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Barbara Couture, Thomas Kent

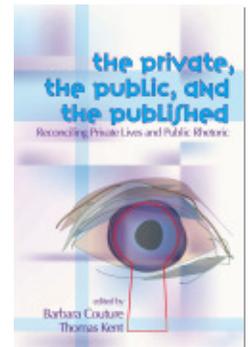
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IDENTITY AND THE INTERNET

*The Telling Case of Amazon.com's
Top Fifty Reviewers***Douglas Hesse**

Shortly after the publication of his memoir *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, Dave Eggers announced a contest whose rules were simple: 1) post a review of the book on the Amazon.com Web site that 2) awards the book five stars (the top rating) and 3) bears no resemblance to the book itself (“McSweeney’s”). Within a week the Amazon site for *A Heartbreaking Work* featured several cleverly wrought evaluations of how the book treated strategies for hanging sheetrock, the Netherlands/Bhutan trade imbalance, or the relative merits of crotchet versus spot welding, all of them headed with five stars. Clearly not appreciating the spirit of the contest, the Amazon.com Webmasters took down the whole lot shortly thereafter, and the 400-some reviews that accumulated by the fall of 2001 had little of the whimsy and decidedly fewer top ratings.

In devising the contest, Eggers parodied several conventions: the socially acceptable ways for authors to promote their own books, the genre of book review, the reviewer’s stance and function, book-rating systems, the Amazon.com reviewing/marketing nexus, and the status of Web communication itself. Like all good parodies, this one unveils interesting questions about its subject, and I pursue a few of them in this chapter. The published review has historically been reserved for scholars or otherwise sanctioned (and usually remunerated) reviewers. What constitutes the reviewing impulse and, by direct extension, the impulse to write, especially when neither money nor career is at stake? If it’s partly an impulse for self-expression/creation in a public forum, how is identity manifested in the reviewing space? What role does the medium itself play? And how does this clarify broader questions of “the personal” in writing whose direct subject is not the experience of the writers themselves?

Before considering those questions, let me review some facts. As most readers will know, Amazon.com invites site visitors to review products sold there, not only books, videos, and music but also items ranging from scanners to chain saws. Following a description of the product and, regularly, an "Editorial Review" written by Amazon.com or taken from publications or the publishers/manufacturers themselves, reader reviews appear. Each begins with a rating from one star to five, provides a bit of information about the reviewer (with a link to more information), and then offers comments ranging from a short blurb to several hundred words. Readers are prompted to "Write an online review" via a link that compels them formally to log in to Amazon.com's site; one does not review without providing credit card information, among other things.

But having the reviews written, posted, and entered into calculations (one learns the average reviewer rating for each product) is scarcely the end of it, for Amazon.com compiles statistics for each reviewer and, in fact, ranks them. For several months in 2001, the top reviewer was Harriet Klausner, a retired acquisitions librarian from Pennsylvania, married, with a twenty-one-year-old son. Ms. Klausner, who has four cats and two dogs (a cairn and a pom), had written 2,768 reviews for Amazon.com by Thanksgiving. That was 1,011 more than the number two reviewer, Donald Wayne Mitchell, an "organizational process improvement and strategy consultant" who is, among other things, heading a "noncommercial project to make it possible for everyone in the world to make progress at 20 times the normal rate." We know these things about Ms. Klausner and Mr. Mitchell because they (like thousands of other reviewers) tell us, in personal profiles that are linked through their reviews or, more conveniently, through a "Top Reviewers" page that Amazon.com maintains. Given their transitory nature, Web pages are notoriously problematic citations. The Amazon.com "Top Reviewers" pages are triply so. By definition, they change. A reviewer with a certain rating one month may have a different one the next. Further, reviewers are permitted to modify at any time the information they provide through the personal profiles. Finally, new reviews for individual products continually are written, and at least occasionally, Amazon expunges submissions. In writing this chapter, I selected several reviewers and reviews for analysis in early October of 2001. On November 17, 2001, I revisited those pages on the Amazon.com Web site

and printed a few hundred screens' worth, including at least three pages from each of the reviewers mentioned in the chapter. (Researchers or other readers who need to consult these pages and who find that they have changed on the Web may contact me for copies of archived materials. For more information on the reviewing process, see "Reviewers FAQ." <<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/subst/community/reviewers-faq.html>>.) In addition to including a personal statement, the reviewer's "About Me" space reprints several of his or her reviews, notes the "featured review categories" in which they work (Ms. Klausner reviews in over fifty categories), and lists the reviewer's "favorite people," which in this case rather means "virtual favorites": other Amazon.com reviewers. More on them later.

