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'Private Criticism in the Public Space: Personal writing on literature in readers' reviews on *Amazon*'

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## **Private Criticism in the Public Space: Personal writing on literature in readers' reviews on *Amazon***

### **Abstract**

The article studies the character of general readers' reviews on the internet bookstore Amazon; what is called private criticism. Patterns, common features, and contradictions are explored, and the social position and meaning of new forms of readers' expressions is discussed. One part of the thesis is that the freedom of speech in the public sphere has given readers new and different opportunities to express their opinions. On the other hand, there is also evidence to suggest that the new practices of reviewing are only repeating established patterns and behaviours. If this is the case, the private criticism that has been applauded as a democratization of the reading and evaluation of literature does not offer any real change.

**Keywords:** Internet, literary criticism, book distribution, reading, reception studies

Reviews written by general readers on websites like the internet bookstore Amazon can be described as private criticism in the public sphere. Readers commenting publicly on literature are not a novel phenomenon, but the various mechanisms involved on the web include both new and old practices of reading and writing.

This article is a study of the character of the private criticism on Amazon and of the social position and meaning of new forms of readers' expressions. Patterns, common features, and contradictions will be explored, and part of the thesis is that the freedom of speech in the public sphere has given readers new and different opportunities to express their opinions. However, the question is also whether or not the new practices of reviewing are only repeating established patterns and behaviours. If this is the case, the private criticism that has been applauded as a democratization of the reading and evaluation of literature would not offer any real change.

In November 2006, John Sutherland, British professor of literature and a well-known critic in the daily press, published an article in the *Sunday Telegraph* criticising the amateur reviewing of literature on the

internet, particularly the kind published on Amazon. The web, said Sutherland, once promised to expand our knowledge, potential, and minds, but instead it is doing the opposite: “corrupting fact and spreading falsehood.” His anxiety over web influence on the practice of reviewing led Sutherland to complain of the anonymity of the unprofessional criticism, of how ill informed the readers appeared to be, and of the lack of quality in the writing. His unease is evidence of changes in critical practices and perhaps also of old polarisations in new shape. The article caused a heated debate that emphasised that influence over literature and readers is an important issue with a longstanding tradition wherein reading and writing about literature is seen as either a literary practice or a social one.

The British author Susan Hill (2006), who, apart from having written numerous novels, writes a blog on literature and reading, was seriously offended by Sutherland. Hill wrote an agitated response on her website claiming authority by virtue of the years of professional criticism she had written in the daily press. She had, however, given it up in favour of what she call “free criticism” on the web on a wider range of titles. Professional criticism has become irrelevant to the general reader, said Hill; instead, reviews on the web have become the ‘new literary democracy’, wherein there is room for all kinds of literature. To Hill, professional critics are threatened by bloggers and general readers writing online.

After Sutherland’s initial article and Hill’s blog, a number of responses followed, underscoring the hierarchical divide between professional and amateur reviewers. On one side of the fence were people agreeing with Hill, hailing the web and the opinions of the general reader, claiming that it is their right to do whatever they want with their newly gained power. On the other side were people agreeing with Sutherland, mainly critics and editors in the press, arguing that having an opinion is one thing but a creating well-written review is something very different.

### **Literary Criticism in a Media-Theoretical Perspective**

Literary critique is an act of evaluating and attributing value to an artefact, but what is seen as valuable varies depending on context. Differences can be seen at any historical point between individual reviewers, media, and recipients. The evaluation of literature is an ongoing process, or as Barbara Herrnstein Smith (1990, p. 181) has argued, “The evaluation of a work is seen, rather, as a continuous process, operating through a wide variety of individual activities and social and institutional practices.”

However different from each other, professional criticism and amateur reviews are in many ways connected. Techniques and even contents are repeated and re-used, what the American media theorists Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin (1999) call *remediation*. They argue that new media technologies integrate older, already established media forms and content. A similar line of reasoning can be found in

Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media* (1964), where he claims that all media exist in constant interaction with each other. According to Bolter and Grusin, both printed and electronic media are trying to defend their position as new forms of digital media threaten them. In unstable conditions, which they define as the present circumstances in the media world, all three forms of media use and re-use aesthetic expressions and concepts of content. What also has happened, says Bolter and Grusin, is that both old and new media "are invoking the twin logics of immediacy and hypermediacy in their effort to remake themselves and each other" (2000, p. 5).

