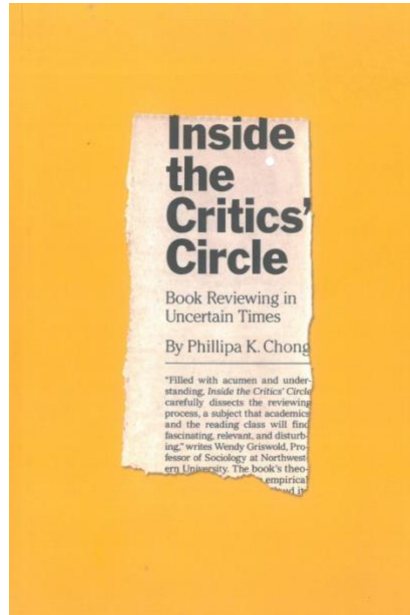


Writing a Critical Essay with help from: *Inside the Critics' Circle, Book Reviewing in Uncertain Times* by Phillipa K. Chong



Congratulations: you wrote your first review. You are now a critic, subject to being scrutinized. Writing about shows or reviewing books allows you to inhabit aesthetic realms you never imagined, even if you don't get paid.

When you look at a work of art or review a book, do you have an immediate reaction, or do you let the experience simmer? You probably think you are bias free—but are you? When you begin banging those computer keys, should you write something negative--just to be cool? Do you harken back to grad school when some professor devoured a student's work, because they could? Is your essay meant for a quick read, or do you want fans to return, as when rereading a John Updike art commentary? Remember the person holding the flag and guiding you through antiquities, on your last vacation? Hold your flag high—lead the way by writing clearly and succinctly!

Inside the Critics' Circle, Book Reviewing in Uncertain Times by Phillipa K. Chong (Princeton University Press, 2020) investigates writing structures for critics. While many tabloids have ceased to exist, along with dismissing salaried staff writers, the ever expanding

internet: Amazon, social media, blogs, and smart phones have allowed for non-professional writers, and experienced ones too, to have a voice.

Chong writes in the style of Pierre Bourdieu, embedding ‘the critic’ into cultural sociology. Like Bourdieu, minutiae lurk within this book. So consider broader themes on your first read. I have read this book multiple times. Of note: Chong’s interview-data blends with her thoughts. For my review, it is of no significance, as I will be combining all her remarks and adding my comments. Below are a few Chong structures, as the point of my analysis is to assist critics.

Uncertainty: Chong writes, “social uncertainty refers to critics’ inability to predict how relevant others will respond or react to their evaluations (57).” I would add ‘uncertainty’ refers to the critiquing process at large, as it is likely you will change your thinking after several reads or several strolls through an exhibition, including when reading catalogs. Criticism is not like adding $1+1=2$.

‘Reader-Reviews’ are allegedly written by amateurs who post opinions on social media, or websites. Chong notes, “If readers can go to Amazon.com and read fifty layperson reviews of a new book, what need do they have for professional book reviews (2)?” Don’t forget, professional critics also have blogs and write for Amazon too. While magazine editors try to match a reviewer to an appropriate subject, the universe of electronic media is not picky, and often relies on ‘hits’ or cyber popularity (24).

Many critics are happy just to be in the reviewing-game, even if they receive little to no money. Chong writes about reviewers who admit that, “it helps me think about what I’ve read [and] deepens my personal reading experience by reviewing books (109).” This testimonial can be applied to those who review shows.

Chong comments, “It is this overlap in the market intermediary function of journalistic and amateur reviews that leaves journalistic reviewing uniquely vulnerable to contest and encroachment from amateur reviewers in ways that literary essayists and academic forms of criticism are not (104).” The internet is big enough to encompass everyone (120). Capable writers should be able to write both academically and informally. Even a book made to be read on a beach is worth a critical review (23). After all, the vernacular has oozed into academic writing. Categories continue to blur, especially if a publication needs the entertainment/celebrity factor to sell. Competition is healthy!

Negative Reviews: can occur when a reporter is not qualified to address a certain subject or event. Negative reviews can also occur when the writer is overly pompous. And nasty reviews sometimes just happen. Often when a piece is badly written, it just gets ignored (92). Sometimes a negative assessment never gets to the reviewer at all (80). A number of authors appreciate constructive criticism (82). When you encounter negative criticism, consider the worthwhile points--or not. Then suck it up, and keep on writing!

Playing-Nice: refers to refraining from writing anything critical. Critics can be worried that saying something negative might jeopardize careers (27). A reviewer who is acquainted with the author or exhibitor can sometimes be non-objective too (78). Chong writes, 'playing nice' or writing a positive review for an inferior exhibition could be seen as 'untruthful or dishonest' or 'acting against reviewers' self-interests' (74). While some reviewers fear retaliation, especially if they themselves are authors, it is best to carry on and be yourself, ignoring bullies (75-77). Inserting constructive thoughts into your review does not have to be snarky. It tells the reader you take your job seriously.

Punch Up, Never Down: means cutting some slack, when critiquing a novice writer, or a first time solo exhibitor (84). Chong notes that, "if you are in any position of power, if you are in any position of authority, it is your obligation to help those who are just starting out (87)." What about a famous author/artist? Chong then comments, "this author's fame made this author impervious to the hurt or impact of a critical review that gave this reviewer permission to proceed and be bluntly critical (89)." Be confidently constructive, but don't sugar-coat.

