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Playing Nice, Being Mean, and the Space In Between: Book Critics and the Difficulties of Writing Bad Reviews

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Introduction

Violence. Revenge. And a long-standing rivalry. This sounds like the stuff of Medieval or heroic literature but actually describes a dinner party at which Norman Mailer, the famed American novelist, journalist, and essayist, punched writer and critic Gore Vidal in the mouth. The reason? Retaliation over a negative book review.

Critics are an example of market mediators: third parties responsible for offering professional recommendations about new products that buyers consult to inform their consumer choices (Hirsch 1972; Zuckerman 1999). Like analysts in the financial market, literary critics assess and evaluate which products (i.e., books rather than stocks) are worth consumers' time and money. Readers consult book reviews to inform their reading selections. But critics are not simply messengers. They do not just report on the underlying value of products; otherwise they would not be of interest to sociologists of valuation (Sauder, Lynn, and Podolny 2012). Critics actively participate in constructing the worth of the objects they review.

And reviews matter. In the literary world, if a book attracts the attention of critics, amidst the hundreds of new fiction titles released each week, then this is in itself a small triumph (Heilbron 1999; Janssen 2009). Simply being reviewed in the *New York Times Book Review* (NYTBR) is a good predictor of whether an author will go on to publish another novel (Ekelund and Borjesson 2002), thus lending empirical weight to the trade wisdom: “[I]t is better to get a negative review in the NYTBR than to get none at all” (Ekelund

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and Borjesson 2002: 354). Getting the attention of newspaper and magazine critics is also a first and necessary step on the road to being consecrated as a high-culture novelist (Bourdieu 1993; Janssen 1998; van Rees 1983).

Yet, as the opening vignette suggests, critics' evaluative practices carry consequences not only for the books they review, but also the evaluators themselves. While the violence of the Mailer-Vidal feud may be an extreme example, it clearly makes the point that reviews can have real social, professional, and on rare occasion even physical consequences for the critics who write them. This chapter explores how critics perceive the consequences of their judgments (to themselves, to others, and the objects they review) can help us understand the final evaluations they produce.

There has been some discussion about the consequences for those who engage in evaluation as part of their professional work usually in terms of the perceived benefits. In his theory of symbolic fields, Bourdieu (1993; 1996) focuses on the strategic self-serving consequences of evaluation. He emphasizes how critics can use reviewing as a vehicle for reproducing their tastes and cultural authority as gatekeepers and agents of consecration in the cultural field. Critics achieve this, for instance, by representing their personal taste as "good" taste or using reviews as a venue for displaying their cultural capital; though they may be more or less conscious about these processes. Reviews, then, reflect not only critics' evaluations of aesthetic quality, but also the larger project of competing with people occupying similar positions in the field, namely, other critics.

Lamont (2009), in contrast, argues that we need to move beyond considerations of self-interest to examine the neglected aspects of evaluation, including how evaluators understand their role and the emotional consequences of their work. Using the world of scientific peer review as her case study, Lamont finds that peer review represents more than just an opportunity for panelists to advance their research agendas or reproduce their positions in the academic field. Panelists are driven by the desire to contribute to collective problem solving and through the process, they derive feelings of pleasure and validation of their self-concepts as fair judges and experts whose opinions matter. Lamont's analysis demonstrates the value of considering actors' subjective experiences for a fuller portrait of evaluative practice.

I follow cues from both scholars and take for granted that power, pleasure, self-concepts and competition all come to bear on evaluation. The task of this chapter is to examine how critics' subjective experience of evaluation can help us understand why they review the way they do. I address these questions using contemporary American fiction critics as my case study. This is a particularly rich case because of the context in which reviewing occurs. The contemporary fiction market has a switch-role structure (Aspers 2008) meaning that market actors are not fixed to a single position (e.g., a novelist) but

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can switch into different roles (i.e., from producers of fiction to reviewers of fiction and back again). Indeed, most critics whose by-lines appear in major American newspapers are themselves working writers (like Mailer and Vidal).

A widespread assumption in the literary field is that authors who switch roles make for excellent critics because they possess a unique insight into the creative works of fellow writers. The case of book reviewers is similar to Lamont's (2009) analysis of peer review wherein many of the panelists populating her study are esteemed academics asked to take time (or switch) from their regular professorship duties to serve as evaluators on peer review panels. But there is no indication that these participants experienced difficulty when making the switch. Not all role-switching is so seamless. In the case of book reviewers, there are many moral, emotional, and professional frictions which arise from switching back and forth between the reviewer and author role. I argue that examining such frictions is crucial for making sense of how reviewers understand their work as critics and what they put in their reviews.

