

Double-Guessing the Obsequious Selectors

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A selector would be hard pressed to find an unflattering review of Roberto Bolaño's novel, *The Savage Detectives* (1998). In other words, after James Wood of the *NY Times Book Review* calls you a "wonderfully strange Chilean writer" and comments on how your "reputation, in English at least, has been spreading in a quiet contagion" and tops that off with the caveat that, "in the Spanish-speaking world" you are "one of the greatest and most influential modern writers," there is little a cross, unflattering review will accomplish (2007, par.1). Indeed, the public's appetite for fiction can be as fickle as a toddler eating asparagus, or as oracular as the reading mandates handed down by Oprah's Book Club (perched on Mt. Guttenberg, it seems). But, just because the snobs at the *NY Times* fall over themselves praising a book, does that mean that the book should automatically be accessioned?

Does *The Savage Detectives* (1998) veer into indulgent, onanistic waters? Without a doubt! Could the novel's 577 page heft be decreased, even slightly? Of course, but then, that might prove antithetical to the ethos of why people actually read fiction. More importantly, when a book takes you prisoner and the physical act of reading becomes pleasurable, you kind of lose track of an inconsequential thing like...page numbers. If anything, you almost hope your book grows pages at night (bibliomitos?) when no one is looking. Yes, this novel is "wildly enjoyable" and the kind of work that has a "worldly, literal sensibility" (Wood, 2007, par.7). Yes, Bolaño is the wunderkind of contemporary Spanish Fiction (the country, not the language). But, let us venture an objective appraisal?

Richard Eder's review of *The Savage Detective* (1998), also in the *NY Times Book Review*, is critical to a greater degree than Wood's review. For example, Eder calls the format of Bolaño's book an "odd tripartite structure" (Eder, 2007, par. 8). In addition, he discloses that

“Bulking between these two moving parts—one an amiable but distracted ramble; the other a tense, implacable advance—is a 400 page middle section, more than twice as long as the others put together” (Eder, 2007, par.11). The fact that he even mentions the length, in pages, is evidence enough of a critical jab. Likewise, while Will Corral’s review of the novel in *World Literature in Review* is flattering to the point of being puerile, he

does not take into account the “square contingent” (quotes mine) of readers and followers of belles lettres that would be severely offended by the “wisecracking hippies, pseudo-philosophers, drifters, pot dealers, street performers, student radicals, hookers, literary workshop groupies, and other alternative types” (2007, pg. 57) that traipse through this novel. So, whether you abhor or revere Bolaño’s work, he is the heir apparent to Latin American Fiction writers like Borges, Cortázar, Márquez, and Vargas Llosa.

So, what types of libraries should accession *Detectives*? Bolaño’s novel would most be at home in an academic library that services a reputable Comparative Literature, English Literature, or Spanish Literature program. Patrons outside of the grove of Academe will also find this novel a riveting read. Outside of the Academe, public libraries that have popular collections of Latin American fiction (translated into English) and Spanish novels (in Spanish) should have multiple copies of Bolaño’s novel. The English translation of *Detectives* by Natasha Wimmer was a novel in vogue when it came out initially; its stature as an underground staple has only increased with time and with the passing of Bolaño in 2003.

Likewise, Suketu Mehta’s *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found* (2004) seems to be comprised of Teflon; negative, subjective appraisals seem unlikely to penetrate the critical veneer of Mehta’s book. The reason is simple: Mehta’s *Maximum City* was a “finalist for the

2005 Pulitzer Prize, the Lettre Ulysses Prize, the BBC4 Samuel Johnson Prize, and the Guardian First Book Award” (2007, Suketu, par. 1). And, it doesn’t hurt that Mehta’s book is a composite of several interesting non-fiction subgenre, “Part history, part travelogue, part memoir” (Kapur, 2004, par.4). In addition, Mehta’s style is reminiscent of Dickens; in other words, *City* is full of characters that waltz through the narrative as if it were a Crystal Palace.