My point is that Amazon.com has developed an elaborate technology for keeping track of thousands of writers and hundreds of thousands of reviews, and it is worth considering what this technology represents, both for the company and for at least some writers who are clearly motivated to compete in the system. A badge icon appears alongside each piece by the Top Reviewers, indicating their status as in the Top 1,000, Top 500, Top 100, Top 50, Top 10, or #1. Reviewers' motivations are undoubtedly diverse, from writing as a hobby, to writing as an ego exercise, to writing as a way to influence, however subtly, American material and intellectual culture. Amazon.com's motivations for including reviews are undoubtedly diverse, too, from providing helpful advice, to creating an additional marketing mechanism (and also a data source for market research), to keeping people longer on the Web site, to highlighting the "Internetness" of online shopping by importing features reminiscent of chat rooms and Listservs. But just as the free territories of the Web promised in the early 1990s have been colonized, claimed, and regulated, so has Amazon.com's review space. Whatever other incentives exist for rating reviews, the practice creates a corporate ethos of being helpful and adding value, supplementing the words themselves with one measure of the reputations of their authors. The whole system of blurbs and ratings mimics, after a fashion, the academic publishing system.

The ratings are generated through both quantity and quality measures. Site browsers vote whether a published review was helpful, and the more helpful votes, the higher the reviewer rating. At work, then, is a crude form of peer review. But it is a numbers game, too. Obviously, the more items that one reviews, the more readers are likely to see and be

TABLE 1. AMAZON.COM REVIEWERS CONSIDERED FOR THIS ESSAY

<i>Rank</i>	<i>Reviewer Name</i>	<i>Number of Reviews</i>	<i>Information from personal profile.</i>
1	Harriet Klausner	2780	Former acquisitions librarian and current pet owner.
2	Donald Wayne Mitchell	1757	Organizational consultant and business book author.
3	Frank Behrens	476	Retired junior high teacher.
4	Michael Woznicki	542	Technical instructor and reviewer of electronics.
5	Lawrance M. Bernabo	2008	"Irony is the master trope of the universe." (His entire submitted personal information.)
6	Angel Lee	360	Recently started a rubber stamp company in Cleveland.
7	Barron Laycock (Labradorman)	481	Admires Francis McNerney (see #10) and disdains other reviewers' numbers games.
8	Robert Morris	477	Business consultant who creates content for many websites.
9	Rebecca@Seasoned with Love.com	792	Personality type is INFJ; working on a cook book.
10	Francis J. McNerney	515	Has stopped posting; encourages Laycock (see #7) to keep writing.
11	Rebecca	584	Sixteen years old and likes fantasy, science fiction, and horror.
12	Petersmaclean	486	Holds diplomas in business management, and wishes all could live in harmony, free of abuse.

able to vote on them. By the same token, if one reviews relatively fewer popular items, the latest Harry Potter book, for example, one will be exposed to a broader readership than if one reviews relatively more but less popular items, such as the latest Oxford University Press book. (However, just to complicate this further, a Harry Potter review is easily lost among hundreds and may go unread and unvoted—unless, of course, it is flagged by a top reviewer badge that makes it stand out.)

This complex reviewing apparatus suggests a number of interesting analyses. Selecting a corpus for closer study, I chose, first, the top twelve reviewers on Amazon.com's list, next the ten reviewers from the top fifty who wrote the fewest reviews, and finally the remaining five reviewers who wrote the most but are not among the top ten. I selected people

Fewest reviews in Top 50

26	Turgay Bugdacigil	133	Turkish-based human resources manager. Reviews only five star business books.
27	Doug Vaughn	234	I program computers for profit because they afford no ambiguity. I read books for pleasure because they do.
32	Marc Ruby	219	A pleasantly rounded, somewhat middle-aged member of the male subset.
36	maniacmedia	182	Actor and graphic artist.
37	Alex Leslie	221	Reviews tools and books. Graduate of Peekskill High. Former pilot.
38	Toolpig	180	Reviews tools and hardware. Carpenter and father of two.
40	Laura Haggarty	229	Likes most things often labeled new age.
43	Nick Gonnella	231	Account manager in the publishing industry.
43	Friendly Spirit	163	Quaker, Mother, Booklover.
45	G. Merritt	205	Provides no personal information.