The analysis is based on in-depth interviews with 30 fiction critics who reviewed for prominent American newspapers including *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *The Washington Post*. In what follows, I explain how the perceived consequences of critics' reviews directly shape the contents of their criticism. While none of the reviewers I interviewed admit to being blatantly dishonest about a book's quality, many did report experiencing a mix of emotional and professional tensions, amplified by their role switching, that alternatively pushed and pulled them towards being more ruthless or forgiving in their reviews.

Data and Methods

I selected book critics for my interviews by first compiling the names of people who had published a fiction review in one of three newspapers in 2007. Respondents were then randomly selected from the list of names and invited to participate in the study. I do not specify which papers I used to generate the original list of names to preserve the anonymity of my respondents, but the publications were selected based on a combination of criteria including their having: i) among the largest national circulation numbers, ii) comparable targeted audiences, iii) a reputation for paying attention to fiction. Although I use only three newspapers to generate my list of reviewers, the majority of my respondents have published reviews in three or more different outlets.

Although in everyday parlance we speak of critics writing reviews, there are actually multiple forms of literary criticism. Van Rees (1983) offers a three-branch model of criticism consisting of: i) academic critics who offer close analysis of predominantly high-culture forms of literature and whose

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discourse is geared towards fellow academics; ii) literary essayists who publish longer-form reviews in specialized magazines or quarterly literary reviews; and iii) journalistic reviewers who report on the range of newly-published fiction for the general audiences of newspapers. As one moves across these branches of criticism—from academic critics, to literary essayists, and finally newspaper reviewers—the pool of critics, the range of books discussed, and the intended audience become more general (van Rees 1983). I focus on the world of literary journalism because it is at this level that the role switching occurs most frequently, and I use the terms “critics” and “reviewers” interchangeably to refer to those people who write reviews for a general newspaper audience.

There are 14 women and 16 men in the sample. The majority were “occasional” reviewers, meaning that in addition to writing reviews they make their living through freelance journalism, teaching English or creative writing at the college level, writing books—or more likely a combination of all the above. Only four of my respondents had full-time staff positions with a newspaper as book critics or book section editors at the time of the interview. Discussions with industry informants (publicists and book section editors) suggest that this is a typical sample. Newspapers have greatly diminished the space allotted for book reviewing, with many stand-alone book sections being folded into general “Entertainment” sections due to the changing economics of print publishing. With less space for book reviews, there are fewer review assignments and a lower demand for full-time book critics on staff. The editor for a major east coast newspaper book section estimates there are probably only twelve full-time critics left in America; other informants estimate it cannot be more than a handful.

Interviews were conducted over the telephone and typically lasted 60 to 90 minutes, during which time I asked critics to describe how they went about the task of book reviewing. Despite widespread interest in valuation, little work has investigated valuation as a phenomenological practice—that is, the concrete steps and considerations actors make when assessing quality or worth (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006; Lamont 2009; Shapin 2012; Hutter and Stark, in this volume). The advantage of interviews is that it provided critics with the opportunity to reflect upon processes and practices that are not observable in the final published reviews the general public receives.

Recipe for a Good Review(er): One Part Writer, One Part Critic

What is the job of the book critic? Instructional books on reviewing emphasize that the typical newspaper review aims to answer two fundamental questions: (1) What is a book about? And (2) How well is the book written? (Drewry

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1966; Hooper 2010). A book review can be likened to an essay wherein a critic argues for the success or failure drawing upon evidence, which comes in the form of direct passages from the book or other insights from literary culture (Chong 2013; Pool 2007).

For the editors of book review sections, always on the lookout for contributors, it is common practice to seek out novelists to review other novelists. This is an efficient recruitment strategy since editors can be reasonably sure that this pool of talent has adequate knowledge of fiction and facility with the written word to produce usable reviews (Chong 2014).

Beyond considerations of efficiency, editors are particularly interested in the perspectives of other novelists because of the common belief that the skills and insights people gain through creating original pieces of fiction enhances their abilities as reviewers. A long-time book section editor, and one of the few remaining full-time staff book critics in America, explains his preference for using novelists for these reasons: “I think there is more a sense of process . . . more of a sense of what a writer might have been going for, whether they succeeded or not, so I think there’s a little bit of a more interior vision of how a book works.”

