

Reviewers Who Don a Writer's Skin

by Phyllis Chesler



Has any other writer experienced this?

In December of 2020, Charlotte Allen reviewed my book [Quillette](#). It was an unusually long review—5,000 words—in which she simply repeated as many details gleaned from my book as possible. However, it was not exactly a review. Allen seemed to want to write the book I'd already written and so she lifted a great deal from it in lieu of a review. I'm not complaining. At least she seems to have read every line.

Allen did write that *Requiem* is “often riveting but just as often disappointing. (Chesler) has a punchy, intimate, highly readable prose style, sliding credibly into Wuornos’s own slang contractions.” Allen acknowledges that I’ve described the book as “a genre blended form of fiction/non-fiction” but dislikes the “fiction” because it is not exactly factual.

The problem is also this: Allen reveals a shockingly old-fashioned, romanticized, and woman-blaming view of prostitution. She writes:

“There is no doubt that prostitution is a dangerous occupation—which is why there are pimps, or at the high-priced escort end, layers of protection in the form of screening, drivers, and bodyguards. By its nature, prostitution involves being alone with a strange man whose intentions are, at the very least opaque and who at worst may feel entitled to rape and batter as part of the sexual services his dollars paid for.”

What? Does Allen not understand that pimps terrorize and batter their property in order to keep them in line? That they take the lion's share of their earnings and force them to service as many customers as possible? That legalized prostitution is as dangerous as the more entrepreneurial form in which Wuornos engaged? Does she understand that real serial killers who are mainly men, practice on prostitutes whom no one reports missing?

Did she really read my book?

Allen writes that "a lowly streetwalker can earn as much in 20 minutes as a McDonald's cashier standing behind a counter makes in an entire morning," but she fails to credit the economic desperation, economic disparity, forced choices versus free choices involved.

Does she not know that most girls and women in prostitution are blue-collar wage slaves who must drink alcohol and take drugs in order to bear the degradation and the violence—and that they all have very short shelf lives since most men prefer women who look "young."

Allen has a PhD in medieval studies from the Catholic University of America. Nevertheless, she fails to understand what the conditions are that track most children, and children of color, into lives of prostitution (incest, daughter-battering, extreme abuse, extreme poverty, mental impairment, trafficking, etc.), she writes:

"Chesler quotes Wuornos as saying: 'If men would keep their money in their pockets and their penises in their pants, there would be no prostitution.' But it's equally true that if women didn't keep raising their skirts to see what money they could get from men's pockets, there would be no prostitution, either."

In a sense, Allen with whom I agree on other issues such as legalized surrogacy, tried wearing my skin and found herself

uncomfortable in the garment. Therefore, she tried to spin the story her way. I say: Charlotte, why not write your own book?

Reviewers Who Don a Writer's Skin. Part Two.

Once I experienced the Allen review I became more sensitive to other such reviews.

Thus, this wearing-of-the-writer's skin was on full and ghastly display when the eminent Julian Barnes reviewed a truly beautiful and haunting book by James McAuley: [*The House of Fragile Things: Jewish Art Collectors and the Fall of France*](#) in the [*London Review of Books*](#) in April of 2021.

Like Allen, Barnes seems to summarize McAuley's work, both his details and his analysis, but without quoting him directly. This is what I mean by "wearing the writer's skin." It entered his blood stream; he then displayed it all as if it were his own.

Barnes reviewed the McAuley book together with another book on the same subject by Edmund de Waal, titled *Letters to Camondo*.

Barnes is kind enough to write that "this is a bizarre publishing coincidence, which must have made McAuley's spirits sink; this is his first book and he has spent ten years on it."

Having said that, Barnes then proceeds to give de Waal pride of place—but, like Allen, he proceeds to repeat every detail contained in McAuley's book as well as McAuley's analysis. He does quote McAuley but does not describe his writing style as approvingly as he does that of de Waal, a "deep insider," who has published his letters to one of the richest men in France, a Jew, whom he addresses as "Friend," "Dear Friend," "Monsieur," "Cher Monsieur," "Mon Cher Monsieur," and even "Monsieur le Comte."

Perhaps Barnes apes Proust in his preference for wealthy

insiders. He further describe de Waal in this way: His “manner is softly prowling, whether inside or outside the house and its archives; his tone is intimate, melancholic, speculative, and at times whimsical.” de Waal is, after all, an Ephrussi, a member of a wealthy family, one that was connected to the Comondos who were connected to the Rothschilds, Reinachs, and Cahen d’Anvers. (Charles Ephrussi was a cousin of Edward de Waal’s great-grandfather.)

de Waal is also a fellow Brit. A member of another leading and well-connected family. McAuley’s book “is the work of an American outsider, who has been diligent in many archives. It is a well-judged investigation, and generally well-written.”

I admit: I have not read de Waal’s book which may indeed be wonderful but I **did** read McAuley’s work and was enchanted by it. It is a beautiful and haunting portrait of the fate of the very wealthiest Jews in France, the builders of mansions, parks, gardens, museums, and the greatest collectors of French art. All this was not enough. These Jews of refinement and philanthropy were still viewed as “fake” Frenchmen because they were Jewish—and they did not survive Hitler. Actually, they did not survive the French who deported them to Drancy efficiently and swiftly.

Simon Sebag Montefiore describes McAuley’s work as “fascinating, sensitive, and heartbreaking, deeply researched and elegantly written.”

I could not put the McAuley book down and underlined at least half the volume. McAuley explores the roots of Jew hatred in France among both its leading intellectuals and the mobs. These wealthy Jewish families were “blind” to the anti-Semitism and believed that their wealth and enormous contributions to French culture would protect them. It did not. Indeed, long before, they had retreated into their own world, surrounded by owned classical art.

I did not know this story. And now I do. I am the sadder and the wiser for it.