



Sonya Huber

Amazon Constellations

There's a one-star Amazon review of my book *Opa Nobody*, that basically says, "This is the worst book ever. " I smiled when I read it, because I can picture the high school student who had this book assigned to him, and I groan in sympathy with him. It's a dense book. I love that review and that reader, and I leave it as it is, because it means my book has gotten into the hands of someone who I never expected would read it.

The Amazon portal appears to stand in for our public discussion of literature; in some ways, the product comments are truly democratic and in other ways the system is truly a mess. Yet with the dearth of reviewing outlets and the huge number of books being published, authors have to stomp for attention, to be more savvy, and occasionally, when it's warranted, to stand up for the complexity of our work in the face of reductive notions about what a "good book" might be. As a writer, I don't hold the comment field on Amazon as any more sacred than any other pseudo-democratic element of capitalism that disguises customer feedback as social participation. But as a consumer, I know I've scrolled through those stars and comments to figure out whether an electrical adaptor or a coffee pot had problems I'm better off to avoid. As a writer, though, I've struggled with how to discern the fine line between a product comment and a thoughtful review when publishing nonfiction online. Writers in the 21st century are expected to be digitally savvy, to Twitter and to blog, but responding to comments online is a level up in complexity.

With nonfiction, Amazon faces the same problem that the independent or chain bookstore as always faced; none of these outlets has developed a clever way to sub-divide nonfiction. Readers stumble

toward our books based on topic searches, driven by their friends' recommendations, or arrive as the result of random clicking. Selling nonfiction is weird, on or offline, because there's no marketing sub-genre tag like "Arty Mix of Life Narrative and Political Commentary" or "Atypical Nonfiction" or "Narrator a Likable Mess."

Personally, I've hated many a book, and yet I would never think to post a negative review on Amazon. Books are not electrical adaptors; it's not that they "work" or "do not work." I realize that the book is reading me as much as I'm reading it, and my views might not be helpful for another reader because they are about me and my expectations and needs. Readers ask for much more specific and personal interactions from a book than they ask for from a vacuum. I expect a rather straightforward job to be done from an electrical adaptor. My expectations for a book are more complicated. Sometimes the book itself is written to challenge my expectations, and my reactions to the book change over time.

I aim to studiously avoid reading the comments on my political essays, though sometimes my eyes do trail to the bottom of the page. The foot of the screen is endless; one can just scroll and scroll. For political essays on hot-button topics with a potentially large audience, I've found that the comment section functions as a sounding board for rants that are only cursorily related to the topic of the essay itself. A comment is different than a review and it's good to remember this, since they can be the same length. A truly thoughtful review, even those on GoodReads, points out something true, even in negative comments, something difficult and incomplete that I need to keep in mind and wrestle with as I approach my next project. It's a kind of feedback previously unavailable and there's some merit to that.

The star-ratings section of Amazon, however, is that place where literature and capitalism come together most directly and in the most confusing fashion. I've interfered in this unsacred space twice since my first book was published 6 years ago. People have the right not to like my books, and I'd be a coward if I didn't see that. However, the mismatch between literature and selling—which means reaching new

readers through the most likely portal—creates what I see as one subset of this problem for the kinds of nonfiction I write.

In one instance a few months ago, I asked my friends to counter a negative review on Amazon in response to a single bad review of my e-book that had just been released by SheBooks, a new independent publishing effort to get the work of women out in the world and to target a female readership. The piece was a mini-memoir/journalism essay “Two Eyes are Never Enough,” and its subtitle was “A Minimum Wage Memoir.” I believe that in this case, the subtitle of “memoir” created problems that led to the comment. The packaging of the book implies that this was a memoir, and the “I” in American memoir is supposed to be apolitical, or in the process of rejecting given political mores, but never in the process of forming or sharpening political views or engagement. The word “memoir” sets up a series of complicated expectations for a reader. Readers often write, “This isn’t what I expected,” and that’s fine, and I let myself interfere this one time in order to get this mixed-genre beastlet into other readers’ hands. The comment itself was a one-star that went up the day after the book was published and the reader complained that the book had an agenda, and to be fair, it most definitely did: to highlight the reasons for the poor working conditions for direct care workers in the mental health field. In response, I posted a status update on Facebook asking my friends to post positive reviews to provide more perspective and balance—by which I meant, of course, “Mom, could you give me five stars?”