It is reasonable to presume that the act of writing a book sensitizes a reviewer to the intricacies surrounding character development, plotting, structure, and a myriad of other elements that the general reader and people who have never tried their hand at writing may not be attuned. But the editor, himself a published author, goes further, implying that writers possess an artistic empathy, by virtue of the writing experience, which allows them to take the perspective of the writer and see inside their creative process (i.e. knowing “what a writer might have been going for”). This is a quality that makes them especially desirable reviewers.

Writers, too, believe that their experience as novelists is beneficial to their work as reviewers. One critic explains she takes a “more writer-ly perspective” to reviewing meaning that she is able to perceive “mechanics of creating a story, character and all of these things.” Alongside the artistic empathies described above, this critic explains that her work as a novelist enriches her work as a reviewer because she can perceive and convey the mechanical successes or failings of a book: “I think that I can see what’s happening when it’s not working well. Definitely, you know, obviously my own work as a writer has made that possible.”

Here the reviewer explains that beyond simply deciding that a book is not working, she can pinpoint what ingredients are missing by virtue of her own work as a writer. This is advantageous for reviewers since critics are expected to go beyond simply conveying like or dislike of a book; they should be able to identify specific features of the book as evidence to support their judgment.

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The benefits of the writer-reviewer flow not only from the writer to the review, but also in the reverse direction. Gaining and sustaining the attention of a reviewing community is very important for the longevity of a writer's career. Studies have demonstrated that participating in sideline activities, such as publishing creative work in forms other than novels, is an effective strategy for maintaining the attention of relevant gatekeepers in the literary field (Janssen 1998).

Today, book reviewing is itself considered a sideline activity novelists engage in to draw attention to their own creative work. Reviewing offers authors the opportunity to promote their own creative work as writers in a variety of ways. For instance, at the bottom of book reviews are by-lines, which typically include the following information: *[Reviewer's Name]* is the author of "*[book title]*," which won *[award name, if any]*. Her latest book, "*[title]*," will be published in June.

Reviewing thereby offers writers a way to keep their name in the public eye while they are between books, which can span several years. It also serves as a way to attract readers to written works they have published elsewhere or to publicize upcoming projects. In theory, then, the writer-reviewer is a reciprocally enhancing combination of talents and responsibilities.

Writer-Reviewers in Action

During my interviews with critics, I asked them to reflect upon their review process, including specific instances when they had written positive and negative reviews. They told me about what they liked or disliked about the books and how they felt about writing those reviews.

Writing a positive review is a relatively straightforward task for reviewers since it allows them to serve multiple goals simultaneously: (i) critics get to read a good book and apply their literary talents to discuss the merits of this worthy material; (ii) critics fulfil their function as mediators and get to tell people about a new book to read; and (iii) critics benefit from the publicity attached to publishing another piece of writing (perhaps even currying favor with the author they praise). The perceived interests of all parties involved are also served when a review is positive: the book under review gets positive publicity; the reviewer gains a venue to demonstrate his/her literary acumen; and readers learn about a new novel.

When faced with writing a negative review, however, critics report experiencing a range of professional and emotional dissonance. As one critic states, "writing a negative review for me is full of anxiety." Another critic describes the experience as "a whole hornets' nest of conflicting emotions" amplified by the fact so many reviewers are also working writers. Below I illuminate some of the sources and contents of these perceived tensions.

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The Upside of Disappointment: Bad Reviews as an Opportunity for Distinction

“There are nice ways to put derogatory comments,” one reviewer tells me, but critics are also acutely aware of the benefits of being a little bit nasty. In so much as reviewers try to write articles that engage and entertain their readers, negative reviews are rich with possibility. For instance, recommending that a writer should “give up writing and take up pottery” captures readers’ attention in a way that a straightforward laundry list of a book’s technical failings does not.

In critics’ vernacular, these types of intensely negative reviews are called “hatchet jobs” or “take downs.” When I ask critics how they draw the boundary between a negative or “mean” review, they explain that the defining feature of a mean review is that the writer is trying to “score points off a failure by making himself [*sic*] look more clever or witty, or sharp, or talented in their own writing of the review.”

