

## Title:

How To Survive A Good Review

## Word Count:

859

## Summary:

When the first reviews for my most recent novel (Great Sky Woman, Random House 2006) started coming in, my emotions went through the usual roller coaster. The first, from Publisher's Weekly, was 90% positive, but mentioned that, in their opinion, it was slow in spots. My stomach sank. Slow? In spots? Oh my God—all is lost!

The second review came in two weeks later. This one, from "Booklist," used words like "magnificent" and "engaging" and "adventure on a grand scale."

...

## Keywords:

writing, novel, advice, creativity

## Article Body:

When the first reviews for my most recent novel (Great Sky Woman, Random House 2006) started coming in, my emotions went through the usual roller coaster. The first, from Publisher's Weekly, was 90% positive, but mentioned that, in their opinion, it was slow in spots. My stomach sank. Slow? In spots? Oh my God—all is lost!

The second review came in two weeks later. This one, from "Booklist," used words like "magnificent" and "engaging" and "adventure on a grand scale."

I sighed. Boy, oh boy, did I need to hear that. Why? Because I am an insecure artist. Because I spend, on average, two years researching and one year writing my novels. Because I care so very much about each and every one of my literary children. Because I pour my life into every project I work on, break my head open, remove the protective walls from around my heart. I have to, because that is the only way to access my talent. I CAN'T do less than my very best—that would immediately devolve to hack work, and that I cannot do.

Some say to ignore reviews, that they are only the opinions of people who, often, are jealous of work they themselves could not create. I choose not to

embrace that opinion. To me, reviews are the opinions of informed, professional readers. Such people are not necessarily any better informed than the average reader, but what they have to say is certainly worthy of attention.

To be absolutely frank, there have been times I curled up and cried because a reviewer I respected disliked my work. And other times when handsprings across the living room were the order of the day. Such violent ups and downs can hardly be good for your blood pressure (let alone the household pets) but for an artist who cares, really cares about reaching out to the world, about creating a dialogue with readers present and unborn, there seems little choice.

An artist needs feedback. We must know whether what we do communicates the message intended. That doesn't mean all glory and complement. Harsh but honest criticism can help an artist understand what the public sees when they read the work, watch the film, view the dance. To the degree that such work is intended to make a statement, to communicate a state of emotion or elusive concept, we MUST know how the public reacts.

But there are times when the good review is more damaging than the bad one. It often seems that a large proportion of artists are people who crave a deeper, more fluid connection with the outside world. Who in early life felt their voice stifled, felt invisible in the middle of a crowd. So they learn to speak their truth in some other form, and a creative performer was born.

Deep within such an artist is a driving, gnawing, ravenous urge to be loved, respected, seen, heard. It is the stifled urge of a child dancing in the living room for the guests, saying "look at me! I'm special!"

Of course, attention isn't always on the artist herself: sometimes we merely want to draw attention to some cause, or effect, or external reality or philosophy we consider important or of interest. At the heart of all of this, however, is the sense that our perceptions are worthy, our hearts strong, our song as valid as that of any other warbler in the forest.

And when those reviews come in, we can either read them at an emotional arm's length, or we can take them to heart, suffer the slings and arrows—and rejoice in the victories.

Which are more important? I'm not certain. But when those positive reviews come, I notice that I don't take them as seriously, as deeply, as the negative ones. I don't dare. That little boy inside me wants too desperately to believe that he is loved and appreciated, that he has made something worthwhile. When the positive reviews come, it is easy to listen to the accolades, to glow in the

applause...

But God help you if you ever need it. Then, with an exquisitely perverse precision, it will be withdrawn. Chasing after the approval makes it dissolve, and we become like a third-rate comic frantically mugging for a once-appreciative audience, begging them to laugh until they are embarrassed for him.

I love the process of writing. I love the books themselves. I love my audience. And I love those reviews, too much, it sometimes seems. And at those times, a little voice whispers in my ear: "The writing isn't for them. Never for them. It was before they were. And if they turn their backs, you will write still. Don't be lulled by the fact that today's reviews are positive. Don't be frustrated if tomorrow's reviews are bad. Listen to the voice in your heart, the one that whispers of discipline, and pain, and creative ecstasy. That voice was there at the beginning, and will be there at the end."

That voice, and no other, can you trust