

BOOK REVIEWING



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Carl Tighe

Book reviewing is an important part of any professional writer's life. It is:

- a way of engaging with the daily culture
- a way of 'keeping in touch' with professional developments
- a way of checking on what the competition is up to
- a way of thinking about the writing processes of other writers
- a way of maintaining a public profile
- a valuable source of income.

Wikipedia defines book reviewing as follows:

A *book review* is a form of literary criticism in which a book is analysed based on content, style, and merit. A book review can be a primary source opinion piece, summary review or scholarly review. Books can be reviewed for printed periodicals, magazines and newspapers, as school work, or for book web sites on the internet. A book review's length may vary from a single paragraph to a substantial essay. Such a review may evaluate the book on the basis of personal taste. Reviewers may use the occasion of a book review for a display of learning or to promulgate their own ideas on the topic of a fiction or non-fiction work.

Usually book reviews are brief, rarely more than 1000 words, although you might sometimes come across longer article-length reviews in the more serious newspapers and journals. In all cases, book reviews need to be succinct. They may vary in tone, subject and style, but whatever their length and wherever they appear all book reviews display some features in common:

1. A review gives the reader a concise summary of the content of the book, including a description of the topic and the author's perspective, argument and / or purpose
2. A review offers a critical analysis and assessment of the content. This involves your understanding and reaction: what strikes you as noteworthy, whether the book is effective or persuasive, how it enhanced your understanding of the issues it deals with
3. In addition to offering an analysis of the book, the reviewer usually suggests whether the audience would appreciate it.

While book reviewing should never be simple nastiness and point-scoring, it is not about just being nice either. Sometimes difficult things just have to be said, but if so they should always be wrapped up artfully and expressed wittily... as the review of Judith Krantz's *Princess Daisy* by Clive James illustrates. It first appeared in *The London Review of Books*, 5 June 1980 (vol. 2, no. 11). Read his review. It can be found at: www.lrb.co.uk/v02/n11/clive-james/a-blizzard-of-tiny-kisses.

- First, notice the basic information provided at the start of the review to enable the reader to identify and help in their decision about purchasing a copy: the author's name, the book title, the name of the publisher, the number of pages, the price, the year of publication and the ISBN number.
- Then notice the way that quotations are used as proof and to make a point effectively.
- Note too, that although Clive James probably gave page numbers for each of his quotations in a proper reference simply because he needed to convince the editor that he was not inventing things, as this article is for newspaper publication the editor has stripped them out. Remember - always give your editor / lecturer a full reference for any quotations you use.
- Note also that this book review is about 3,202 words long – which is long for a book review, but it is detailed and substantial.
- What do the following words from the article mean – look them up in a dictionary: topographical, transfigurative, adumbrates, cetacean, bourgeois, reprehensible, *tutto tremante*, naturalism, disconsolate, patrician, indispensable, rivulets, garnered, chimerica.
- Why is *tutto tremante* in italics?
- Who are: 'Elinor Glyn, E. M. Hull and Gertrude Atherton' and why do you think he refers to them?
- Draw up a series of bullet points summarising the main observations of this review.
- What are the main 'technical' points about writing here?
- How is this review structured? Identify the structural elements of the review. Is it conventional or unconventional?
- Most reviews are pretty ephemeral, but this review was included in the *Oxford Book of Essays*. Why? What do you think makes this review more worthy of a longer 'shelf-life'?
- How would you describe the style of this review?
- Do you think this is an effective book review? Why / Why not? In what ways is it effective / ineffective?
- The review was criticised because of the sentence: 'Until lately she was a nice Jewish lady harbouring the usual bourgeois fancies about the aristocracy.' Given the general tone of the piece, why do you think this particular line was considered offensive?
- Towards the end of the review Clive James says: 'Mrs Krantz is 50 years old, but to judge from the photograph on the back of the book she is engaged in a series of hard-fought delaying actions against time.' What does he mean? Is it fair comment? Why do you think so?
- What are 'the usual bourgeois fancies about the aristocracy'?

BOOK REVIEW: *MY LIFE IN ORANGE*

Here is Wikipedia's description of *My Life in Orange: Growing Up with the Guru* by Tim Guest and a brief account of its reception.

My Life in Orange: Growing Up with the Guru is an account of a child growing up in the Rajneesh movement led by Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh. The book is a firsthand account, written by Tim Guest years after his experiences, at the age of 27. The book was published in 2004 by Granta Books. The book's title is a reference to the term 'the orange people', which was used to refer to members of the Rajneesh movement due to the color they dyed their clothes.

Guest describes how his mother was initially raised in strict Catholicism, but later turned to a tape of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh after going through a period of experimenting with sex and drugs. She dyed all of her clothes orange, took on the name of 'Ma Prem Vismaya', and 'Yogesh' for her son, and moved to a Rajneesh movement commune near Bombay. Guest's mother moved to many different communes, and had leadership roles within the movement, eventually running a commune in Suffolk. Guest recounts how he regretted the absence of his mother's presence during this time, and describes controversial living conditions with other children at the various ashrams. Guest and his mother moved to the 64,000-acre (260 km²) commune in Oregon, but his mother was demoted in position and sent to live at a different commune in Cologne. His family later disassociated from the Rajneesh movement and moved back to North London, where they each encountered difficulties reintegrating back into mainstream society.