The temptation to score points off a failed novel is a common occupational hazard. One reviewer comments on this tension in his own practice: “I feel like, you know, there’s constantly this tension between wanting to sort of show off your own erudition and write some snappy kind of funny lines at the expense of the work, on one hand, and then awareness that that’s a little morally debase.”

What is “morally debase” here is an implied violation of disinterestedness (Bourdieu 1993). Briefly, disinterestedness refers to the symbolic value of disavowing economic and material profits. Bourdieu argues that it is by demonstrating disinterest in profit that individuals accrue prestige and authority in the cultural field. For artists, the principle of disinterestedness requires that they make “art for art’s sake.” For reviewers, this means their criticism should be guided primarily by aesthetic considerations. Sacrificing literary substance for the sake of adding a few snappy lines to one’s review clearly violates this core value in the field.

Yet, even reviewers who shy away from being overtly negative in their own practice confess to enjoying mean reviews written by others. One reviewer reveals, “I don’t like to do a hatchet job [but] I like to read them.” Another critic, who describes herself as “too timid” when it comes to negative reviewing, is nonetheless drawn to the work of one critic because, “He’s not afraid to be a bitch... He’s not afraid to ‘go there.’”

Some reviewers are famous for “going there.” *New York Times* reviewer Michiko Kakutani is known for her polemical style: being equally passionate in her praise and criticism of novelists. She is perhaps most famous for her takedowns of writers, having once been described by the equally controversial Norman Mailer as a “one-woman kamikaze.” Although the critics I spoke with do not always (or even regularly) agree with Kakutani’s literary

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opinions, many still check her reviews to see what she has to say because her willingness to be so damning in her reviews does “keep the conversation lively.”

Another potential benefit of writing a negative review comes from when the reviewer is contradicting the critical consensus (de Nooy 1999). Being the singular voice of dissent is a way of distinguishing oneself from the crowd. The same effect can be achieved by being the one reviewer who positively reviews a book that other critics deem a failure; however, critics often describe such instances as embarrassing rather than beneficial.

For instance, one critic sheepishly recalls a time he wrote a glowing review about a book that most other people hated. He “felt a little embarrassed” by it and tells me that other critics still tease him about that review. How does he make sense of this experience? He reasons that in this instance, “more serious critics, perhaps more judicious critics, saw the book more clearly” than he did. He casts his enthusiasm as the opposite of more careful reviewing (i.e., reviewing that is “judicious” and “serious”).

In contrast, a critic with a reputation for writing very negative reviews recounts a time when he wrote such a devastating review of a book that he and his editor decided not to publish it. The book went on to win the prestigious *Man Booker Prize for Fiction*. Yet this critic does not experience relief that his opposing judgment was not revealed, but instead expresses regret at a missed opportunity: “I really wish it had come out because I ended up being one of the few—or maybe the only—dissenting voice.”

What is the benefit or significance of being the “only dissenting voice”? In addition to the publicizing effects, this critic explains that it is part of his responsibility to readers: “This is self-aggrandizing, but there’s like an “Emperor’s New Clothes” kind of feeling, like you’re going to be the little boy that points out that this is actually not so good.”

The “Emperor’s New Clothes” reference elicits the image of a person courageous enough to point out what other people know, but are too frightened to say for fear of appearing foolish; hence, the critic equates his criticism with the bravery and public good provided by the young boy in the fairy tale. He suggests that his negative reviews act as a corrective or counterbalance to the “nimbus of excessive praise” he sees created by newspaper reviewers who may be working too quickly or are inclined to “go with the flow” rather than point out when a book is simply not very good. Thus, critics recognized that negative reviews have their professional benefits and functional purposes in the

The Pitfalls of Negative Reviews: Risking Reputation and Relationships

Given the potential benefits, one might assume that critics would be enthusiastic when they came across a disappointing novel that offers the opportunity

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to write a negative review. But pursuing such gains does not come without risk, invoking considerable uncertainty amongst reviewers about how best to proceed.

Alongside the potential benefits of writing a very negative review, critics risk being perceived as *writers in critics' clothing*: novelists who disingenuously adopt the role of the critic so they have a venue for advancing their own interests as novelists. Few critics openly admit to taking shots at writers or turning phrases just for the sake of it. Or they explain that these are things they did in the past when they were “younger” or less “mature.” Whether these reported tendencies are accurate accounts of their own practices or efforts at positive self-presentation, reviewers are quick to identify and condemn other writers whom they perceive as giving into the temptation of self-promotion at the cost of fair criticism.

