the changing profession

How to Talk about Books You *Have* Read

SHARON MARCUS

I DON'T DO MUCH PUBLIC WRITING, BUT EACH MONTH I PERSUADE OTHERS TO DO IT IN MY ROLE AS THE FICTION EDITOR IN CHIEF OF *Public Books*, a twice-monthly online review that I cofounded with Caitlin Zaloom in 2012. On the first and fifteenth of each month, *Public Books* publishes six to eight essays about books, nonprint works, the media, the arts, and ideas, written mostly by academics but also by journalists, novelists, activists, and artists. In addition to traditional reviews, we publish roundtables, interviews, visual essays, and Public Picks, our annual lists of best books and films.

Our contributors run the gamut from graduate students to emeriti and have included Judith Butler, Nicholas Dames, Colin Dayan, Simon During, Eric Hayot, Ursula Heise, Marianne Hirsch, Caroline Levine, Heather Love, Leah Price, and Gayatri Spivak; a full list is available on the site's "About" page. We recently added a blog, whose diverse content includes reviews of films, plays, and television shows; essays by the winners of undergraduate writing contests; and ongoing series such as Public Streets, devoted to urban observation, and On Our Nightstands, in which we on the editorial staff describe the books we are reading (or at least falling asleep beside).[1] We are always interested in expanding our roster, so consider this an invitation to take a look at the site and to pitch us an idea if you like what you see.

When I explain the motives behind the founding of *Public Books* and describe the kind of writing we feature, I usually say that we seek to give academics a forum for writing about contemporary culture in ways that combine rigorous ideas, strong arguments, and accessible, engaging prose. Think of it as crossing over without selling out. Our guiding editorial principle at *Public Books* is "scholarly value added": we believe that all the pieces we publish should illustrate how academic knowledge enhances their authors' takes on the works under discussion and should convey specialist knowledge to an interested general public.[2]

In other words, we aim to give academic writing a good name, and there are signs that we are succeeding. In 2013 *The Daily Beast*

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named *Public Books* a Beast Best and described it as a "monthly compendium of meaty book writing . . . by professors . . . designed to cater to seriously curious readers" ("Beast Best Awards"), and in November 2014 Jonathon Sturgeon, of *Flavorwire*, named *Public Books* one of five new literary publications to watch, describing us as a "well-edited and exciting site that features writing from academics both young and tenured [and] avoids the pitfalls of most academic writing with its range and quality. . . . This, to my mind, is the preferable direction for accessible writing from academics." Readers outside the academy are clearly curious about what scholars have to say about contemporary books, and at times it's been hard to tell what's growing faster, the *Public Books* readership or the pile of review copies in my vestibule. As of 15 May 2014 the site had received over 300,000 visits, and while many *PMLA* readers have probably not yet heard of us, in the fall of 2014 we often had as many as 5,000 visitors a week. Simon During's provocative "Stop Defending the Humanities" has received over 25,000 page views since its publication in March 2014. A little over a third of our readers are located outside the United States, in Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, India, Germany, France, New Zealand, Brazil, Spain, South Africa, Ireland, Sweden, the Philippines, Japan, and the Netherlands. Because our publication exists only online, our circulation can be greatly boosted by aggregator sites and social media, and many readers arrive on our pages via *Arts and Letters Daily*, *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Longform*, and *Reddit*.

Our dream in founding *Public Books* was to reinvent the *New York Review of Books* for the digital era—but this time from within the academy rather than in opposition to it. We are not alone in this wish: the *Los Angeles Review of Books* has been our contemporary along the way and another noteworthy success story. Lili Loofbourow and Phil Maciak's term *semipublic intellectual* aptly describes the kind of author who can aid in this reinvention—one who embraces the obsessiveness, absorption, and inwardness associated with books and academic life and who also believes that those qualities can attract readers outside the university.