My Life in Orange received generally positive reviews in book trade publications and in the media. *The New Yorker* critic John Lahr characterized *My Life in Orange* as 'one of the best autobiographies of the decade'. *The Daily Telegraph* placed the book in its 'Top 20 non-fiction' list of 'the year's best biographies, histories and memoirs' for 2004, and *The Independent* highlighted the book among its '50 Best Books for the Beach'. A review in *Reference & Research Book News* commented that participants in the Rajneesh movement created 'adults like Guest who are marked by the neglect suffered in a childhood among the completely self-absorbed'. *Kirkus Reviews* described the book as 'a rightly disturbing record of malignant child neglect by people who sought a heaven, but made a hell'. *My Life in Orange* was highlighted among *Kirkus Reviews* 'Best books for reading groups'. In his review of the book for *M2 Best Books*, Peter Haswell concluded: 'A thoroughly enjoyable read and a fascinating insight into the workings of a commune along with the people, their beliefs and their attitudes. Both amusing and sad. Pretty much something for everyone.'

The book received a favorable review in *New Statesman*, and William Leith wrote: 'This is an excellent study of what happens when a charismatic leader comes into contact with a group of rudderless, dispirited people. They follow him blindly. They let him get away with anything.' Montagu Curzon of *The*

Spectator wrote that 'Guest makes an astonishingly mature debut (he is 27) and has the rare ability to describe childhood as a small child lives it; accepting, helpless, curious.' Lois Kendall gave the book a positive review in *Cultic Studies Review*, and wrote: 'The book is deep, yet light and readable, both for those who have had similar life experiences and who, I am sure, will find solace in this book, and for those with no such personal experience, who will find the narrative fascinating.' *Publishers Weekly* characterized *My Life in Orange* as 'Honest and vivid, this is an absorbing book about survival and good intentions gone awry.' Gillian Engberg of *Booklist* called the book a 'stirring memoir', and wrote: 'Guest writes with a reporter's sense of economy and restraint, letting absurd, even shocking details speak for themselves.' Christopher Hart gave the book a positive review in *The Sunday Times*, and wrote: 'Tim Guest's extraordinary account of his childhood in the communes of Bhagwan, the notorious Indian guru, is a survivor's tale, poignant, funny and wise.'

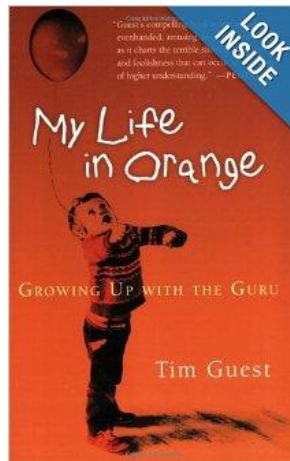
A review in *The Daily Telegraph* commented that 'the main failure of Guest's otherwise excellent book is the absence of character: even his mother comes across rather as a history than a personality.' 'My Life in Orange, though slightly patchwork in its construction, is an absorbing piece of writing, all the more compelling for begging as many questions as it answers and for the author's refusal to ask for pity,' wrote Geraldine Bedell in a review of the book in *The Observer*. Director of the Cheltenham Festival of Literature, Christopher Cook, characterized *My Life in Orange* as 'the most extraordinary account of his (Tim Guest's) childhood and the bravest writing I've read in ages'. Sudipta Datta of the *Indian Express* described the book as 'a postcard from the past that the Osho ashram may not rave about.' Datta noted though that after having been angry with his mother and Rajneesh, Guest had reconciled with his family, reclaimed his childhood and come to see Rajneesh as 'a loveable rogue who got away with doing his own thing'. Catherine A. Powers of *The Boston Globe* characterized the book as a 'moving, superbly written account of growing up in the midst of ... cruel madness'. Michael E. Young of *The Dallas Morning News* gave the book a favorable review, and wrote: 'The book offers a glimpse into the thoughts of the followers, and examines the fine line between spirituality and insanity, between religion and cult.' Shane Hegarty of *The Irish Times* characterized the book as 'an intriguing and often humorous mix of straightforward 1980s nostalgia and cult delusion'.

What follows is a review of the book.

Review by Charley Baker¹

Tim Guest, *My Life in Orange: Growing up with the Guru*,
(London: Granta Books, 2004), 297pp, ISBN1-86207-720-7, £7.99

¹ (www.madnessandliterature.org/literature.php?id=146&resultpage=1) 10 November 2009.