Sometimes this offense is seen as a matter of house style. *The London Review of Books* was singled out as a repeat offender on this count: “[I]t’s presumably about books but it always turns out to be about the writer of the review.” One writer reports that “it generally tends to be sort of mid-rate writers” who “use reviews as an opportunity to make a name for themselves, to make a big splash, to do something bold.” Thus, one consequence or risk of writing mean reviews as a mode of distinction is being recognized as doing so, which can hurt one’s legitimacy as a critic and one’s status as a writer if one is grouped in such an unflattering and disparaging category of writers (i.e., “mid-rate” or “immature”).

Another consequence of writing negatively about a book is the risk of *retributive reviewing*. Critics who are too cavalier with their criticism run the risk that the favor will eventually be returned since the switch-role structure of the field assures that the reviewer today will be the reviewee tomorrow.¹

Other forms of retribution include *burning bridges* within the literary community. For instance, writing a devastating review in the *New York Times* of a writer who is represented by a literary agent or publishing house that one might want to work with in future can be seen as a short-sighted manoeuvre. Writer-reviewers are, in effect, “critics for a day.” But what they do with that day—how they convey their judgments in their reviews—can have long-term consequences.

In an ironic turn, recall that writers and review editors agree that having gone through the process of writing a novel equips writer-reviewers with an artistic empathy that enriches their criticism. Reviewers’ artistic empathies,

¹ There is an expectation amongst critics that they should recuse themselves if there is some conflict of interest preventing them from giving a fair and unprejudiced review. Many respondents agree that reviewing a novel by someone who has previously reviewed their own work is a sufficiently corrupting factor. Yet, while review editors may do their best to weed out biasing relations, not all such conflicts are reported or easily identifiable.

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however, do not stop at the writing process. It also extends to the feelings of devastation that can come from receiving a negative review.

Most respondents report reflecting upon their own painful memories of getting negative reviews when faced with the prospect of writing one themselves. This type of identification with the author could render critics' experience as writers more of a liability than an advantage. One critic describes the conflict this way:

[T]here's no way to separate my experience with books as a writer... from the process of talking about them in a review... I think *I try to be more generous* just because I absolutely know what it is to get a bad review... I know that there's a human being that probably spent three to seven years working on this thing.

The reviewer explains she is unable to bracket her experiences as a writer from her review practice. She explains that her identification with the author, the "human being" at the other end of the review, often leads her to skew her comments in a more positive direction ("to be more generous") rather than being completely forthcoming in her criticisms. She was not alone in this tendency.

Many critics report very unpleasant stories about when facing the hurt and anger caused by a negative review. Incidents such as the punch-out between Norman Mailer and Gore Vidal, which opens the chapter, circulate amongst writer-reviewers as a kind of cautionary tale. For some, this and all of the other risks described above are enough to make them think twice about how direct they should be when writing a negative review. Some critics opt to "play nice."

Playing it Safe by Playing Nice in Reviews

Just as there are potential benefits to being ruthless in one's criticism (i.e., "making a splash") there are also benefits to following the opposite impulse and playing nice in a review. "Playing nice" as a discursive practice is accomplished in multiple ways but its overall intended effect is to downplay critics' own negative feelings towards a book and skewing the overall valence of a review in a more positive direction.

Playing nice can mean softening negative language. One critic, for example, expresses his strong distaste for a book he recently reviewed negatively. He concludes that the book was "a mess and all over the place!" The intensity of his criticism is noticeably muted in the print version of the review, where he suggests rather benignly that the reader may feel a little "lost" at some points of the book. Another means of playing nice is to fill the review with descriptive details of the book's plot to crowd out any explicit evaluative statements about the book's overall quality.

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Several critics admit that when they are faced with writing a negative review, they hedge by emphasizing how the book might appeal to other readers. One critic explains: “If I ever have to say something bad about a book . . . I kind of try to be—to *play nice about it* and say, you know, I just didn’t like it, but maybe someone else might like it?”

Acknowledging the variety of readers’ tastes is an effective strategy critics can employ to sidestep being overtly negative and avoid potential backlash from an angry author. Critics emphasize, however, that they are not being dishonest about the absolute quality of a book, they are not writing a positive review of a very negative book, but eliding the true intensity of their criticism.

