

Reviews: Reading

How would you feel if you had bought a ticket to see a show but it turned out to be terrible - the actors forgot their lines, the sound was awful (you could hardly hear what was being said) and the story was extremely dull? Probably fed up, but imagine that you only went because a reviewer had said that it was very good. You might even feel angry then, especially if the ticket was expensive.



Then you bought a book because all the reviews on the back said it was great, a 'tour de force', 'unput-downable', a real 'page turner' etc., only to find that it wasn't gripping at all, in fact you couldn't even finish it. The plot was unimaginative and the writing was weak.

Finally, you read a great review in the paper about an expensive restaurant in town and so decided to splash out and go there with a special friend. The reviewer recommended booking because it was very popular so you reserved a table, and one with a good view. When you arrived, however, there was no record of your booking and you were placed in a corner far from any view. The dishes were as expensive as you had been told but the food, when it eventually came, was very disappointing. The portions were small, the combination of tastes rather strange, and it wasn't hot either. Every time you tried to ask for some more water or bread the waitress was never around, and then she took ages to get anything. Feeling very disappointed you decided not to leave much of a tip, but when the bill came (and it was the most you have ever spent on dinner for two!) you were annoyed to find out that a 10% service charge had already been added.

So how do you feel now? Put out because the experience was not nearly as good as you had expected (and you write a letter of complaint to the newspaper editor), or do you feel that it would have been inappropriate for the reviewer to have written an honest opinion of the restaurant - it might go out of business?

The role of reviewers has been questioned in Australia recently, particularly the role of food critics, after a restaurant took a newspaper to court. They claimed that because the review in the paper was so bad, people cancelled reservations and they lost all their customers. The restaurant had spent a million pounds doing the place up before opening but, a few months after the review, it had to close down. The staff lost their jobs, the owners lost their money and the restaurant lost its good reputation - all because of one review. The restaurant owners said customers had been put off by the food critic's strong words.

The review was indeed very scathing. The reviewer criticized the taste of the food, the price of the dishes and quality of the service. He only awarded the restaurant nine stars out of a possible 20. He said, "If restaurant staff do their job badly there is no reason why I should do mine badly as well."

The newspaper has defended their journalist, who went to the restaurant twice before writing his article. They say that it's important that reviewers are honest - that's what reviews are there for and it's what the readers expect. Their purpose is

to provide a guide for people who don't want to spend an enormous amount of money on a meal that's not that good. The editor has suggested that if they lose the case there are implications for other reviewers, of theatre or books for example. If a reviewer is worried about getting sued for giving their opinion there won't be any point in having reviews at all.

Interestingly, some restaurant owners have said that a review, even a bad one, can help them. Several have said that after a bad review they made significant changes which improved their service, and they now have more customers than before. Others though feel that a reviewer has a lot of power, perhaps too much, and criticism should always be fair and constructive. A restaurant may need improving but it doesn't necessarily have to close down.

Do reviewers have too much power? Some food critics have certainly become quite famous for their witty comments, and these do tend to be negative rather than positive remarks. It seems to be easier to be funny while saying something bad rather than saying something kind. In addition the rise of blogging means that there are many more reviews on the web, not just about restaurants of course, and again these can often be hurtful, and even unjust. The anonymity of the reviewers maybe encourages over the top criticisms and the need for a balanced review gets lost.

Perhaps the punters overreacted to the review? If you're a regular customer of a restaurant, presumably this is because you like the place, so you wouldn't stop going because of a bad review - or would you? For a restaurant to fail it must have been unpopular with all its customers, not just one that has a newspaper column - mustn't it? Let's see what answer the Australian courts settle on.