Bolter and Grusin argue that remediation is the representation of one medium in another, and also that it is a defining characteristic of new digital media (2000, p. 45). In studying criticism on the web, it is clear that a number of critical strategies depend upon earlier forms of professional criticism and also on other kinds of personal writing, such as reading logs in schools, regular letters, and diaries. Personally written texts about literature or reading recommendations could be found before the internet in letters to the editor and were particularly prominent in subcultural genre magazines and fanzines. Today many sites on the web encourage reviews, which mean that people can publish pieces they have written themselves, comment on other peoples' writing, and discuss what literature is, should, or could be. Thus, it appears as if the web offers new forums for expressing opinions and views on literature, and that the reviews on Amazon are related both to a rapidly developing blog culture and to historically developed professional criticism.

There is an ongoing debate over whether or not the internet provides a democratic opportunity for everyone to influence and take part in the public sphere. The optimists claim that writing on the web is evidence that people, in their homes all over the world, can transform what we see as literature, culture, and reading. Others fall on the side of Jürgen Habermas, who argued that such freedom is simply an illusion and that individuals can never formulate self-contained opinions, since they will always be ideologically produced by others (Habermas 1962). The internet would be, in Habermas' perspective, the worst kind of fraud, since it makes people believe they have the power to influence the public sphere, when in reality the web is only another way for capital to profit.

The complete mistrust of modern development that Habermas expresses is partly aimed at the commercial aspects of the cultural industry, of which Amazon is a main contributor. The reviews on Amazon have one purpose for the company—to sell more books. Amazon provides the option to write reviews because it is a cheap and efficient way to provide information on its products. It is convenient to let one's customers do the editorial work rather than having one's staff do it. The reviews also allow Amazon to appear to be a customer-oriented, non-commercial site. The writing done by customers does not look like marketing; instead, it is the real thing—authentic readers commenting on books they have actually read.

Similar concerns over modern development were expressed by the American literary critic Sven Birkerts, who argued in *The Gutenberg Elegies* (1994) that our willingness to embrace new technologies is a threat to reading and literature. According to Birkerts, all new media—CD-ROMs, DVDs, the internet, etc. (he had not yet seen the mp3 download of books into mobile phones or Amazon's Kindle reading device)—have detrimental effects on our ability to read and cause difficulties for the important printed text.

No matter what stance we take in the debate over freedom and democracy on the web, it is possible to view personal writings about literature as expressions of the need for something new. Habermas argued in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962) that people have transformed a reasoning culture into a consuming culture, and if we apply his theories to Amazon reviews, it does appear as if much focus is placed on consumption, both in terms of shopping and of reading. Many reviewers on Amazon write about the experience of reading, about the physical setting of their reading ("I read it on a plane," "on my vacation," "on the bus," etc.) and also about how they got hold of the book ("a friend gave it to me," "I bought it at the bus centre," etc.). There is, however, no need to devalue this manner of writing or the belief in the importance of reading or book buying.

One of the critiques of Habermas has been formed by Mark Poster, who argues that Habermas' model cannot describe modern technology and that the "formation of canons and authorities is seriously undermined by the electronic nature of texts" (Poster 2001, p. 188). Poster has a strong claim when he says that Habermas' theory does not apply to digitally mediated texts, and new concepts are required to understand what happens to literature, reading, and writing in contemporary society.

### **Characteristics of Private Criticism Online**

For the last twenty years a flood of critique, reviews, and reading suggestions has been published in evening paper supplements, literature columns in weekly and monthly magazines, fanzine culture membership papers, and so on. Today, private criticism is written mostly on the internet. There are, however, also official and unofficial evaluations made on publishing houses' home pages, in the marketing of reading groups, on book stores sale sites, and in literary diaries, reading recommendations, writing clubs, authors' personal pages, etc. On these sites has developed a world of views and opinions on the nature of good literature far from that expressed in the articles written by professional critics in daily press and literary journals.

Many readers use reviews to confirm their personal interpretation or experience of a text. One aim of a public review appears to be to enhance the value of a particular work or, sometimes, a whole genre.

Another aim is to nuance the image of a genre by making distinctions between different texts. By posting

their opinions on the internet, private critics often make statements going against established criticism; or at least they appear to be convinced that there is a significant difference between the two.

