someone else. That was a deliberately commercial book, & by rights I ought to be ready to take my critical lumps along with my royalties, and I find that I am." As for Budrys, he never said a word to me about my harsh review, which I know he must have seen, but I suspect he must have been hurt by it, because I had known how much difficulty he had had in writing the book in question, a long, agonizing struggle. Perhaps it would have been kinder of me to greet the unquestionable failure of that book with silence rather than criticism.

Silence, in fact, seemed to me the best tactic in general. Many of my colleagues, I knew, were struggling with severe financial problems and periodic writer's block and any number of other headaches; and, since my own life and career were very clearly going in the opposite direction, I felt it ill behooved me to be publishing negative appraisals of their work. Bad enough to have one's book sniped at in print; to

be sniped at by a friend, and a friend whose own position was a secure and comfortable one, must surely seem intolerable. So I found myself evolving toward the same “praise and share rather than blame and ban” position that John Updike would later speak of. I did almost no book reviewing after 1965, and when I did briefly return to it in 1977 and 1978 my words were nearly all ones of praise. I did find one book by one of my own favorite writers “a stunning failure” in a 1977 review, but that, I think, was my last unkind word about someone else’s material. Not that I found all science fiction to be unalloyed masterpieces—far from it. But after that I resolved to let someone else demolish the inferior work in the manner of Blish and Knight, and took no part in the public demolition work myself thereafter.

I still have some strong opinions about what is being published, of course, and I do sometimes express those opinions—taking pains to keep them between me and the friend with whom I’m talking. Which led to one final twist in my relationship with Damon Knight, that vehement defender of all that was true and proper in science fiction.

Damon, in the mid-1960s, had become the science fiction editor for one of the major paperback houses, and in the course of time published a novel so dreadful, so totally awful, that I could not resist dropping him a note of protest. Anyone unfamiliar with science fiction, I said, who happened to pick this book up to see what SF was all about would throw it away after a couple of chapters and never go near our field again. What sort of service to science fiction did Damon think he was performing by letting a book that bad go into print under his auspices?

Yes, Damon replied, the book was unquestionably terrible. But there were two extenuating circumstances: the author was a black man, and he had written the book while serving time for burglary in the penitentiary. Thus Damon saw publication of the book as a blow for racial equality and also as a personal act of charity toward a troubled human being.

I was unimpressed. What, I asked, did an act of reverse prejudice of this sort do to bring about racial equality? And why did the fact that the author was a convicted burglar justify publishing his terrible novel? Damon’s response was to publish a second novel, just as bad, by the same writer. And so I saw that the critic who in the 1950s could use such words as “horrid” and “nonsense” when discussing Richard Matheson’s *I Am Legend*, and worried about the example that the commercial success of such a bad book would set for the publishing industry, had an entirely different set of standards when he was on the other side of the editorial desk. It was a useful lesson in the futility of criticism. Matheson’s book sold and sold, and is regarded as a classic now. The two clumsy novels by the ex-convict that Damon Knight published long ago sank without a trace, and the man never sold anything afterward. In neither case did Damon’s position, giving sharp treatment to Matheson’s book on the one hand and high-mindedly publishing two unworthy novels on the other for reasons that had nothing to do with their literary quality, have any effect on the future of science fiction publishing.

Better to keep my opinions to myself, I thought, and avoid injuring my friends. And so, after once having called a friend’s book “a disappointingly thin effort” in a published review and having said of another’s that it was “a stunning failure,” I gave up negative reviewing forever. Praise and share, don’t blame and ban, said John Updike in 1975. I came to the same conclusion a couple of years later, and have stayed with it ever since.