For some reviewers playing nice is not only a defensive measure, but also a matter of professional service and responsibility. One critic challenges, “Why are you telling people about nine books they shouldn’t be reading?” He sees playing nice as serving the needs of his readers, which means guiding them towards books they actually might want to read (Drewry 1966).

Playing nice is also seen by some critics as a way of taking care of the literary field at a time when reading culture is thought to be on the decline. Critics cite struggling publishing houses, the retrenchment of dedicated arts coverage, and the allure of alternative entertainment media like film and television towards this conclusion.

One critic reflects, “[P]eople are not reading novels nearly as much as they were 20 or 30 years ago” which “puts you in a very different position [as a reviewer] . . . than it would if [fiction] had this more prominent place.” Similar to the comments of the previous reviewer, this critic recognizes that telling the reading public about books they should not read seems like a wasted opportunity and an unnecessary blow to an already ailing industry.

Against this backdrop, the same critic reflects upon a time she wrote a very negative review for the *Los Angeles Times*. She later learned: “[The author’s] publisher lost confidence, not only in that particular book but maybe in future books. In other words, to write that negative of a review had real repercussions. “I never felt terribly that I was wrong in my critical assessment of the book . . . but it did raise for me some kind of deeper issues of responsibility as a critic.”

There are two points worth making about this critic’s comments. First, the reviewer is confident in her critical assessment about the book: she did not like it. But she treats the issue of aesthetic judgment (“I never felt terribly . . . wrong”) separately from concerns about the consequences of her review (“deeper issues of responsibility”). Second, the consequences she refers to regard the author’s career, and taken with her previous comments about the decline of the book industry in general, she reasons that the right or responsible thing to do is to be gentler with her criticism. It is questionable

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whether a single review can generally make or break a writer's career (let alone the entire literary enterprise), but this critic's comment are representative of the emotional conflicts and sense of stewardship other reviewers expressed towards books and their fellow writers.

The Good, the Bad, and the Space In Between

A central motif in this chapter is that a lot of interpretive space exists between highly critical or positive reviews on one end and merely lukewarm reviews on the other. Critics confront different types of consequences as they move across this range, and these perceived risks or benefits inform how they choose to position their criticism in terms of its intensity.

By way of summary, book review editors seek out individuals who are knowledgeable about fiction and good with words to review for their papers. Fiction writers fit the bill nicely; however, writers bring not only their literary expertise, but also their literary ambitions, social ties, and ethical commitments to the task. These findings support previous research on the social nature of reviewing (Bourdieu 1996; Lamont 2009; Lamont and Huutoniemi 2012; van Rees 1983). But a contribution of the analysis is that it clarifies how critics' emotions, interests, and reviewing practices are related.

First, this chapter shows how critics' reported experiences of pleasure or anxiety, competition and stewardship, empathy alongside self-preservation are related to the *valence* of their valuations: the degree to which their assessments are positive or negative. When critics favor a novel, writing the review proceeds with minimal personal or professional anxiety. A few critics mention that being too "gushy" in one's tone comes with the risk of "looking like a shill" or being perceived as "uncritical" by their peers. Recall, for instance, the reviewer who is still being teased for a "glowing" review he had written years earlier. In contrast, when writing a negative review the overwhelming majority of critics report conflicts and anxieties regarding their reputation and relations within the literary field. These include feelings of sympathy that come from identifying with the author at the other end of the review, the temptation to "score points" off of a novel's failing, and the fear of retribution. Most interesting is the case when critics feel that they must write a negative review, despite the anticipated repercussions. Here is the moment of dissonance, the situation that demands their most careful valuation (Hutter and Stark in this volume).

Second, this chapter reveals how critics' social position in the field shapes what they put in their reviews. My analysis enters the critics' review process at the point when they have already decided upon a book's qualities and are contemplating how to convey those judgments in written form. Critics actively reflect upon the consequences of their judgments when deciding

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what to put in their reviews; for instance, the perceived costs and benefits of penning a negative review entices some critics to be very damning in their criticism whilst others choose to “play nice.” Hence, critics’ concerns about the social consequences of their reviews are not just (at least, consciously) about reproducing or legitimating their tastes (Bourdieu 1984), but also how to frame and compose their reviews, which in some cases (i.e., “playing nice”) meant obscuring how much they liked or disliked a book.

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