A distinct characteristic of private criticism is the frequently heightened emotion, both positive and negative, expressed. Some researchers, for example James E. Katz and Ronald E. Rice (2002), have seen a tendency toward a widened social freedom where one may express one's feelings more often, or perhaps just more intensely, according to the relative anonymity of the media. The release from social restraints is perhaps a prerequisite for the strong emotions and the intimacy that can be found in private reviews. Possibly the more or less anonymous signatures on Amazon are necessary for people to be open about their literary tastes and for many reviewers to express very strong opinions about books. Their tone would probably not be the same if they knew each other, or even if they simply interacted with identifiable names.

Other features of private criticism, such as self-expressiveness, intimate language, and self-exposing details, are less related to professional criticism than to diary writing and similar activities. The reviews on the internet are not only about literature but also about understanding one's cultural position in relation to other readers, both professional and general.

### **Authenticity and Impostors Online**

Concerns have, however, been raised concerning a number of aspects of online criticism, one of these being the authenticity of the reviewers. A technical mistake on Amazon's Canadian website in February 2004 revealed the true identities of reviewers, who included a number of angry ex-husbands, close friends, publishing house editors, and authors themselves. The American author John Rechy, who had written himself a five-star review, defended himself by arguing that his action was reasonable considering that anyone could trash his books anonymously (Harmon 2004).

The incident caused a debate in which it was claimed that Amazon users are not able to see through fakes and faults in the system. In the traditional spirit of cultural criticism, it was argued that the receivers are passive, unable to understand the system and differ between various kinds of writing. It is, however, likely that many web users are aware of possible corruption and that commercial interests produce online texts disguised as genuine and authentic. However, professional reviewing is not always innocent, either. There are a number of dubious ties within the literary industry between the professional reviewers, on the one hand, and agents, publishers, and authors on the other.

Apparently most American and British publishers regard Amazon as an important channel for marketing.

The rumour within the trade is that editors in publishing houses nowadays spend hours on writing fake

reviews on Amazon and other internet sites with high visibility. In the case of literary dissemination and Amazon, there are a number of complicating factors, such as agendas other than commercial; for example, political, philosophical, or even literary.

The effect of the 2004 revelation was a stronger emphasis on authenticity among Amazon reviewers and on the necessity to present oneself as a reviewer. Even though the real names of the reviewers will only appear occasionally, reviewers are expected to be the real thing, made up by general readers like you and me. Often comments are made to strengthen the connection to a real person; for example, mentioning where the reviewer read the book, how his or her life relates to the events in a particular novel, or giving rather intimate details about real-life events connected to the reviewed text. There is an awareness of impostors, and as a consequence there comments reflecting on another reviewer's opinions may raise doubts about the sincerity and authenticity of that person. The problem of fake reviews has also been addressed by Amazon; one can now earn the badge "Real Name" under one's signature, which offers some proof of identity.

### **Reviews as Comments on the Reading Experience**

When Melissa Bank published her second novel, *The Wonder Spot*, in spring 2005, she received a small number of reviews in the American daily press. Bank had been commonly labelled a chick-lit writer after her successful first novel, *Girls' Guide to Hunting and Fishing* (1999), which probably meant that *The Wonder Spot* ended up in the no-review piles of the literary editors making hard choices between the thousands of new novels published each year. The few reviewers who did take the trouble of writing about the second novel came to the conclusion that the book was not so bad, after all. However, most of them also said that because chick-lit is defined by poor language and narrative technique, simple themes, and predictable endings, Bank's novel could not be labelled chick-lit if it were good.

One literary reviewer, the author Curtis Sittenfeld (2005), wrote in the *New York Times*: "To suggest that another woman's ostensibly literary novel is chick lit feels catty, not unlike calling another woman a slut." Sittenfeld's argument was that there is literature about women's love life that is interesting, but such texts should not be called chick-lit. However, she said, *The Wonder Spot* is chick-lit "because its appeal relies so much on how closely readers relate to its circumstances and ours."

A reader who likes chick-lit will probably search for reading suggestions and book reviews in other places than literary reviews— places like the web, magazines, or friends. Readers' reviews of *The Wonder Spot* on Amazon contrast with the literary reviews in the daily press, indicating differences in reception

depending upon a number of aspects, most particularly, perhaps, whether the reading act should be regarded as literary or social.

