

## SEND IN THE RIGHT REVIEWER

It's an acknowledged truism that it is pointless to argue with professional critics. Once they've made up their minds about a movie, a book, a play, or a short story, it's highly unlikely that you will disabuse them of their notions. Whether or not you or I agree with their assessment of a work, they will usually have cogent reasons for their opinions. Engaging in counter argument will likely lead to humiliation when they bring the hammer down and finally reveal to you their *real* opinion of the work in question. I take the advice not to quibble pretty seriously, but there are times when I rather wistfully wonder why a magazine or a newspaper can't be more merciful to their reviewers. Why not ask someone who enjoys genre fiction to review the latest big-budget sci-fi film? Why not give the fantasy buff the newest three-volume trilogy?

In 1979, *TIME* magazine's noted film critic Richard Schickel must have thought he'd drawn the short stick when he was sent to review the first *Star Trek* movie. He was unhappy with the language, "[T]here is a lot of talk. Much of it in impenetrable spaceflight jargon. Scanners, deflectors, warp speed. . ."; referred to many of those who had enjoyed the original TV show as "the half-educated"; and completely misinterpreted the opening sequence of the film, describing it this way: "It turns out that the villainous UFO is not manned. This is very peculiar, since in the film's opening sequence it is full of weirdos [sic]. By the time the *Enterprise* closes in on it, the creatures have all disappeared, victims not of the story line but of what appears to be a shortage of either money or time."

Mr. Schickel was entitled to his ultimate opinion that *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* was "nothing but a long day's journey into ennui." Indeed, it was not the most exciting SF film I'd ever seen, but my "half-educated" friends and I—all philosophy graduate students at Wash-

ington University in St. Louis—agreed that we would have gotten more from the review if *TIME* had chosen to send a critic who had actually enjoyed the TV show, wasn't afraid of the vocabulary, knew a more descriptive term for "Klingons" than "weirdos," and could figure out that rather than piloting V'Ger, the aliens and their spaceship were under attack and then destroyed by the "UFO" during the movie's first scene. The reviewer didn't have to like the movie. Confusion and boredom are legitimate reactions to any film, but one gets the sense that Mr. Schickel may have attended the screening of a *Star Trek* film under protest.

More than thirty years have gone by and as far as fantasy and SF films go, most news outlets seem to have either gotten better at assigning the right reviewers or perhaps find that a higher percentage of their critics grew up on and now enjoy watching genre films. Even Mr. Schickel seems to have found some of the later *Star Trek* films easier to endure. Reviewers like Richard Corliss, A. O. Scott, and Manohla Dargis, routinely extol the virtues of genre films that catch their fancy. Still, that doesn't mean that today's news outlets always manage to match the right reviewer to the work.

One of the most egregious examples of a mismatched pairing has got to be the New York *Times* decision to ask Ginia Bellafante to review HBO's ten-part series based on George R.R. Martin's blockbuster fantasy novel, *A Game of Thrones*. Ms. Bellafante doesn't directly refer to the intended audience as "half-educated," but she does question whether the show's subject matter could possibly appeal to half the world's population because she doesn't know a single woman who is interested in reading fantasy. (I have the impression that she may never have met any that read science fiction, either.) In her review, Ms. Bellafante shows herself to be very uncomfortable with alien

world building. Echoing Mr. Schickel, she's also unhappy with the show's vocabulary and she asserts her superiority over role-playing gamers in the usual obligatory manner of many popular culture critics. She sums up her feelings toward *A Game of Thrones* this way: "If you are not averse to the Dungeons & Dragons aesthetic, the series might be worth the effort. If you are nearly anyone else, you will hunger for HBO to get back to the business of languages for which we already have a dictionary."

I have no argument with Ms. Bellafante's opinion of the show. It didn't work for her, and that's fair. It's her job to tell us what she thought. I don't subscribe to HBO and haven't watched the series so I haven't formed my own opinions about it. Still, I am in agreement with a commenter who posted on the *Times*' website, "I don't want a rabid fan as a reviewer, but the writer should be somebody who at least likes similar shows, movies, and books (a.k.a. somebody who would actually buy a ticket to the Lord of the Rings)."

Ms. Bellafante was inundated with so many cries of protest that she posted a follow-up essay wherein she described herself as a stand-in for the non-fantasy viewer. As such, she may have provided a useful service for that subset of television watchers, but a lot of those spectators probably self-selected themselves out of *A Game of Thrones*' audience even before they read her review.

Those who could have benefited most from the review—the millions who enjoyed *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, as well as *Avatar*, *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, and perhaps even *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*—would have learned more from an essay by someone who wasn't afraid to occasionally step outside the everyday world of *House* and *The Sopranos*—someone who wasn't discomforted by the language, the world building, and the unusual inhabitants that are often the *sine qua non* of fantasy and science fiction. Undoubtedly, I wouldn't have agreed with everything this imaginary reviewer had to say about the program, but at least I would have known that he or she had attended the screening willingly and not just for the popcorn. ○