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Everyone's a critic

Remember that little interlude in a Kingston Trio album from a very long time ago that said, "No matter how high or great the throne, what sits on it is the same as your own"? Critics are the professionals who remind even the greatest writers of this fact.

I've spent this last week cruising the internet for the best examples of critics eviscerating some of the best works of literature just so I can share it with you. Yes, I'm now a scathing review curator. These critics are often brilliant writers of their own accord and other times nameless – just a publication associated with their words.

Let's start with Dorothy Parker who did the unthinkable – she blasted **Winnie the Pooh**. "'Tiddely what?' said Piglet." (He took, as you might say, the very words out of your correspondent's mouth.) 'Pom,' said Pooh. 'I put that in to make it more hummy.' And it is that word hummy, my darlings, that marks the first place in The House of Pooh Corner at which Tonstant Weader Fwowed up." Parker was a tough cookie. After all, Winnie the Pooh is the closest thing to sacred text for children's literature.

Truman Capote was more succinct when speaking of Jack Kerouac's **On the Road**. "That's not writing. That's typing." Kerouac is currently having a huge resurgence in readership. Capote isn't.

The biggest gun goes after the other biggest gun in this one. Mark Twain remarked, "Every time I read **Pride and Prejudice** I want to dig [Austen] up and beat her over the skull with her own shinbone." His issue isn't specific, but his passion is. These are two of my favorite writers, yet I can see how neither would be the other's cup of tea or shot of bourbon.

Don Quixote runs right around a thousand pages. I still recall the undergrad lit class where we read a book a week and Cervantes' tome only got the customary seven days. (Don't ask how I did that.) Martin Amis spares no words on his critique, perhaps my favorite of them all: "Reading Don Quixote can be compared to an indefinite visit from your most impossible senior relative, with all his pranks, dirty habits, unstoppable reminiscences, and terrible cronies. When the experience is over, and the old boy checks out at last (on page 846, the prose wedged tight, with no breaks for dialogue), you will shed tears all right, not tears of relief but tears of pride. You made it." I'm not sure who should be more distressed by this take in the afterlife, Cervantes or old Uncle Cordis.

I'll admit I'm no fan of Russian literature, so I can only smile when one Russian delivers the poison dart to another. Vladimir Nabokov said of Dostoevsky, "I dislike intensely **The Brothers Karamazov** and the ghastly **Crime and Punishment** rigmarole. The soul and the sins and the sentimentality and the journalese hardly warrant the tedious and muddled search" for self-revelation. Couldn't have said it better.

As to that most obscure of novels in English, James Joyce's **Finnigan's Wake**, the New York Times mentioned it is, "over 600 pages of dense, lightly punctuated prose aspiring to the condition of poetry." That might not be an insult, but again I think it might. It causes me to take a moment of silent gratitude that, as the head of my department in grad school at the University of Michigan told me in a chipper tone, "Oh, too bad. Our Wake scholar died last year." This saved him and me six years of frustrating work. I don't believe he was ever replaced.

If you've had bad thoughts about required reading, you're in good company, and if you've ever felt that your work in any endeavor was underappreciated, rest assured, you are in the very best company. Stop in and get some wonderful reviews of books we think you'll love.

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