Semipublic also fits the carefully chosen but varied, unpredictable mix of work we try to cover. We review fiction and nonfiction from trade presses large and small, as well as from university presses. Our authors have reviewed memoirs by Cheryl Strayed (Grobe) and Jesmyn Ward (Sen); technology criticism by Evgeny Morozov (Schüll) and Jonathan Sterne (Aronczyk); emerging trends in global and environmental history (Cooper; McNeill); exhibits at the Fashion Institute of Technology (Joseph), a sonic art installation that traveled the world (Varzi), and the 9/11 museum (Molotch); music writing by Carl Wilson (Kindley); the television series *Girls* (Kessler) and *Orange Is the New Black* (Berlatsky, Comfort, Dubois, Landsverk, Love, McLennan, Stanley, and Sullivan). We also include in our purview children's and young adult literature, graphic fiction, e-books, and iPad app literature. While the majority of our fiction reviews focus on the segment of the market usually called literary, our contributors also address mass-market best sellers, such as E. L. James's *Fifty Shades of Grey* (Arjomand, Berlatsky, Gallop, Hallett, Jarvis, Schneider, and Torgovnick). Capitalizing on the fact that most academics are fluent readers of foreign languages, we regularly cover non-English-language writing in reviews, such as David Kurnick's essays on Roberto Bolaño and César Aira and Karl Britto's nuanced comparison of Marie NDiaye's works in their original French and in English translation.

The scholarly values that *Public Books* essays add to the journalistic book review are not exactly the ones we immediately identify with the public intellectual. For some people, the public intellectual is a dissident figure who speaks truth to power and opposes the

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tyranny of mass culture: Émile Zola, Theodor Adorno, Susan Sontag. For others, the public intellectual is a consummate popularizer, able to translate ideas and research into best-selling books or widely viewed television series: Will and Ariel Durant, Carl Sagan, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Simon Schama, Amanda Vickery. (What does it mean that we could plausibly put George Orwell and Ayn Rand in both the dissident and the popularizer categories?) Still others see the public intellectual as defiantly opposing academia, taking aim at its elitist, arcane obfuscations. In all three models, public scholarship is valuable because it radically alters either the public or scholarship.

While we have no plans to rename our review *Semipublic Books,* the dual orientation suggested by *semipublic* neatly captures our aims. The semipublicness of scholarly value added means that academics often tell me how "accessible" they find *Public Books* essays: "It's like reading the *New Yorker*" (maybe—except that *Public Books* essays often have footnotes). Meanwhile, nonacademic readers report that our "intense" essays remind them of taking college courses on literary theory. Our essays are Janus-faced, attuned to the academy and to those outside it who are interested in scholarly ideas and research. We don't ask authors to imagine how they would think about a book if they didn't know all that they know; we ask them to communicate what they can see in a book because they know so much. When Marah Gubar writes about the work of the children's author E. L. Konigsburg, for example, she uses feminist standpoint theory and insights garnered from comparing Konigsburg's print editions with the original manuscripts in a University of Pittsburgh archive. Like other reviewers of Helen Oyeyemi's *Boy, Snow, Bird*, Anne Anlin Cheng shows how fairy tales shape this remarkable novel, but she also unpacks the racial cast Oyeyemi adds to Jacques Lacan's famous psychoanalytic theory of the mirror stage. When Nicholas Dames writes about Edward St. Aubyn's Patrick Melrose novels, he does not just mention in passing, as many reviewers did, that these are works concerned with questions of consciousness. He connects a moment in which the protagonist awakens in a darkened room to a passage in William James about introspection, and then he carefully shows how the interior monologue of a character in an ambulance exemplifies the philosophical stakes of novelistic narration.

How does one do this kind of writing, which involves distilling copious research and complicated ideas about difficult texts into crystalline points that any intelligent eighteen-year-old can understand? We have a name for this in academia: we call it teaching, and we do it all the time, often on tighter deadlines than semipublic writing imposes. Why not take the skills we have acquired as teachers and translate them into our writing? Professional contributors to high-circulation periodicals often do just this when they convert the scholarly diction and dry exposition of academic books into something more engaging and accessible, a metamorphosis that seems easy until one has tried it but that is well worth attempting for ourselves. Academics often feel justifiably exasperated when the authors of such pieces give the air of having invented what they are in fact paraphrasing; it feels as if our scholarship is being ripped off. Semipublic writing constitutes an opportunity to rip ourselves off with some of the brio, pithiness, and user-friendliness that we deploy, of necessity, in the classroom.