In the 83 reviews written about *The Wonder Spot* on Amazon up until March 2008 can be found diverse discussions of quality, reading, and the purpose of literature.<sup>[1]</sup> Although some of the reviews are short and without real argument, many are longer pieces that go into depth about the qualities, or lack of such, of the text. Some of the reviews are not well written, but they clearly develop a more complex view of literature than professional criticism can offer, a view based on experience rather than on the text. This might be seen as evidence of what the American cultural analyst Steven Johnson (2005) has seen as a development of popular culture into something continuously more complex and cognitively demanding. The reviewers' discussions show a desire for greater textual variety and for new themes; what are seen as repeated textual patterns are dismissed as commercial tricks. *The Wonder Spot's* reviews are written by readers with advanced and well-defined literary requirements.<sup>[2]</sup> Many of the reviewers make literary references, and they often demand depth and sophistication, like Lucy Stone from the American West Coast, who wrote, 'I expected more plotting and character development this time'.

The first reviews of *The Wonder Spot* that appeared on Amazon in April 2005 were negative and said that those who liked Bank's first novel were bound to be disappointed by her second. Several reviewers went on to say that *Girls' Guide to Hunting and Fishing* was a wonderful novel, but that the second was only mediocre – well written but tedious. The overall star rating, however, was not so bad: 43 reviewers gave the novel four or five stars.

Interestingly enough, some reviewers made comments similar to those found in the professional criticism. Those reviewers appreciated the novel and argued, therefore, that it was not chic-lit. As in the press critiques, the argument went that Bank is not a chick-lit author because her novel is too good. Instead, she is declared to be a female author who isn't taking herself too seriously.

An often-repeated critique of private criticism is that it tends to deal with experience rather than text, and to some extent this corresponds to the content of Amazon reviews. A common feature in these reviews is discussion about one's feelings and personal experience of a novel. For example, *The Wonder Spot* is criticised by Amazon reviewers for being depressing and pacifying, in contrast to her first novel, which was seen as strengthening and affirming that life is full of potential. The pessimistic tone and attitude in *The Wonder Spot* is repeatedly regarded as its main drawback, or, as S.C. Watson in New York wrote, "The Wonderspot [*sic*] is a dull and depressing read." The reviewer continues: "I felt like I'd been abandoned dog-paddling in the ocean."

Despite all the stars readers have given the novel, it is clear that most are critical. For example, Lois Lane in San Francisco wrote, "Confusing. Inconsistent. Boring. Not the best three adjectives in the world if you're looking for the next great read." The rare really appreciative comments are mostly about the book's

sense of humour, realism, and nostalgia. No one seems to care for the story, although a few reviewers wrote about being entertained and even moved.

Melissa Bank's *The Wonder Spot* is an interesting example of the differences in taste as well as style of writing between professional critiques and reader reviews on Amazon. Studying a wider range of titles generally stamped as chick-lit further illuminates these differences. In the reviews written by general readers, it is clear that the people writing understand that their opinions differ significantly from those expressed by professional critics. They are often proud of this fact; professionals are frequently dismissed, sometimes even ridiculed, as elitist and ignorant about the genre and the importance of personal reading experiences.

Californian commentator manderly123 wrote, for example, about Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996), "This book has received some of the most vicious and petty reviews of any in recent history." This reader regarded her reading as being *against* what she was supposed to like. And, she went on to say, liking this book does not 'make me a mindless idiot. It makes me human." She asserted her right to have her own opinions on literature, knowing that her reading is looked down upon, and the Amazon forum provided her with a space to protest patronizing attitudes toward chic-lit. This particular reader even made reviewing a gender issue, claiming that the text has received so much criticism because it is written by a woman on women's issues. The reviewer concluded that if Fielding had been a man she would have been praised for her wit and entertainment skills.

Many readers writing on Amazon openly declare their desire to talk to someone just like them and to enhance their feeling of belonging to a global community of readers with similar daily problems and desires. A form of self-referencing is characteristic, with comments such as "readers of our kind" or "readers who like these kinds of books," indirectly saying that someone who does not like the same book does not belong. It has been argued that the internet is a place for people to develop their individuality, because there is always someone else in the world interested in the same thing, no matter how obscure. A global community can give one a sensation of being in the right, and there is tangible evidence to suggest that many of these reviewers search for affirmation.