Others with > 800 reviews

28	Jason	849	Grew up listening to 70's and 80's rock and still likes it best.
31	Thomas Magnum	1094	Provides no personal information.
39	Maximillian Muhammad	3187	Lists several hundred favorite musicians.
47	Brian D. Rubendall	892	Average Joe type who loves any book that tells a great story.
50	Bernard Chandler	949	Helps by putting ISBN numbers in his reviews.

who wrote the fewest reviews because they necessarily had a high percentage of their works deemed “helpful.” I selected those who wrote the most reviews because a comparatively low percentage of their writings were judged worthy or they were so obscure as to go unread. Table 1 presents an overview of the group.

HOW REVIEWERS TALK ABOUT THEMSELVES

Amazon.com's "About Me" space allows reviewers to introduce themselves directly to readers. One might expect autobiographical information, but practices in the list range from reviewers who provide no information at all, to those who have only disembodied slogans ("Irony is the master trope of the universe," from #5 Bernabo), to those who present what amounts to a résumé (sometimes even in the third person, as with #26 Bugdacigil), to those who share personal details at levels beyond Christmas letters (#38 Toolpig, whose daughter Missy loves butterflies).

There are three basic topics in the personal profiles: occupation, personal life, and reviewing itself. Some writers cover all, others only one. Reviewers appear most likely to dwell on their work when it has some connection to the kind of reviewing they do. Mitchell (#2), Morris (#8), and Bugdacigil (#26), for example, write extensively about business-related books, and they themselves work as managers and consultants. For them and others (such as Lee, #6), reviewing constitutes nearly a form of marketing, of generating whatever name recognition accrues to this kind of visibility on Amazon.com. When reviewers choose to include information about their occupations—and about half of this group did—they tend to put it first, which is hardly surprising given Americans' general tendencies to introduce themselves in casual conversations by asking or telling "what they do," meaning how they earn a living.

Most reviewers include some discussion of reviewing itself, and this topic subdivides into three areas. First is "why I review," and the customary answer is to help others. Some confess reviewing because they enjoy writing, but apparently this reason comes across as egocentric; it is more palatable to avow liking books or reading, the implication being that you can best serve by writing about them. To claim an interest in writing *per se* counters the site's ostensible service to reading. The second subtopic of reviewing deals with "how I review." Several writers talk about the kinds of products they treat. A few explain either why their ratings are consistently high or low (Vaughn #27, for example, says he usually doesn't finish and therefore review books that are bad), and fewer still describe their processes (as in Chandler's [#50] explaining that he includes the ISBN numbers in his reviews so people can find the books more easily). The last subtopic is a kind of metadiscourse on reviewing itself, often with references to Amazon.com and to reviewing practices there, especially ones deemed suspect.

The most interesting example of this last is an exchange between Laycock (#7) and McInerney (#10). Laycock writes, "It is with great sadness that I read about Francis' [McInerney] decision to no longer post reviews" and cites his own dismay that quality plays no role in reviewer ratings and his contempt for "one paragraph throwaway reviews of obscure DVD and VHS releases" that can thrust a reviewer into the top ten. McInerney responds: "Barron, I have taken this long to reply as your thoughts caught me unprepared. Your words mean a great deal, and I thank you." He then goes on to comment on the proliferation of reviews. Beyond the "there-goes-the-neighborhood" nostalgia evocative of, say, Stanley Fish fretting about the demise of *PMLA*, and beyond the direct evidence that at least some Top Reviewers keenly follow their status, what is striking here is the use of the "Personal Profile" space for direct exchanges; after all, this is not a Listserv or a chat room.

While most reviewers do not directly converse with each other, many do intimately address their readers. Rebecca@seasonedwithlove.com (nickname: "cookingrl," #9) starts her profile with an epigram, the first eight lines of Shakespeare's Sonnet 116 ("Let me not to the marriage of true minds/Admit impediments"), which she attributes to *Brush Up Your Shakespeare*. She tells us that she lives in Washington, is thinking about adopting a kitten, loves castles and towers, has published two recipes, and has an INFJ personality type. This mode enters her reviews, too. In comments on J. Budziszewski's *The Revenge of Conscience* (a review that five of six people found helpful), she describes the author as "someone who became almost an angel to me."