What we might call teacherly writing does not avoid difficult ideas or terms; it explains them. Professors teaching undergraduate courses on the novel don't drop terms like *focalize* or *free indirect discourse* into lectures and expect students to know their meaning; a good teacher defines those terms, illustrates them with examples, and helps students to see how naming these techniques improves our understanding of novels. The essays we

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feature in *Public Books* similarly adopt a pedagogical stance that makes terms of art illuminating rather than frustrating.

As college and university professors, we often find ourselves shocked that our students haven't read each and every book on our lovingly composed syllabi, but we also quickly learn, sometimes to our greater surprise, that even students who haven't done the reading can be thoroughly engaged by our lectures. Perhaps this isn't so surprising, considering how we all turn to book reviews and criticism not only to decide whether to read a book but also to figure out how to place it in literary history or in an intellectual landscape. Yes, readers use book reviews as cheat sheets to palliate the status anxieties so cleverly registered and stoked by the title of Pierre Bayard's *How to Talk about Books You Haven't Read*. But readers also use book reviews the way students use lectures, as aids in an endless enterprise we might call *How to Think about Books You Haven't Read—Yet*. The best guides in this adventure are not confidence artists who manage to sound learned despite their ignorance but nerds who love talking and writing about books they *have* read—multiple times.

In my experience, most contributors to *Public Books* take pleasure in teacherly writing and find it satisfying and clarifying. To be sure, some academics consider it demeaning or compromising to have to explain themselves to the uninitiated; others equate lucidity with naïveté and obscurity with brilliance. Those who fear being judged by such lights might well experience anxiety about deliberately writing to be understood. But most *Public Books* authors seem to have absorbed a lesson that I came to relatively late, as a recently tenured associate professor working with advanced graduate students on their job application materials. I could not make head or tail of a sentence in a student's cover letter. I felt mortified; clearly I had no business advising graduate students. But I decided to be honest. I pointed at the sentence and said, "I don't understand what this means." I've never forgotten what followed: the student giggled, and, in a moment of liberation for us all, he said, "That's because *I* have no idea what it means." Obscurity, difficulty, even alienation have their place and purpose, but so do clarity, inclusivity, and consideration.

In addition to being teacherly, semipublic writing is more collaborative than most humanistic scholarly writing. Someone else may propose ideas, topics, and titles; several other people will rewrite your sentences and reorganize your paragraphs. For those attached to the artisanal independence offered by the scholarly publishing model, the bad news about writing for a more public venue is that you are likely to be heavily edited. For those new to this kind of writing, the good news is that you are likely to be heavily edited.

Why engage in semipublic writing? Some advantages are obvious, such as the chance to give specialized areas in the humanities a higher profile by reaching more readers in more locations more quickly. Most of us academics are lucky if our books or articles reach three hundred readers over several years; public writing can easily draw as many readers in days, and its expiration date may arrive no sooner than that of many scholarly articles. Semipublic writing also allows academics to shape public debates. If a popular author can write a book about how literature influenced economic theory, a professor who has written on poetry and capitalism should be able to offer a countervailing history of economics in response, as Christopher Nealon did in his essay on Sylvia Nasar's *The Grand Pursuit*. Semipublic writers also form new kinds of intellectual communities with broader interests than those governing professional academic cohorts defined by historical periods, single languages, or national literatures.

Are there any reasons to avoid semipublic writing? When academics express anxiety about having a public presence, as did many on the MLA convention panel leading

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to this special section, they are usually worrying about whether public writing will count toward tenure or might even be seen as lessening the seriousness of their scholarly publications in peer-reviewed venues. These concerns strike me as very different. The ability to be intellectually bilingual, by which I mean the ability to translate specialist knowledge into more accessible terms, should never detract from a junior scholar's merits; like good teaching, public writing is a positive contribution to knowledge and to institutions of higher learning. However, just as acknowledging the virtues of difficult writing should not amount to condemning accessible writing as worthless, saying that public writing should not hurt someone's prospects for tenure is not identical to assigning public writing the same weight as scholarly work. Adding scholarly value to public writing requires having scholarship to add, and the professoriat remains the body that recognizes and ratifies what counts as scholarship. The question of how to count semipublic writing in promotion and tenure cases requires ongoing discussion. Deciding when a review, post, or think piece has the same seriousness, erudition, and originality as peer-reviewed scholarship calls for qualitative, case-by-case evaluation.