He befriends underworld terrorists and visits (stretching the limits of intimacy) with beautiful dancing girls. A Hindu fundamentalist speaks to him nonchalantly of burning Muslims during the religious riots that shook Bombay in the early 1990’s. A policeman famous for breaking the resistance of suspected terrorists describes some of his horrifying techniques. (Kapur, 2004, par.5)

Let me assure you, though, Mehta’s book has its problems. For one thing, Mehta’s work is highly subjective, despite the fact that it is a work of non-fiction. In other words, as he reconstructs cataclysmic events in Bombay’s history (like the 1993 massacre of Muslims by Hindu Shiv Sena partisans), he favors interviewing the actors and agents that will prove the most interesting characters, despite the atrocities they might have committed. Or as Adam Hochschild writes in Harper’s, “most writers would have spoken only to the victims or their families. Mehta, by contrast, goes straight for the killers” (2005, par.5). Mehta is particular with whom he chooses to speak with, or have speak in his book, and that is a glaring deficiency: in a supposed objective, non-fiction book that seems like a very subjective choice.

Anosh Irani's review of *Maximum City* in *The Globe and Mail* calls Mehta's book, an "autopsy of a city that is morally dead" (2004, par. 2), a "gem" (Irani, 2004, par. 8), and "a brilliant examination" (Irani, 2004, par. 2). In fact, all the reviewers allude to the noirish nature of Mehta's book. Akash Kapur subtitles his review in the *N.Y. Times Book Review*, Bombay Confidential(alluding to crime novels, and perhaps the movie *L.A. Confidential*) and Adam

Hochschild writing in *Harper's* titles his review, UNDERWORLD, all in caps. A great part of Mehta's book centers on his dealings with underworld elements, like power-mad politicians (Shiv Sena's Bal Thackeray), movie stars (Sanjay Dutt), a bar dancer (Monalisa), gangsters, and Bombay's top cop on anti-terrorism (Ajay). In addition, Mehta's descriptions are precise literary renditions. Akash Kapur likens Mehta's writing to "Dickens's London" (Kapur, 2004, par. 3) while Adam Hoschild writes that "Mehta's eye on Bombay remind me of no one's so much as Balzac's on Paris" (Hochschild, 2005, par. 2).

While none of the reviewers comment on what type of libraries should carry Mehta's book, the book covers subjects that lie under the artifice that went into writing a book about Bombay's transition into Mumbai. For example, Mehta is a screenplay writer with credits for *Mission Kashmir* (2000) and a Merchant Ivory movie starring Tina Turner called *The Goddess* (2007, Suketu, par. 2); and, part of Mehta's book chronicles his dealings with the Bollywood system as a writer and as a researcher. Therefore, it would be an easy leap to make the argument that Mehta's book would be just at home in an academic library as a special media library used by film producers and archivists, especially those working with Bollywood and East Asian film making. In addition, Mehta's book could just as easily be accessioned into a literature collection with a Victorian bent or specializing on Writers and the Cities they inhabit.

In terms of morality, objectionable characters, and corrupting influences, the most innocuous of the three books discussed in this essay is Steven Johnson's *Everything Bad is Good for You* (2005). Yet, the idea at its core, that playing video games and watching the "boob tube" is actually making us smarter, might seem seedier to most parents. Let me clarify: video games and the "boob tube" are making us smarter in the sense that playing video games requires you

use the scientific method to navigate a sequence of levels; they are making us smarter in the sense that Johnson compares the plots and narrative trajectories of several popular 70's shows, like *The Love Boat*, *Starsky and Hutch*, and *Fantasy Island*, to the plot lines of current television shows like *The Sopranos*, and landmark shows from the 80's like *Hill Street Blues*. What he finds is that despite the glaze-over look that seems to be embossed on the faces of gamers and cathode-ray zombies, there is actually some thinking going on in their' heads. Johnson explains that gaming actually requires a keen, dynamic mind willing to explore, investigate, and "read" physical cues embedded in a virtual realm; he makes it seem that playing video games are calisthenics for the mind.

