

Pictures *of* You

The Writer as Reviewer:
A Note from the Author



Questions for Discussion



The Writer as Reviewer

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

“DON’T DO IT, it’ll kill your writing,” a writer friend warned me when, seven years ago, I first mentioned I was going to be a book critic for the *Boston Globe*. I can’t say I was that surprised by her response; a lot of writers I know won’t review books at all. They don’t want to risk reading a book they may not like, having to give another writer the kind of review we’ve all gotten at one time or another—you know, the one that makes you feel that maybe it’s not too late to give it up and go to dental school. A writer writing reviews is incestuous, I’m told. Shouldn’t we really just be concentrating on our *own* writing rather than taking apart someone else’s for all the world to see?

Ah, I beg to differ.

I want to review because I’m passionate about books and writers. And for me, reviewing opens up writing in ways one wouldn’t expect. Having to read critically, instead of for the pure, dizzy enjoyment of being lost in a read, forces me to look at a book differently: I notice what’s working and why, and what is leaving me adrift. This, in turn, impacts how I write. Writing is *always* challenging—but I’ve slowed down, gotten more meticulous, because of everything I’m learning from reading other writers critically. I take note of a great first line, a reveal I never expected—and I begin to tuck those techniques into my own author’s toolbox. Reading as a reviewer is like seeing the scaffolding of a building, the bones beneath the skin. Reviewing actually makes me more conscious of not just how and why books work but how and why I want my *own* to work.

While I knew I could learn a lot from reviewing great books, I was happy to see I could learn even more from the ones that faltered. Recognizing a flaw in someone else's work can prevent me from making that gaffe in my own. Having to read flowery, fussy language makes me stop every time I think about adding what seems like a perfectly good adjective. Closing a book unsatisfied because the ending ties everything up in a neat bow makes me work harder at my own grand finales, making sure they're more open ended, that they provide more of a never-ending story that makes you wonder about the character's next step even after you've shut the book. I've learned that if I don't love a book by the first twenty pages, chances are I'm not going to love it for the next three hundred. This means I spend months on my own first chapter, honing it, getting it exactly right. What I most love are the books that aren't afraid to break a few rules. A meditative chapter might not advance the story, but you know the book would be less without it. A character who leaps into a book midstream, tells his story, and then vanishes can somehow tie the book together. These things give me the courage to wander, to take risks in my own novels.

It's awful to have to give a bad review, but even bad reviews can be helpful. I realize no one sets out deliberately to write a bad book (and I know that most of my writer friends and I are always terrified that we somehow have), but sometimes a bad review gives helpful feedback. For example, a line in a *New York Times* review for my first novel, *Meeting Rozzy Halfway*, mentioned that my "back-story was sparkling while the front story faded." This taught me how to pay more attention to making things more immediate. I try to give the same sort of critical help, because I feel that all writers are in the trenches together and we should do what we can to help one another. Plus, false praise is disrespectful to another writer, like telling a friend he looks terrific even though there is that bit of salad greenery lodged in his teeth that he could easily get rid of if someone would gently point it out.

I love reviewing. When I'm desperate to figure out my story, I always study what worked for other writers I've reviewed—and what didn't. But when I'm deep in the writing zone, engaged in my character's struggles, I don't consciously think about anything but the world I'm lost in creating. It's then that I hope that all those techniques and tools will emerge, organic as seedlings and just waiting to sprout on my pages.

Questions for Discussion

1. Why do you think Leavitt describes the events surrounding the pivotal accident in the book three times, from the points of view of Isabelle, Sam, and then Bill? What do you think this is saying about how we see events in our lives and whether or not we can ever really know the whole truth? Do you personally think anyone can ever really know the truth?
2. What's different about the ways in which April and Isabelle are running away? What do you think would have happened with April if she had not made the choice to leave? And why do you think she was really outside the car?
3. Some of the characters in *Pictures of You* engage in magical or wishful thinking. Sam believes he has seen an angel. Isabelle is told she has a special gift to foresee the future lives of the children she photographs. How do you think this magical thinking helps and hinders the characters, and have you ever used such thinking in your own life to get through a painful situation?
4. Sam's asthma impacts his life, April's, and Charlie's. At one point, on page 64, April tells Charlie that she heard that "breathing is our contract to remain here on this planet," that people with respiratory problems are "troubled souls." If this is so, why do you think that Sam's asthma vanishes? What made Sam want to stay on earth and survive?

5. At one point, on page 69, Charlie asks, “Was any parent perfect?” Discuss the ways April and Charlie were both good and also highly imperfect parents. Was there anything they could or should have done differently, given Sam’s illness? Do you think parenting ever turns out the way we expect it to?
6. Sam remembers how he and his mother used to go on short trips and pretend to be other people with other lives. Why do you think people need to create different realities for themselves? How can it be both helpful and harmful?
7. As Isabelle teaches Sam about photography, she explains that photographs sometimes show things that aren’t there. She tells him that he has to learn to look deeper, to see what might be hidden, and in a way, she’s really talking about people, as well as photographs. How much do you think we can ever really know about the people we love?
8. Leavitt’s book explores many different kinds of love: the love of a mother for her child, the love of husband and wife, and some unexpected kinds, too, such as Isabelle’s devotion to Nelson, her tortoise. Why do you think Isabelle’s love for her tortoise is so important to her?
9. How did you react to Bill’s story about what really happened the day of the accident? How did you feel about his ultimate decision? Why do you think he tried to find April after all that time?
10. Why do you think Leavitt chose to flash forward thirty years and show Sam as an adult? How would the novel have been different if it ended with Sam as a child? Was Sam’s life what you expected it might be, or were you surprised by his choices?

11. Leavitt has said that the novel is about the stories we tell ourselves about the ones we love. How do these stories keep each character from truly seeing the ones they love?

12. On page 304, Isabelle's driving teacher tells her that "people who are frightened, who don't know where they're going . . . are my best students." Why, in the context of the book, do you think this is true?

13. The novel asks, can we forgive the unforgivable? Do you think Charlie ever really forgives April? Do *you*?

14. At the end of the novel, on page 323, Sam wonders if his whole life might be perfect, "or just this moment? And wouldn't that be enough?" What do you think he means? And what do you think the answer to that question might say about Sam's worldview?

15. Leavitt has said that she wanted to create a never-ending story that would make readers wonder about the characters long after they turned the last page. What do you think happens to Sam? Do you think Charlie and Isabelle ever meet again?

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Caroline Leavitt is the award-winning author of eight novels. Leavitt's essays and stories have been included in *New York Magazine*, *Psychology Today*, *More*, *Parenting*, *Hallmark*, *Redbook*, *Salon*, and several anthologies. A book columnist for the *Boston Globe* and *Dame*, she also reviews books for *People* and is a senior writing instructor at UCLA online.