A final word about how the semipublic sphere relates to the print and digital worlds. Just as semipublic writing addresses readers inside and outside academia, it can also partake of both digital and hard-copy cultures. Humanists are attached to the past and to books and should not apologize for this. If we want to make these attachments sound modish instead of retrograde, we can dub ourselves analog warriors brave enough to disrupt disruption. At *Public Books*, where our guideline is that reviews should appear within roughly six months of a book's first publication, we move between print and electronic media in ways that aspire to marry the speed, currency, and splash associated with the digital to the deliberateness, seriousness, and craft still linked to print. As an exclusively digital review, we can respond to new publications more rapidly than can most scholarly journals, but we also allow our contributors time for serious reflection by moving at a slower pace than newspapers and magazines.

An advantage of the virtual is that it connects to the live with greater ease than print does, and one way that we build our readership and connect academics to the public is to host live events. Many of the events take place in New York City, where we are located, but sometimes we take advantage of digital platforms to make events in other locations available to our readers via transcripts, video, and audio. *Public Books* recently presented an interview based on a panel discussion in which Christian Parenti spoke with Greg Grandin and Chris Hedges about Herman Melville's work and issues of freedom and slavery. You can also find videos of a panel discussion with Thomas Piketty, cosponsored with New York University's Institute for Public Knowledge (Piketty, Ott, Stasavage, and Viguier), and of novelists discussing key words such as *rebellion* and *redemption* in the Villa Gillet's International Forum on the Novel in Lyon, France (Treuer, Cusk, Goodison, and Powers). Our events often connect directly to our reviews—another way we link the live and the virtual, the analog and the digital, to create a hybrid public. For example, around the time that *Public Books* published Heather Love's review of Alison Bechdel's graphic memoir *Are You My Mother?*, we arranged for our graphic-books reviewer, Jared Gardner, to interview Bechdel before a standing-room-only crowd. To take another example, after publishing poet-critics' responses in poetry and prose to new entries in the revised edition of *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Alizadeh, Hejinian, Nakayasu, Perelman, Shankar, and Smith), we hosted a live event in which a different set of poets spoke about the reference works that they consult when writing poetry ("Poetry Reading").

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A common vision of the Internet is that it is universal, encyclopedic, exhaustive, and totally free—as though, even when writers and editors donate their labor, computer servers didn't cost money and Web site bugs fixed themselves. The counterparts to the fantasy of an infinitely free and open Web are the equally common and justified complaints about unremunerated labor, offensive advertising tactics, underfunded publications (*Public Books*, at the time of this writing, certainly qualifies as one of those), and the stupefying effects of overly abundant information. Another way of thinking about the deficiencies and surfeit of the Web is that Internet culture is too interesting, because it offers more than we can absorb. An antidote exists: selective sites that provide the mind with a much needed vista point on the information superhighway. *Public Books* seeks to be such an antidote by being curated rather than comprehensive and by focusing on interesting combinations of books as much as on selecting individual books for review.[3] Just as we are semipublic, in the academy and oriented to readers outside it, we are part of digital culture and also a bookish refuge from it.

Notes

1. A recent entry in Public Streets is Taylor.

2. I elaborate on points made here and throughout the essay in an interview.

3. See, e.g., Anahid Nersessian's review of *Gone Girl*, *Accelerated*, *Magnificence*, and *Breed* and Ursula Heise's examination of the similar issues raised by *Flight Behavior*, *Rambunctious Garden: Saving Nature in a Post-wild World*, and *Wild Ones: A Sometimes Dismaying, Weirdly Reassuring Story about Looking at People Looking at Animals in America*.

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