In a way, if I respected the market, this would be reprehensible and I don’t normally go in for the games that end up rigging Amazon ratings—though I have no problem with playing with that system. In this case, I wanted to take advantage of the publicity bump during the window when the piece would likely get the most hits, and I didn’t want potential readers to see one star and keep clicking. So my behavior was motivated by a knowledge of social media trends in reading and purchasing. I was, in that moment, treating my own writing like a product, and I was a saleswoman gaming the system. But I was also a

frustrated author constrained by the terms of engagement in nonfiction. The digital world of writing is a beast all its own that requires writers to be both artists and hawkers, one that is new to most of us.

Paying for reviews is seen as out-and-out fraud, and I think that's true. Yet asking friends and family for reviews, or asking those who will be predisposed to one's work and one's cause begins with the blurbs on the back of the books themselves. In this and one other case, having a specific reason to ask people to post reviews helped me in a practical way and boosted the total number of positive reviews.

The first time I interfered in the same Amazon comment space was because of different issue entirely. It started with a reader who purchased my second book, *Cover Me: A Health Insurance Memoir*, and then was clearly disappointed because my politics ran afoul of his. This happened a year or so after it was published, so I would have left it alone, except for the fact that he used part of the space in his comment to imply that he wished I were not alive.

The man made some personal attacks about my behavior as recounted in the memoir—I'd slept with people before marriage, shockingly—and uses that as a route to disagree with the fundamental issue of the book: my feelings on healthcare in the United States. The vast majority of memoirs reveal some element of sex, drinking, and minor brushes with the law; such events are usually taken for granted or praised in men's memoirs as "gritty life experience" but in women's memoirs, such life experience can banish a book and its narrator to hell. So I was half-prepared when I read that I was a "reckless, negligent whore"—friends and family will cackle at that one, because I'm the nerdiest ex-Mathlete alive. The commenter, who identified himself as "Andrew," described the political campaign for universal healthcare "an act of immorality of appalling proportions," and I gathered this pre-existing condition of my political beliefs was a big part of his problem.

But it was his sign-off that stopped me cold:

“Too bad she didn’t die from her urinary tract infection: there would be one less taker parasitically leeching off the makers in this Republic.”

Too bad she didn’t die.

A few years before, I might have laughed this off as hyperbole, but since then I’ve been in a few situations dangerous enough to teach me that a threat or wish for fatal harm means code red. With the increase in anonymous threats on the internet message boards, cyberstalking on Twitter, and other variations of online harassment, Andrew’s sentiment hit me in a different place: this review popped up sixteen days after Arizona Representative Gabrielle Giffords was shot by a disturbed teenager who believed *the world be better off if she were dead*. It was worrisome enough that it was okay for Andrew to think this, then to write it, then to hit send, and then for Amazon to publish it: *The world would be better off if you were dead*.

No matter where you place yourself on the political spectrum, it’s easy for someone who is passionate and knowledgeable about a subject to cross the line from a conversation to mocking and intimidation and rhetorical violence. The way we talk to each other in online comments, and threaten each other, and do character defamation is poison. In that case—as in the first one—you could either argue that I interfered with capitalism’s machinery, or that I did exactly what I was supposed to do in lobbying for my product and/or for my self-respect.

I had more than one reader comment that “this book wasn’t what I expected,” and that would be a bad thing if one were purchasing a vacuum cleaner. Yet I think it’s the central job of a literary work—to be surprising, to be more than the reader expected. Some readers were surprised it actually was a memoir with careful examination of personal experience rather than a political tract. Andrew, however, took me at my word. He encountered elements of my personal experience that had shaped my political views, and it was those life experiences that he objected to. If I had drawn from those life experiences the insight that I

wanted to vote for Ron Paul and that government welfare had made me a weaker person, he would have left me five stars rather than one.

I have wondered, as I write and watch reaction to memoir publications online, if memoir's vaguely apolitical and individualistic reputation in the US helps to create challenges for any writer whose life story or reflection colors outside of those lines. Andrew was upset partly because he'd been surprised by a memoir that was both memoir and also the exploratory writing of a woman who'd been deeply engaged in politics.

I actually wanted my story to get into the hands of readers like Andrew. I had tried very hard to stick close to my life story, and I eschewed heavy-handed research because I figured that readers had enough of preaching at them in the early years of the 21st century, when healthcare was enough to get one into a screaming fight with strangers in a diner or bar. I believed memoir could cross bridges and offer identification through life experience that was more complicated than party lines.

I still believe memoir has that power. It offers readers a way into a life they have never lived and may promise a route towards empathy, complexity, and identification. Because readers come to memoir with opposing motivations—some to judge, and others to explore, still others to be changed—those star ratings on Amazon offer the barest hint of a relevant review for an unfamiliar reader. A certain percentage of comments on Amazon will continue to evaluate the details of my life as if they were reviewing a vacuum cleaner, and for that reason I may again find occasion to step in and to argue for my stars.