According to the *Library Journal* review done on *Everything...*, Johnson is a "Discovery magazine columnist" that has penned a "fascinating" book whose premise is simple: "contemporary culture is intellectually demanding, honing complex mental skills and encouraging well-reasoned decisions on the basis of available information" (Wood, 2005, pg.108). *Library Journal* "Highly" recommends Johnson's book for "both public and academic libraries", but not until Suzanne Wood, the reviewer, has mentioned that Johnson draws on "research in neuroscience, literary theory, and economics" to make his arguments, substantiating *Library Journal's* zealous appraisal. The *Journal* might have us believe that Johnson has authored a tome of deliberate genius, but Walter Kirn of the *N.Y. Times Book Review*, sees gratuitous holes in many of Johnson's arguments.

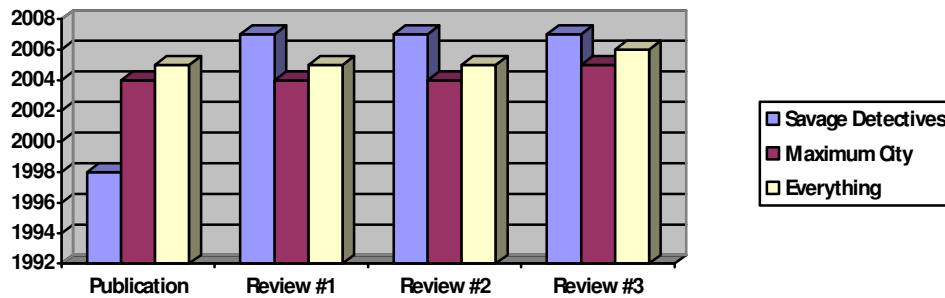
Kirn commences by attacking Johnson's credentials as a scientist, implying that he really only has the credentials of a magazine correspondent, not a bona fide scientist. Kirn then downgrades Johnson's acumen to that of a junior research intern by writing, "Johnson's argument

isn't strictly scientific, relying on hypotheses and tests, but more observational and impressionistic" (Kirn, 2005, par. 3). Earlier in the review, though, Kirn is careful to call Johnson's *Everything...* an "elegant polemic" and calls Johnson, himself, a "cross-disciplinary thinker who has written about neuroscience, media studies and computer technology" (Kirn, 2005, par. 2). But the blow below the belt comes when Kirn castigates Johnson by correcting him like a ruffled marm with the admonition that "Stimulation is not a virtue all by itself" It all reeks of feigned critical duress because in the end Kirn makes Johnson's review about teaching an old dog, like Kirn, new tricks; Kirn states it plainly, "The old dogs won't be able to rest as easily, though, once they've read *Everything Bad Is Good For You*"

Tim Madigan's review of *Everything...* in the *Journal of Popular Culture* is more evenhanded. Madigan understands that Johnson's book is not a textbook, but that it makes for riveting Reference reading. Madigan and Kirin both seem to question Johnson's research methods and particular inferences that Johnson makes, but it is Woods and Madigan that mention Johnson's current credentials (Wood credits his *Discovery* credentials while Madigan mentions the *Wired* quasi-column). Madigan has specific problems with Johnson's contention that "IQ scores have been increasing steadily over the past few decades, and that this could be correlated to changes in our 'mental diets'"(Madigan, 2006, par. 2), but he can still manage to suggest that Johnson's book could be put to great use in a Popular Culture Collection, "by drawing connections with the latest findings in cognitive development and brain research, Johnson has opened up a new venue for advocates of popular culture to explore" (Madigan, 2006).

In terms of timeliness, all three books were reviewed not too long after first being published. For example, *Maximum City* was published in 2004, and two of its reviews were

published as well in 2004, with the last one coming in 2005. The same can be said for *Everything*...which was published in 2005 and has two reviews attributed to 2005; in 2006, the *Journal of Popular Culture* published its review of *Everything*, probably as a result of it not being a trade publication like the *N.Y. Times Book Review* or *Library Journal*. The book that had the largest lag time between publication and review was Bolaño's *Detectives*. While the novel was initially published in 1998, it wasn't eagerly reviewed by the American press until at least 2004; however, this is probably as a result of the book having to be translated into English, as it was first published in Spain.



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