

From the Kitchen

9 September 2009

We live in a world that appears complex to many of us. It is crowded with people, things, information and events. We can only deal with a small part of all this in a lifetime and an even smaller part at any one moment. We have to choose what to do, who to be with, where to be, what to read; even from the small slice of all possibilities that we have access to. To assist us in this, helpful people create catalogues, indexes, compendiums, digests, directories, databases, search engines, fortune cookies and book reviews.



Book reviews are interesting. Someone has read the book and then attempts to put into a small number of words their impressions and, sometimes, critical analysis. If we know the reviewers or know what they like, their reviews can be useful in making the most of our limited reading time. If we don't know them or their prejudices, the review needs to give reasons for what is written.

One thing I detest in reviews (and publishers' jacket notes) is too much information; the giving away of key elements or surprises in the work under review, so that the author's intentions are thwarted. A reviewer should never take away from the author's intentions in the unfolding of the story and the timing of revelations.

Sometimes the author's intended surprise has to be ignored when turning a book into a film, for instance when one of the characters is black and the other white – you can't hide this in a film, but in a book the author has control over the revelation. Other visual aspects of characters may be entirely up to your imagination and a film can spoil this. Moral: read the book before seeing the film.

When I write fiction, I'm in control of what information I give readers and when I give it. I may want to withhold something until a critical moment in the story or provide information in a particular order. I would resent a reviewer or jacket writer thwarting that intention and giving the reader prior information. I do not see it as necessary in a review to spoil the experience; there are plenty of things that can be legitimately said about a work.

Mind you, there *are* people who read reviews because they want a guarantee that they will like a book before they spend money and time on it. This may reflect how these people are about life in general but, as I wrote in *From the Kitchen* #9, quoting Helen Keller: "Life is either a daring adventure or nothing."

As with everything else in life, a book affects each of us uniquely. It's not what you read but what you do with what you read that is important. The same book may be a 'ho-hum' experience for one person and spur another into action to change the world. One reader may laugh throughout while another goes through a box of tissues. I once heard a writer say that there are as many versions of any book as there are people reading it.

Book reviews can also completely miss the point of a story. An example is all the reviews I read of Toni Jordan's *Addition*. The more than a dozen I read all concentrated on the compulsive counting of the central character and how hilarious the book is. Not one mentioned any of the issues explored by the book: what constitutes (in)security; the wisdom of trying to 'cure' some 'conditions' with pharmaceuticals; the tenderness in a loving relationship; what it is that may underlie such compulsive behaviour. These are the meat of the book; the humour is part of the telling of it, but is not what the book is about.

As a reviewer, I know it is not always possible to treat all the elements in a book, mainly because of limits to word counts. I recently reviewed *Bloke* by Bruce Pascoe. I was limited to 800 words. This was not enough to mention the author's interest in birds and their habits, fish, the bush, nor his fine portrayal of women and their pivotal roles in many communities and relationships.

It is, of course, not only with books that we look for recommendations. We watch film trailers and read film reviews; we read travel magazines and rely on friends for holiday information. There are also those who ask their friends for advice on who they should date and marry.

I could also get into those parents and siblings who think they should be the final arbiters on the questions of jobs and partners. But I won't get started on that. Although, seeing I already have ... No. I'll leave that alone, for now.