Status Advantage: means that a celebrity will always get a good review because they are famous (90). If you regularly read the work of a renowned author/artist, you will eventually encounter one of their works which misses the mark. Generally a famous author's book or artist's work will sell anyway, even if it receives negative reviews. Example: no matter what, Steven King always sells (91). Seasoned authors or artists can react to negative reviews. According to Edith Wharton, Henry James couldn't stand criticism.

Writer as Reviewer: can often produce better reviews (29). Chong surprisingly writes, "While many critics may, in fact, have degrees in English, many do not, and none of the reviewers I interviewed indicated that an English degree was a threshold for vetting who would make a qualified critic (32)." Correct grammar, associated with English majors, is a controversial issue at present. Some feel English grammar is synonymous with 'Colonialism'—

not a favorite topic at the moment. Having read countless essays--incorrect grammar may fit a certain style of book, exhibition wall tag, or catalog, but it's wise to use correct grammar when writing a review, entering a contest, or submitting an abstract.

Chong notes, "While it is taboo for critics to consult other critics' reviews when preparing their own, it is common for critics to later read or otherwise learn about evaluative disagreements once other reviews of the same title are published (51)." With the vast amount of electronic information invading your brain, trying to stay away from reviews is impossible, especially as critics need to keep abreast of the contemporary art world. Attending conferences and listening to presentations also helps develop a writing style. Chong comments, "'be constructive' and employ 'sensitivity to and understanding of what the author [or artist] had been attempting' (82)." Ideas for essays come from everywhere, and that's not pirating others' writing.

No Accounting for Taste: Chong writes, "it is useless to argue about taste because taste is idiosyncratic, irrational, and thus inarguable (37)." Taste, with apologies to Emmanuel Kant, is a writer's palette. Knowing what you like allows you to disagree about, or appreciate the tastes of others.

Chong notes, "Many reviewers expressed delight at being exposed to new genres and new ideas through the review assignment process (110)." It's trendy for some museums to juxtapose art/artefacts, foregoing any historical timeline. Chong comments, "I found that reviewers often cited the unsuccessful merging of elements from multiple genres as part of why they thought books were failures (48)." Mixing genres can be successful. A reviewer's task is to recognize if the genre-mixing works or not, and comment appropriately.

Developing your techniques for writing and your method of working takes practice. Chong suggests writing at least four drafts (37). I don't begin editing until my paper is organized. Then I rewrite countless drafts. If I think my essay is boring, it probably is, and needs to be cut or rearranged!

As an editor, I encounter essays that possess too many themes. The principle theme should be on the first page, and should drive the essay all the way to the end. I find writers drop in sub-themes, then leave them dangling. And for some ridiculous reason academics think quantity matters over quality. Chong writes, "The analogy of the rollercoaster positively speaks to the reviewed author's ability to immerse the reader in the fictional [and non-fictional]

landscape and bring readers along ‘for the ride’ through the book (44).” Simon Schama is a good example of successfully peppering his writing with colloquialisms.

Getting Paid: While most critics would like a steady writing position with a salary, it is becoming less and less a reality. Even being paid for the occasional essay is disappearing. Most critics have ‘day jobs’ and then write for free or get paid enough for a burger and beer at the local pub. According to Chong, “research elsewhere has established how individuals maintain a strong sense of identification with roles even when they are nonpaying or otherwise nonprimary work activities (117).” Critiquing gives a reporter recognition, which can lead to other assignments. (114). Chong also comments, “Critics thus describe reviewing as presenting a learning opportunity: the act of preparing for and writing a review tasks reviewers with increasing their breadth as readers and invites them to examine works beyond their normal reading habits (111).” The more you review shows and get read, the more referrals you’ll receive. A ‘thank-you’ note from someone who appreciates your writing is priceless!

Cuttings Left on the Studio Floor: As a critic it is important to go beyond ‘thumbs up and thumbs down’ and actually read the whole book, or spend time at an exhibition, including reading the catalog (122). Do amateur critics really threaten the field of journalistic writers (123)? A good writer can be academic or switch to an informal style when appropriate (124). Keeping the reading-public, or museum-goers, informed is the goal (130). Good verbiage written clearly without pomposity works for all writers. Being a ‘jerk’ reporter makes you a loser!

Inside the Critics’ Circle, Book Reviewing in Uncertain Times by Phillipa K. Chong is a dense 150 pages about key aspects of the critiquing profession. I was surprised when Chong comments that, “Critics feel very little *groupness*, that is, they do not have a sense of book reviewing [or show reviewing] as a bounded category to which they feel belonging (101).” Organizations like AICA International with its annual Congress and Awards contest exist for fellowship. Universities maintain alumni organizations for connecting.

Chong writes how, “new online magazines are perhaps better understood as providing new opportunities for would-be reviewers to become known (144).” The **AICA/E-MAG** is like a drama school’s ‘black-box’ giving novice and seasoned writers opportunities to experiment. The AICA/E-MAG [link](#) is under the AICA International website headline (no password required).

BIO: Jean Bundy, Editor of the *AICA/E-MAG*, has a BFA from the University of Alaska, MFA from the University of Chicago, MFAW from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and a PhD from The Institute of Doctoral Studies in Visual Arts. She is also a painter, focusing on the climate and the socio-political, and has shown her work internationally. Bundy thanks, Jodi Price at Princeton University Press, for supporting the *AICA/E-MAG*.