Another frequent feature among the reviews of books by authors like Marian Keyes and Helen Fielding is references to similar books. Through comparing a novel with others by the same author or within the same genre, the reviewer shows that she is well acquainted with this kind of literature, which gives her a kind of authority to judge quality. Comments like "this one is my favourite of her novels," "I know Marian Keyes has done better in other books," or "this is not her best work" makes it possible for a reader to judge whether the reviewer is to be trusted or not.

It is also common to make references to films, TV shows, fashion, and current events. These references are directed toward an audience familiar with the cultural phenomenon, gossip, and details of the genre's artefacts; they will probably alienate other readers. It is also clear in these kinds of comments that reading is not seen as an activity different from watching films or TV; they are all acts of consumption for pleasure, escape, or the understanding of one's own situation in life, and all social practices.

The chick-lit reviews on Amazon show that readers are conscious of the character of the genre and will define it through comments like "this is not real chic-lit," or this "is British (!) chick-lit at it's best." By identifying the boundaries of the genre and what they regard as the core, these reviewers display metaliterary competence and a distinct concept of quality. *Good* chick-lit novels are defined as fun, witty, easy and light reads dealing with real issues. Readers have to be able to sympathise with the main character; identification is, of course, the foundation of the genre, so this aspect is often discussed. A further requirement for a good chick-lit novel is that it is engaging and, at best, should change the reader's life.

### **Reviews as a Literary Practice**

The reviews on Amazon are, however, not written only about commercial fiction; literary novels also receive a great deal of attention. One example is Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001), which had been reviewed almost 900 times by March 2008. Most of these reviews are completely ecstatic, and half of the reviewers have given the novel five stars. For example, C. B Collins Jr. (2006) from Atlanta wrote, "Very few works of art are as profound, moving, and sublime as this novel." Apart from being so overjoyed, most of these reviewers write articulate, long texts about plot, narrative technique, language, and character.

A comparison between the *Atonement* reviews and the chick-lit reviews show distinct differences. First of all, the McEwan reviewers seem to have no need to distance themselves from professional criticism. Instead, they borrow from academic discourse; for example, by using literary allusions and frequently drawing on references to fiction by authors such as Leo Tolstoy, Charles Dickens, Victor Hugo, and E.M. Forrester.

Another feature of the *Atonement* reviews is the referencing of a literary practice of reading. This activity is described by the reviewers as distinctly different from the intimate and personal experience referred to in the chick-lit examples. The McEwan reviewers on Amazon claim that the book's value is derived directly from the qualities of the text and the author's skilful prose. The positive comments are predominantly grounded in criteria that a student or scholar of literature would use, to the degree that one may suspect that many of these reviewers have taken university courses in literature. One example by D. Srinath

(2006) from Canada describes in detail McEwan's use of linguistic complexity to emphasise his narrative: "he utilizes his mastery of the English language to its fullest extent; the vocabulary is evocative, effective and sometimes menacing in describing every intricate framed detail." This reviewer uses Amazon to write what appears as almost professional criticism to strengthen his argument. He begins with a discussion of language and then continues on to plot, narrative, themes, and the construction of the story.

Like the reviewers of Melissa Bank's novel, the McEwan reviewers are well aware of the presence and character of their potential audience. The message conveyed is that if you do not like discussing language and narration, then this is not the novel for you. Defining an audience works similarly in different kinds of reviews but allows for diverse texts and styles. In each case the reviews resemble the literature discussed, and by this use of similar language and descriptions of plot and story, it is possible for the readers to decide whether or not the book is in their taste.

The *Atonement* reviews show how varied reviews turn out, depending upon the book discussed. Within the book trade as a whole, books are often treated according to how they are labelled by their publishing houses and by press, and these reviewers adopt a similar approach. Canadian professor of English literature Paul Delany (2002) argues that the commercialism in contemporary trade has led to a greater degree of "segmentation." He claims that this has led to a situation in which individual genres have become more distinct and dispersed, "while undermining the kind of unitary cultural authorities that made possible the masterpieces of earlier traditional societies" (Delany 2002, p. 7). The commercial side of Amazon should not be underestimated, and it is one of the controlling instances of the private criticism on the web. Regular readers might claim power, but the commercial interests within the industry are strong and clearly visible.

