



Editorial ? July 2010

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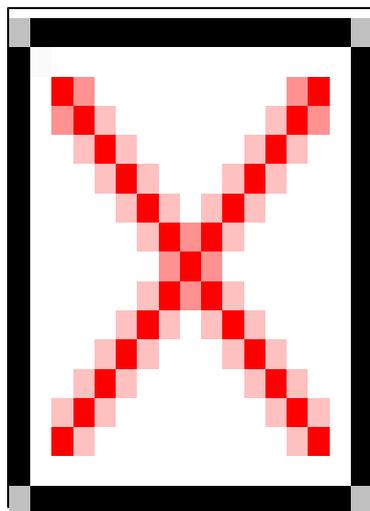
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Article Category:

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News and comment from the Editor.



How independent are online book reviews? The bizarre case of historian Orlando Figes who at first denied (with threats of legal action) and then admitted posting anonymous reviews on Amazon praising his own work and rubbishing books by fellow historians has demonstrated how easily impartiality can be undermined.

Figes described his own book **The Whisperers** as 'a rich and deeply moving history, which leaves the reader awed, humbled, yet uplifted?' while describing rival historian Rachel Polonsky's **Molotov's Magic Lantern** as 'the sort of book that makes you wonder why it was ever published?' Her writing is so dense and pretentious, itself so tangled in literary allusions, that it is hard to follow or enjoy.? Robert Service's **Comrades** got similar treatment: 'an awful book. It is very poorly written and dull to read? it has no insights to make it worth the bother of ploughing through its dreadful prose.'

While it is hardly news that some writers write and post their own 'reviews' on Amazon (and publicists would hardly be worth their salt if they didn't also seize the opportunity to post the occasional glowing testimonial to the work of the authors they are promoting), it is probable that the book buying public reads these effusions with a sceptical eye. Orlando Figes scandalised not just because he puffed his own oeuvre (surely the over-egging gave that game away?) but because he attacked the works of fellow historians so savagely and then threatened legal action when smoked out.

The salient point here is the issue of accountability whether in print or online reviews. It is not a new issue ? book reviews, including reviews of children's books, were anonymous in the **Times Literary Supplement** until 1974 when bylines were introduced. It had to be taken on trust that the Editor would avoid, for example, allocating a title to a known rival of the author thereby inviting the kind of territorial malice in evidence in the Figes debacle.

Readers of literary journals, whether print or online (and you are reading the first online only edition of **Books for Keeps**), want to be able to take it for granted not only that a system of commissioning, editing and publishing reviews is in place but that ? while no system can be perfect ? it has been devised and is being implemented in the interests of review

coverage that is both informed and impartial. **Books for Keeps** has always valued its editorial independence and plans to maintain it in its new online only guise.

BfK Basics

One of the opportunities afforded by an online edition of **Books for Keeps** is the opportunity to broaden the range of the articles we publish to cater for parents as well as for professionals involved with children and their books. Our new series, **BfK Basics**, aims to introduce parents and carers in an informative and practical way to the delights of sharing books with very young children. In the first article in the series, Children's Librarian Jake Hope explains what libraries have to offer the very young. In our next issue Liz Attenborough who manages 'Talk to Your Baby' at the National Literacy Trust, explains how and why sharing books can play a crucial role in helping children learn to communicate.

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