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Juvenal Delinquencies

Review of Snark, by David Denby. Simon & Schuster. $15.95. 128 pgs.

In his meandering, meditative new book, Snark, David Denby, film critic for the New Yorker, does not invoke Justice Potter Stewart's standard for obscenity - "I know it when I see it." But he might as well have. Snark, according to Denby, is a clever insult, designed to get a cheap laugh without making a substantive point. It is "spreading like pinkeye, throughout the media, especially the Internet." But then again Denby deems "vituperation, which is insulting, nasty, but well, clean," a valuable activity in a democratic culture. While he's wondering why we can't all just get along, or, at least, find a little "grace" in our dealings with one another, he's also advising readers to "commit" a savage insult: "You'll feel better. You'll make other people feel better."

Denby traces the roots of snark to the Ancient Greeks and Romans. In the evolution of snark, from Juvenal to Alexander Pope to Spy magazine, and "today's lame practitioners," he sees "a line down, a collapse, a devolution, as snark increasingly loses its intellectual complexity and wit."

In homage to Lewis Carroll's nonsense poem, The Hunting of the Snark, Denby's book is organized, not all that helpfully, into seven "fits." His Fourth Fit, entitled "Anatomy of a Style", for example, contains nine "Principles of Snark," and the exposition collapses under the weight of the gag into a kaleidoscopic - and painfully obvious - monologue (snark attacks without reason, gives old jokes a new twist, tries to disguise hackneyed prejudices, accentuates the negative, reduces human complexity to caricature, brings fear and loathing to celebrity culture, assaults the elderly, ignores journalistic principles, and, we kid you not, trashes "expensive, underperforming restaurants.")

Denby bemoans snarkiness in contemporary political discourse. He is disturbed - rightfully so - not just by the racist material promulgated against Barack Obama during the 2008 presidential campaign, but by the subtle and not-so-subtle statements and messages of Republican attack ads, Fox News, and "off the
record” comments by Karl Rove. Recognizing, belatedly, that his partisan slips are showing, he acknowledges, halfway through the book, that “Liberals are not without sin.” And then skewers Maureen Dowd, the "most gifted writer of snark in the country," devoting an entire chapter - or "fit" - to her, which concludes: "like the ravenous Cyclops, snark see with one eye. And then it complains that other people lack dimension."

Taking after Dowd doesn't make Denby an equal opportunity snark shark. Indeed, he goes out of his way to gives liberals he likes a free pass. Not everyone, we guess, will agree with him that the claws of Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert are sharp but not snarky. And while some may believe, with Denby, that Keith Olbermann's tirades are "voluminously factual, astoundingly syntactical and always logically organized," many more will conclude, as we have, that if the daily designation of Bill O'Reilly as the 'Worst Person in the World," accompanied by an impersonation of his "Ted Baxter" voice and a recitation of Bill-O's sexual hang-ups, ain't snark, then God didn't make no little green apples and AIG was a steal at seventy-nine.

The heart of the book, the part that resonates, is Denby's thesis, presented in fits and starts, that snark is "mean, it's personal, and it's ruining our conversation." Denby insists that "when writing becomes the vessel of social ambition, snark becomes more likely" and that "when such a shift is combined with the development of new reading and writing technologies, like the internet, snark becomes inevitable."

As Denby says, it is "reasonable to ask: What are we doing to ourselves? What kind of journalistic culture do we want? What kind of internet culture? What kind of interpersonal - and national - conversation?" He is angry - and rightfully so - at the phenomenon of anonymous postings on websites. He points to the (now defunct) website Juicy Campus which invites coeds to comment on each other. "Who are the hottest girls on campus? 'Who are the biggest sluts?'. The women are named, but the men identifying them hide behind a handle."

Certainly, anonymous postings involving personal attacks are cowardly, juvenile and quite possibly actionable. But they do not seem to us to be a distinctive category of snark. The public square in America has always been a rough place; but snark goes to the level of civility of the speechmaker. Anonymous postings are drunken hecklers. Snarky or not, they do not deserve a platform.

Snark stimulates us to think harder about the public square and how it will look in the future. We wish Denby had provided a comparative perspective to help us understand snark in the cycle of American politics. Is there more snark in newspapers, on TV, and even on the internet than there was in the nineteenth century, when "scandalmonger" James Callender and a legion of lesser lights revealed the lurid details, many of them imagined, about Alexander Hamilton's sexual relationship with Maria Reynolds, a married woman, and Thomas Jefferson's child-producing rape of his slave, Sally Hemmings? As Americans enjoy snark in our culture of infotainment will they - can they - address issues of politics and public policy as they did in earlier times? What does it tell us that the electorate ate up Bill Clinton/Monica Lewinsky jokes, but was overwhelmingly opposed to his impeachment? And that for all of the Obama/Osama crap that was out there, Barack still won?

Denby suggests, albeit too briefly, that "snark sounds like the seethe and snarl of an unhappy and ferociously divided country." Is it, then, an epiphenomenon of a more dangerous phenomenon, political polarization? When Americans gravitate to media outlets tailored to their point of view, do they greet snarky comments as subscribers to Democratic Party newspapers in the nineteenth century did when they read that Abraham Lincoln was an "ourang outang" - as rabid reinforcement of what they already think or believe?

"I have a tendency, I know," Denby admits, "to be bothered by cynicism, slander, and failed nasty wit more than I should, and indeed, to take things too seriously." He may be right about the pernicious tendencies of snark to debase our culture. But maybe, he - and we - should be more worried about a democratic mass media that has conflated opinion with information and sorted out viewers into us and them.


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