Another Rebecca (nickname: "rebby," #11) is less effusive, both in her profile and her nearly six hundred entries. Sixteen years old and homeschooled, she lists among her favorite series *Dear America* and *Star Wars: The New Jedi Order*, and her reviews scatter through fantasy, horror, science fiction, and historical fiction. Her persona is considerably more guarded than Rebecca@seasonedwithlove.com's, or to put it another way, more closely matching traditional conventions of the review, down to the reviewer's bio.

Even more guarded, though at the opposite end of the self-disclosure spectrum, is Marc Ruby (nickname: marcruby, #32). If, in Walker Gibson's taxonomy, Rebecca is a "tough" speaker and Rebecca@seasonedwithlove.com a "sweet" one, then Ruby is a "stuffy" one. His profile begins: "I am a pleasantly rounded, somewhat middle-aged member

of the male subset of the human species. Normally even tempered, I am subject to pique when I find someone who doesn't like my reviews (or who doesn't appreciate how nice it is to have someone around who is right all the time)." His reviews have a similarly überpolished style that closely matches published conventions. (Consider: "Jim Butcher has clearly created one of the strangest wizards in detective fiction. Actually he is a wizard/gumshoe with the kind of do-gooder streak that is a cinch to cause trouble.") In both style and content, these three reviewers suggest the X and Y coordinates of self-presentation on the "About Me" pages: the amount of personal information disclosed and the degree of intimacy or formality with readers.

REVIEWING AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY

The diversity of the reviewers' "About Me" statements leaves unanswered the question "why do they write?" As I noted, several foreground business interests to the point of writing as (self) marketing. These reviewers are relatively few, as are those who openly come out for making the world a better place. More frequent are the writers who modestly want to guide other customers. My own first experience with the Amazon.com reviews came as I researched buying the entire run of *National Geographic* on thirty-one CDs, only to be eloquently convinced by reviewers that poor technical quality made it a bad investment. Finally, however, marketing, altruism, or direct advice accounts for only part of the drive to review. Rather, and this is especially true for the Top Fifty Reviewers, there is the motive for self-expression or creation.

In one of the best concise definitions of the personal essay, Edward Hoagland defined the genre as existing on a line between "what I think and what I am" (46). The *identity* pole is typically figured by autobiographical elements in the essay. To the extent that the "About Me" sections or the reviews themselves contain such elements, they make explicit this essayistic impulse. A traditional way to account rhetorically for self-disclosure is to consider it as an ethos-constructing strategy. A traditional theoretical account would label it the situating of knowledge, the making present of the writer's subjectivity and situation in order to contextualize her or his interpretation. No doubt both are part of these reviews. But as Robert Connors noted, epideictic rhetoric (and surely the review has as its ostensible impulse praise or blame) is a rhetoric of display, finally a display of the self (30). Consider Friendly Spirit's

admission that “I loved Kathleen [a character in Nuala O’Faolain’s novel *My Dream of You*] because she is so much like me—a cynical romantic (can there be such a thing), ever hopeful and yet practical, imperfect, packed with mistakes and flaws, some painfully obvious to others, some painful to herself, and yet ultimately lovably human.” Such expressions are common across the reviews and across the personal statements, but they are hardly universal.

Even when writers don’t narrate their experiences, the very nature of these reviews invites self-fashioning. Understanding this claim involves understanding the genre and discursive nature of these reviews in relation to other Internet textual practices, existing somewhere between a newsgroup or Listserv posting and a Web page. The Amazon review, or rather the complex of reviews by a single author, has a closer affinity to the Web page, especially as the writer produces more reviews and achieves a top ranking.

Various theorists have explored ways that Web pages serve substantially to construct and assert identity. As Nina Wakeford notes, the subject of a personal home page is the author him- or herself, with the central organizing question being “Who am I?” (34). Charles Cheung explains that while many home pages answer this question “directly” by including specific autobiographical information, others do so indirectly through the nature of the information and links included. Chances are fairly slim that any personal home page gets found on the Web through general Web searches (Cheung 47–48). Yet this may not be a barrier. As Jennifer Petersen explains: “Audience plays an integral, and interesting, role in these self-representations. Whether or not the sites have many (or any) readers, the very public nature of the representation presupposes an audience; the self-representations are geared toward the (envisioned) audience” (161).

