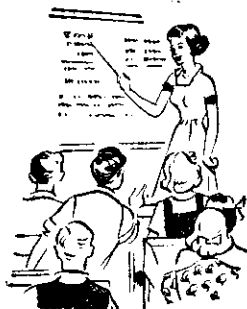
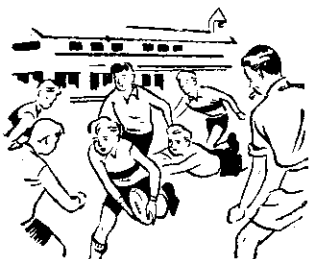


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Critics and Their Audience

THE evolution of *Book Shop* as a programme which commends itself increasingly to listeners is described in an article on page 6. Its success comes partly, perhaps very largely, from the personality in the background. Although a review or talk, once the choice has been made, must be left to the speaker, the connecting thread of comment gives character to a session and may influence the tone of criticism. A postscript in another voice can also take the sting from a doubtful review. The light touch has a peculiar grace when books are being discussed.

A radio book session is not easily managed, for it needs variety to be interesting, and not many speakers are able to meet its special requirements. The reviewer has only a few minutes (seven at the most) in which to describe a book, to explain where it succeeds or fails, and to reach his personal judgment. In so short a time he must leave much unsaid which, in a fuller review, would have to be said in fairness to the author. A man may spend several years writing a book; and the critic, who perhaps would be incapable of writing a book in a lifetime, may demolish it while a listener's electric jug is heating the water for a pot of tea. This is true also of the printed review. But the radio speaker cannot be answered as effectively as the man who writes for publication. A listener who objects to what has been said can write a letter to this journal, but no argument is soundly based unless there is quick and easy reference to the text which provoked it. A review on a book page is in print, and can be consulted, whereas a broadcast, once given, is lost among the sound waves, or is at the mercy of memories which can subtly distort what has been heard. The reviewer cannot be pinned down as closely as the man who writes his opinions.

At its best, however, reviewing on the air has a charm of its own.

People like to hear opinions about books and writers, to compare notes, to agree and oppose; and a broadcast allows them to enter directly into this experience. They do not want to be assailed by dogmatic statements, or affronted by an aggressive manner. The speaker most likely to succeed with them will have his ideas formed in his own mind, and will be able to express them clearly; but he will also leave listeners with the feeling that they have heard opinions rather than judgments, and that their own views may certainly be as valid as his. Profound ideas can be expounded in long broadcasts—as in the Reith Lectures; but there is not much room for them in brief talks. The nature of a book session tends therefore to be closer to gossip than to criticism. And yet it is gossip with a hard centre of opinion.

People feel strongly about books. They cannot always say why they like or reject a writer, but once a liking or antipathy is formed it becomes almost a personal possession. It could even be argued that all criticism, even at the highest level, is ultimately a response to a writer's personality. The man is in his thoughts, his use of imagery, his style; and his way of writing repels us or makes us feel at home with him. Thousands of words of explanation can merely take us in circles around an attitude which rests on a bias of mind. Every writer who has gained a following has both friends and opponents in the unseen audience. It is doubtful if a review can often bring about a conversion, though it may introduce a new name or title; but the radio critic is taking sides—as he must, in all honesty—when he praises or blames. And the discussion is merely at its beginning when, his last words spoken, listeners turn to one another and do their own reviewing.

N.Z. LISTENER, MAY 15, 1953,