### **Reading as a Social Act**

One strong motivation in writing criticism on the web appears to be the desire to connect with others, mainly through community-creating comments. The spreading of private views on literature in a public forum further strengthens the claim that reading is a social act, which American sociologist Elizabeth Long has called "the social infrastructure of reading" (2003, p. 8). She claims that reading should be seen as a social event and interpreted in terms of its function in society. Long's study of reading groups in the United States provides one example of how this works. Reading groups, she says, create space for literary discussion without preset notions of quality, where texts are evaluated according to criteria far from those of professional critics. This argument is, however, in direct opposition to the tradition of regarding reading and writing as a literary, artistic practice. Even if we consider this division to be fallacious, it is clear that it is established and brought into play both by Long, the internet reviewers, and the professional critics.

In a similar way, today in many countries book talks on TV air views on literature based on the experience of reading, rather than on the text. TV show book clubs such as Oprah's in the United States and Richard and Judy's in Britain have turned literature as a social act into a commodity. It is reasonable, as has been done by Kathleen Rooney in her study *Reading with Oprah* (2005, p. 8), to call into question the rather superficial and uncritical attitude toward literature displayed in the book talks on Oprah's show. On the other hand, maybe it is precisely the positive approach of the talks, which only focus on what is *good* in a certain book, that makes such a difference to many readers. Similar approaches to literature can be seen in Amazon's review sections—they contain a straightforward and positive attitude toward reading itself.

Clearly these examples are driven by commercial interests and can be dismissed as such, but literary interests are not necessarily in opposition to commercial interests. Literature might even benefit from a general marketing of reading. It is also a fact that there is an agenda behind non-commercial interests as well, one that regards certain kinds of books and readings as better than others.

Previous studies of book talks and reading groups on the internet have observed that they are short and mainly discuss the value of the reader's experience (Söderlund 2004, pp. 71–72). However, this article has shown that these observations only cover certain types of reviews on Amazon. How reviews are written depends mainly on the book being discussed. The reviews of Melissa Bank's *The Wonder Spot* dealt a great deal with experience, but the reviews of Ian McEwan's *Atonement* did not. The variety of style and character in the Amazon reviews is perhaps their most prominent feature, suggesting that this is a diverse and developing culture with promising beliefs in literature and reading.

The differences between internet literary culture and previous media forms might not be extensive. Spanish professor of sociology Manuel Castells claims that internet communication only maintains pre-existing patterns in human behaviour (2001, p. 119). The difference, as Castells sees it, lies in “the emergence of a new system of social relationships centered on the individual,” what he calls “the privatization of sociability” (2001, p. 128). In using and re-using older forms of culture, private criticism emerges as something new. The discussion initialised by John Sutherland focused on what is happening to criticism but not on what is happening to literature in contemporary society. The bottom line is whether or not personally written reviews on the internet bring new titles to readers or, even better, new readers to literature. The division between commercial and literary books is one that has a long tradition, but it seems that the reviewers on Amazon, in part at least, challenge this division.

It has been suggested by *Wired magazine* editor Chris Anderson that “the long tail” is significant for the distribution and sales on the internet. Sites like Amazon, Netflix, and iTunes Music Store are a combination of sales, distribution, marketing, and critique, and it is this character that makes it possible for them to offer a wider selection than any physical store. What Anderson argues is that not only can one

make a lot of money on marketing low-sellers, one can even make more profit on them than on bestsellers (Anderson 2006). The use of reviewers on Amazon might have commercial motives, but its impact on literature might still be quite positive.

If we, like Friedrich Kittler, regard the internet not as an extension of the human mind but simply as an opportunity to explore pre-established practices, it is possible to argue there are distinct differences between texts, participants and activities (1988, pp. 289-300). On different levels the internet has already affected the distribution and consumption of literature in contemporary society. The reviewers on Amazon are simply adding their bit to the equation.

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[1] All references to the reviews of *The Wonder Spot* are fetched from Amazon on March 25, 2008, URL [http://www.amazon.com/Wonder-Spot-Melissa-Bank/dp/B000VTPEVK/ref=pd\\_bbs\\_sr\\_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1206449351&sr=8-1](http://www.amazon.com/Wonder-Spot-Melissa-Bank/dp/B000VTPEVK/ref=pd_bbs_sr_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1206449351&sr=8-1)

[2] This is similar to what Janice Radway (1982) noted in her study of women's romance reading, where the readers had a well-defined literary taste very different from the literary critics.

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### Biographical note

Ann Steiner teaches literature at Lund University, Sweden. Her PhD was on subscription book clubs, and she is currently researching terms of production, distribution, and consumption of literature in the 20th and 21st century in Sweden.