In the strictest sense, Amazon.com reviews do not constitute home pages for the reviewer. The reviews, after all, are assimilated into the Borglike site that Amazon.com manages, reviewers creating neither the physical appearance nor linkages of their contributions. Yet to a large degree, they do individually and collectively control content, and through the rating competition, they even control an aspect of the design. Each posted and read review potentially juggles the rating order, with implications especially for what shows up on the Top Reviewer’s opening page. Further, since every posted review has a link to “About

Me,” “About Me” takes on characteristics of a home page, space that can be used toward various ends, as my quick review above indicated. Finally, once readers are on the “About Me” page, they can link to other reviews that the writer has published, so that each new review adds another incremental element to the reviewer’s constructed identity, all organized by “About Me”—and by Amazon.com’s apparatus.

I suggest this is quite a new way to construct identity, one dependent on the intersection of several genres and discursive practices: the review itself but also Web pages, newsgroups, journals, and Listservs. For traditional reviews, a book’s being published or a product released creates the epideictic occasion for writing. Usually limited by space (though the reviewer’s fame buys extra acreage), writers figure themselves primarily through relating the book under discussion to other books, the references outlining their verbal identities. In print publications, the relatively scarce spaces for people to write to strangers are generally assigned. In Amazon.com’s space, reviews are elected, and there are no external space limitations that I can discern, though surely if one tried to upload, say, a novel into the review space, the site’s Webmasters would sanction it as they did the Eggers reviews.

Unlike the traditional review, and borrowing a genre feature from Web pages, Amazon.com reviews can be linked through the writer’s “About Me” page, with some of them further including a URL to other author pages (though Amazon.com doesn’t make these links active). There are additional Weblike features, most notably the “Friends and Favorites” area. Reviewers can create a list of “Favorite People,” “other Amazon.com shoppers, friends, and favorite reviewers that you like and trust.” Whenever someone you designate a “favorite” writes a review, Amazon.com sends it to you. A step beyond “Favorite People” are “Amazon Friends” (formerly designated as “Trusted Friends”), people who “have permission to see a private view of your About You area,” including not only personal information about the reviewer but also items from his or her “Shared Purchases Page.” This last is a list that you choose to share of the items you have bought from Amazon.com. Fascinating as it would certainly be to analyze the appeals and marketing strategies of these features, there is no space in this chapter. I will simply note the five strands of identity creation available to reviewers: what you say about yourself, what you read, what you say about your reading, who you like, and what you buy.

None of this information really pertains to the very occasional Amazon.com reviewer, but all these elements come into play for the Top Fifty Reviewers. Traditional personal Web pages are hit-and-miss affairs in terms of whether anyone ever reads them. The structured marketing space of Amazon.com paradoxically offers a pretext for being discovered that traditional pages do not, and the more one insinuates oneself into that space, the better one's chance of being found. If *hits* mark the degree to which one is *present* in virtual space (much as citation indexes mark one's influence within some academic disciplines), then more is better—and more hits mean more links to “About Me.” The drive to (re)produce oneself textually in the world (and there is not room here to explore how that drive is both socially constructed and biologically impelled) is an end to itself, and Amazon.com provides one means to it. That means differs from other self-fashioning Internet genres such as the online diary or blog. A blog, shortened from Web log, is “a web page made up of usually short, frequently updated posts that are arranged chronologically—like a what's new page or a journal, [whose] content and purposes . . . varies greatly—from links and commentary about other web sites, to news about a company/person/idea, to diaries, photos, poetry, mini-essays, project updates, even fiction” (Blogger). (For an interesting example, see the diary diligently kept at <http://www.slithytovet.net>.) Unlike the single-author spaces of diaries and blogs, the Amazon.com site depends on congeries of writers interacting, producing not only reviews but ratings and rankings.

Christine Hine explains how Internet users are engaged in configuring one another, but the idea of “user” is complicated here beyond the conventional subject position of information consumer. Most business advice on Internet marketing focuses on knowledge as exchanged between suppliers and consumers. Of seven strategies summarized by Davenport and Jarvenpaa, only one explains how to “design electronic communities for knowledge exchange” (151), although a seller risks much through this strategy, including losing control of the message space, as in the case of the spurious Eggers reviews. In the face of post-modernity's proliferation of information sources and abjuring of final authority, James M. Slevin observes:

[Internet readers and writers] actively seek to forge commitment and mutuality with others in an attempt to restrict the experiences they have to sample

in order to develop a coherent self-identity. . . . Individuals are thus routinely engaged in accessing information which often stems from distant sources, and in making information available to distant others in an attempt to unify and make sense of their own involvement and the involvement of others. (25)

While grounded in commitment and mutuality, Amazon.com's "Top Reviewers" site multiplies rather than restricts writer experiences. "Coherent self-identity" comes substantially through the sheer number of writings produced, sometimes to such extreme ends as #39 Maximillian Muhammad's 3,187 reviews and his "About Me" statement seeming to list every musician he could possibly name. It is telling that most Top Reviewers mark coherence through an "About Me" page that serves as the nexus (as cogito? as strategic persona? as reptilian brain core?) for their scattered reviews. It is perhaps more telling that some reviewers decline any personal statement—though Amazon.com does it for them by reporting their basic data (number of reviews and ratings, review categories, and so forth).