For the majority of Tim Guest's childhood he lived in communes of 'the orange people', followers of Indian guru Bhagwan Rajneesh. This involved moving back and forward to England, Germany, India and North America, often without his parents present. Despite the utopianism, this instability, neglect, and lack of boundaries, was bound to create problems. By the time his mother 'abandons orange', he ends up in a London school with overt mental health problems.

It is easy to see why people, like Guest's mother, fell for Bhagwan. She wanted to escape a Catholic up-bringing, seeing the nuclear family and the state as oppressive. She held a doctorate in psychology, but heard voices, and this included the voice of Bhagwan. A quotation from the text, when she informs people she is 'taking orange' is telling:

The Marxists thought co-opting Eastern philosophy was intellectual imperialism. The feminists were outraged that her consciousness had fallen so low that she was carrying a picture of a man around her neck. Her therapist acquaintances warned she was projecting her primary love-object in an unconscious bonding with an omnipotent fantasy and that was bound to end in catastrophic negative counter-transference. Her hippie friends thought it was a hassle to have to dye so many clothes. (p.13)

There is comedy, and a lot of truth in all these comments. Guest manages to lay bare the deep longings of a son chasing his mother. He gets deformed feet in the process, standing so much on tiptoe amongst thousands of orange people, searching for her amongst the crowds. This is heart wrenching, but not mawkish.

The book fully evokes the 1970s and 1980s. Perhaps you have to be once removed from the world, as in a commune, to understand it. From shrinking Monster Munch crisp packets under the grill, to almost worshipping the colour visor on a Lego spaceman, Guest encapsulates the ontological essence of being a boy in this period. He is the rebel, but no hero, as when he narrates when, to look cool to his mates in

England, he pretends to not know the girl with thick glasses and on crutches who he had been friends with in Germany.

The book also contains evocative black and white photographs, which, from Guest's perspective reveal how his father and mother had been forever searching elsewhere. She believes in the subversions of R. D. Laing, that the mad might be sane, and vice versa. Laing invited her home, but we don't learn if she accepted! Bhagwan's beliefs changed like the wind, and the level of scandal and corruption that led to the fall of the main commune in Oregon, including terrorist plots and mass poisonings, is startling. All Guest wants is a home. What is even more shocking is that even after his mother has given up orange, they are always on the move. He eventually gets her to face what she has done to him, forces her to settle, and, ironically, through using techniques probably learnt in Bhagwan's communes, there is reconciliation and hope.

As Guest puts it, according to R. D. Laing, when one looks into the mother's face one sees oneself, and to be seen by the mother confirms existence. Guest's mother embraced Bhagwan, and her looking away to Bhagwan meant that she abused her son. Guest refuses to confirm that actual child sexual abuse took place in Oregon, when asked by an official. This is despite eight year olds bragging about having sex. His own depth of loss is clear. Guest's ability to evoke the external world of time and place, in various countries, with the inner more complex world of childhood, is immense.

Follow-up work

- The key themes here are: autobiography, writing the self, transforming experience into writing, revealing reads, book review.
- Would you agree?
- Or are they? Is there anything else?
- In what ways do these themes intersect with a consideration of writing processes?
- Who is R. D. Laing?
- Why is he referred to here?
- What do you know about Bhagwan?
- What elements of an idealistic lifestyle can you identify here?
- What sinister elements can you identify here?
- What elements of plot and character are explored in this review?
- In what ways does human nature rather than idealism triumph here?
- In what ways does idealism triumph over human nature here?
- In what ways do you recognise elements of this book, as outlined by the reviewer, as common to what you want to say about yourself?
- In what ways is this book different / similar to your growing-up?
- In what ways has this review informed you about the book?
- Is it an effective review?
- Does this review have the potential reader in mind?
- In what ways does the review differ from the Wikipedia comment on the book?
- Why do you think they differ?

- In what ways does the writing process involved in producing this book show through here?
- In what ways does the writing process involved in producing a review of this book show through here?
- In what ways has this review helped you to shape what you want to say about your life and experience?
- In what ways has this review helped you to understand how you might review a book that has influenced you?
- Find a book that both interested and irritated you and write a review of it – max 500 words. Be as arch and severe as you like, but back up each major point you make with a fully referenced quotation (including page numbers) from the book.
- In what ways (if at all) do the reviews by Clive James and Charley Baker conform to the advice given on book reviews and reading reports in Carl Tighe's *Creative Writing @ University: Frequently Asked Questions*?
- Imagine you are a commissioning editor working for a literary magazine. Draw up a short policy statement on book reviews: offer guidelines and advice on the kind of review you would like to see from potential contributors to the magazine.
- Bring your book review and your Policy to class next week for discussion.

ADDITIONAL READING

If you want to know more about book reviewing, see the following:

- John Drewry, *Writing Book Reviews*. Boston: The Writer, 1974.
- *Literary Reviewing*, Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1987.
- Harry Teitelbaum, *How to Write Book Reports*. New York: Macmillan, 1998.
- A. J. Walford (ed.), *Reviews and Reviewing: A Guide*. Phoenix, AZ: Oryx Press, 1986.