Reading Like a Graduate Student

Why do graduate students tend to be so eager to dismiss, dislike, and disrespect what they read?

By RACHEL TOOR

It didn't take long, working as an editorial assistant, to learn the importance of prepublication book reviews. I had never thought about it before but soon realized that those reviews are crucial to bookstore buyers when they make decisions about what to stock. Regular news media — newspapers, magazines, radio shows — are not supposed to review a book until after its official publication date, usually about six weeks after the book is scheduled to be available. That allows it to be in the stores by the time the publicity starts.

But before any of that happens, prepublication reviews are key. I was always excited to see early mentions of our books in Publishers Weekly, the trade magazine for the industry, or in Booklist, Library Journal, and Kirkus Reviews.

What was striking was that the Kirkus reviews were so brutal. It was book reviewing as blood sport. Sometimes funny, often snarky, they were mostly surprisingly harsh. In the beginning of my publishing career, right out of college, I wondered if the Kirkus reviewers were better and more critical readers than me; sometimes they made me doubt my own judgment. But then I read enough of them to realize that the reviews often were not only nasty, they frequently weren't even helpful or smart. They were, however, unsigned. So I asked someone who had been a book editor for a long time what was up with Kirkus.

"They hate everything," he said. "It's because the reviews are written by graduate students." That, he seemed to think, was explanation enough.

Sometimes you need visual aids to make clichés come to life. I was once watching a TV documentary on hyenas and realized how little I knew about them. The pack had taken down some elegant ungulate and was tearing big chunks of flesh out of it, ripping it apart, devouring the viscera so that within a few minutes, the victim was no longer recognizable as what it had been. Occasionally the hyenas would turn on one another, growling and snapping with blood-splattered muzzles. It reminded me of something. I thought for a minute. Oh, yes, of course: a graduate seminar.

It's a signature of youth to want to make a place for oneself by destroying the old guard. Perhaps, as Freud-tinted Harold Bloom has spent a career arguing, it is the anxiety of influence that impels poets to kill off, by "misreading," their artistic fathers in order to establish a place for
themselves in the world. That involves, if not outright murder, at least some dismemberment and maiming, an ugly fray that graduate students are often quick to jump into.

Why is it that so many graduate students are reflexively critical of what they read? Why are they so eager to dismiss, dislike, and disrespect work that has already been done before they can even hope to begin to contribute?

In some ways, of course, they are exercising their critical reading and thinking muscles that will serve them well as grownup academics. They are being asked to read not just for content, but also to understand the histories of their disciplines, to comprehend the way that so much of academic work rests on visions and revisions. No one wants to teach students to be unquestioning and bland; they should be asking hard questions. That's their job.

But there's a peculiar animus that guides the reading style of many graduate students. No doubt it's a result of being overworked and overwhelmed as well as of the anxiety of influence. While there are sometimes savant-like writers who are able to create without the benefit of vast amounts of reading, it's the nature of academic life that there is a huge amount of prior work to be digested before you can intelligently enter a discussion. It can feel like having to eat the world.

One way to deal with that is to carp about the flavors, textures, and composition of that which you are required to consume. Or to revel in the defects you can find. Auden said of falling in love with Hardy's poetry at the age of 16, "His clumsy and forced diction gave me hope where a flawless poet may have made me despair."

In her book The Writing Life, Annie Dillard discusses the tree of literary models so important to most authors, talking about the indebtedness many writers claim to those whose work has influenced them. "By contrast," she writes, "if you ask a 21-year-old poet whose poetry he likes, he might say, unblushing, 'Nobody's.' In his youth, he has not yet understood that poets like poetry, and novelists like novels; he himself likes only the role, the thought of himself in a hat." That's similar to the kids who like to play doctor but faint at the sight of blood. It's the white coat and the stethoscope, the ability to tell others what's wrong with them, that is compelling, not memorizing the nerves of the brain or performing a bowel disimpaction. The fun of playing "what do you want to be when you grow up" comes from not knowing what the job actually entails.

The fact is, putting on the white coat necessitates doing a whole lot of icky, messy work. For many graduate students, the ambivalence about being in school (Am I good enough? Smart enough? Creative enough? Does my adviser respect me? Can I make a contribution?) manifests in a sour-grapes scenario that can get in the way of learning. Instead of reading to glean what is important and useful, people who are constantly being evaluated (and having their own flaws pointed out) naturally seek to turn that on others. Published work is an easy target.

The editor of a book series told me recently that he never sends out manuscripts to be reviewed by people who haven't themselves written books. That is not only a credibility issue; until you've
done the horrible, painful work of writing a book yourself, it's easy to underestimate how hard it is.

Indeed, after my first book was published, I became, overnight, a more generous reader. Not less critical, to be sure, but more understanding of the many ways in which a book-length work can go wrong, and more accepting of a failed attempt. Reading reviews in places like Amazon, where people don't even have to sign their names, let alone back up their assertions, became exercises in frustration for me — as frustrating as hearing graduate students in writing make "workshop" comments about Toni Morrison, or fledgling historians trash Simon Schama and Richard White, or lit-crit kids bash Fred Jameson and Judy Butler.

I've learned never to ask graduate students what they think of a particular work or scholar. That generally leads to posturing, self-aggrandizing put-downs, and useless bluster. Instead, I ask them what they have learned from a particular writer, what moves or academic maneuvers they noticed in the work that they could steal and use in their own writing and thinking. I ask them to try to understand the work not only on its own merits, but also in the context within which it was written. I try to remind them that there was a history in the discipline before they started reading.

It's hard not to remind them that many of the flaws and intellectual infelicities they find so quickly in their reading often litter their own writing.

Thankfully, just as frequently, students will find their heroes and models in print. They will "discover" a great scholar and will talk for hours about what she has done, and how important she has been to their discipline. It's always a joy to hear them express the excitement of intellectual engagement without a concomitant fear of their own inadequacy.

I wish there were a way to inculcate in students, as they continue through their graduate studies (and even when they enter the professoriate), the idea of how fortunate we are to be able to spend our lives reading, thinking, and writing, and that much of what we are absorbing is the best that has been said and thought in the world, even if it's not exactly their cup of decaf skim chai latte.

It's scary to come so late to a conversation (again, I think of Bloom's idea of belatedness), but I'd like to remind them that they're lucky to be included. They may not love everything they are reading. But at least they can learn to appreciate the labor taken to get it before them.

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