BEYOND AMAZON.COM: SCHOLARSHIP AS OCCASION FOR THE PERSONAL

An early commonplace, since challenged in theory and practice, was that the Internet would provide open spaces for radically democratic presentations of information and ideas. It is telling that developers chose *browser* to name the software for negotiating the Web, for implied in the name is a relatively undirected mode of use. Early advice for developing Web pages emphasized providing readers links through which they could seamlessly follow associations to unexpected places. However, Web use has evolved much differently, toward more purposive *searching*, away from more serendipitous browsing.

The transition has had subtle implications for how writers imagine and place themselves on the Web. Browsing readers may happen across your home page, vivifying a virtual you. Searching readers likely will not. Writers therefore have to find or create occasions that will attract readers. Topics or products are such occasions. In creating the reader reviews superstructure, Amazon.com almost certainly didn't have the main goal of offering a pretext for writers to construct and extend textual selves, nor would I assert that reviewers self-consciously intend to do so. But this Web site enables just that.

In doing so, it functions in ways similar to academic journals. To varying degrees, both reviewers and academicians share the goal of interpreting

and evaluating texts with the aim of influencing others. But the advancement of knowledge is hardly the only or even most important motive. With direct consequences for merit, tenure, and promotion, professors have to establish textual selves within the discourses of their disciplines. Obviously, except for those seeking marketing angles, Amazon.com reviewers don't have this imperative. Still, the dynamic is instructively similar, as writers in both situations need official spaces to which readers turn.

But there is more, and it has to do with manifestations of the personal in the academic. Three common, entwined rationales for autobiographical elements in academic discourse are rhetorical, epistemological, and political. Writers include personal materials for reasons of ethos and pathos or for Burkean identification. Or writers do so to mark the contingencies of knowledge: who I am filters what I perceive and how I understand it. Or by dramatizing experiences that represent or evoke certain subject positions, writers call attention to groups that must be taken into account. All three strategies are no doubt true. But as a list they are incomplete.

We ought not overlook the plainer desire to put ourselves textually into the world, our interpretations and ideas, yes, but also some fuller identity. Those autobiographical elements collectively recognized as "the personal in the scholarly" are metonymic of this broader desire. Just as reviewing gives Amazon.com writers a pretext to write themselves where personally unknown readers might read, so does academic publishing. Yes, to advance knowledge and a career. But also to establish a self. Scholarship's "About Me" equivalent has traditionally been the author's bio, its personal home page the curriculum vitae. Because print lacks hyperlinks, "About Me" has been stealthily making its way into printed texts themselves. In standing the conventional order on its head (the scholarly serving the personal rather than vice versa, personal identity being the ends rather than the means), I confess exaggerating for effect. But only to a certain extent, perhaps one similar to Richard Miller's assertion that ours is now "a world where all writing—from the aching personal confession to the finely tuned literary exercise to the resolutely indifferent bureaucratic memo—competes on a level playing field for our attention." He concludes: "The world is now awash in writing that no one reads" (49).

In such writing times, when the circle of readers we know personally is too small to accommodate the selves some of us would put forth, we

look for bigger circles. As decades of vanity press books and, more recently, Web pages make clear, individuals widen those spheres themselves, especially when texts proliferate, and bookmarking, not browsing, becomes the preferred user mode. Finally, it is the space that editors, publishers, and even retailers control that is our best hope for readers. But it isn't enough to fill this space with mere information. In his provocative analysis of life-writing's role in an age of "data fatigue or data nausea" (146), especially as caused by the Internet, Charles Baxter muses that "the memoir is memory's revenge upon info-glut" (151). To write oneself into the information—or against it—is an act of self-constitution not only for the writer but also the reader. The burgeoning enrollment in MFA writing programs, especially the thirty-five new ones in creative nonfiction that have sprung up in the past half dozen years, is but one sign of a cultural push to expression through writing. Another, more mundane, is the thousands of Amazon.com reviewers and a vast realm of discourse—perhaps less about books than about me.