

5.01 Why You Should Be Critical of the Things You Love

Angourie [host]

Before I begin, I acknowledge the Wurundjeri People of the Kulin Nation as the traditional custodians of the land on which this work was developed and is presented. I offer my respect to Elders past, present and emerging.

[theme music]

Angourie [host]

Hello and welcome to The Community Library: a fortnightly podcast for anyone interested in stories, and how and why we tell them. I'm your host, Angourie Rice.

[theme music fade out]

Angourie [host]

There was once a time in my life when I was incapable of hearing any criticism against *Harry Potter*. The whole franchise – the books, the movies, the theme parks, the Pottermore website – it was all golden, untouchable, completely without fault. To be fair, I was, like, eight years old. But as I got older and my understanding of the text grew, I realised that what I had once placed on a pedestal was perhaps not as untarnished and wholesome as I thought it was. And then, come June of 2020, I – along with the rest of the Harry Potter fandom – was confronted with what it means to be a fan of *Harry Potter*, having witnessed J. K. Rowling's transphobia. If you'd like to know more of my thoughts on this, I made an episode on it called *Choosing Between What is Right and What is Easy: Discussing J. K. Rowling*. I'll have it linked in the show notes for you.

But this episode isn't about *Harry Potter* – it's about how my experience with being a fan of that franchise taught me why it's important to be critical of the things I love. If you haven't been here before – hello, I'm Angourie, I am a twenty-year-old actor and podcaster from Australia. I love books and movies and pop culture, and I love talking about those things here on the podcast, and I also love talking about how we talk about things. If that sounds at all interesting to you, then feel free to stick around! We have lots of great chats in this community, and I would love for you to be a part of it.

Like all good essays – or bad essays? – we're going to start with a definition. What do I mean by 'criticising', 'criticism', or 'being critical'? The verb 'to criticise', can either mean 'find fault with', or 'analyse and evaluate.' The meaning depends on the context. To say 'the book was criticised for its writing style' means that reviewers found fault in the writing. However, a 'literary criticism' refers to an academic paper that presents and defends a theory on the meaning of the text. For example, you might read a literary criticism that argues that the green light in *The Great Gatsby* is a symbol of the unattainable American Dream. So, to 'be critical' of a piece of media, can mean to identify its flaws, yes, but it can also mean to

analyse and deconstruct the text to uncover a deeper meaning. Today I want to give you a list of reasons as to why being critical of media you love – in both senses of the word – is an important part of understanding media and our culture's response to it.

But, before we get into it, I of course must clarify the parameters of the discussion. This discussion is about works of art, rather than the individuals who create those works. I don't think we can separate the art from the artist, however I think the tools we use when criticising and evaluating art are different from when we criticise and evaluate individual people – specifically people in the public eye. Also, when I refer to a 'text', I'm talking about a book, film, TV show or song – any form of media, really, that includes the written word.

Another thing I'd like to clarify is that discussions in the area between 'good' and 'bad', or 'problematic' and 'unproblematic', are often difficult and require emotional energy. It is always my aim to have these discussions in a really safe and welcoming way. And I would offer to my listeners, um to be mindful of taking time and space to be kind to yourself and others when discussing topics that are particularly distressing to you or to other people.

Part One: Why be critical at all?

I try to avoid blaming the internet for all of our problems, but I do think Twitter has some things to answer for – and, spoiler alert – not all of them are good. Something I extremely dislike about Twitter is the way it encourages users to make short and sweeping statements about things they might not know much about. Hank Green said in a recent Vlogbrothers video, aptly titled: 'Is Twitter Redeemable?':

'Every day there are a bunch of trending topics and they seem to be the most hot thing possibly portrayed in the hottest possible light. And if there isn't something to get hot about, someone will manufacture it, they'll find it!' – 'Is Twitter Redeemable' by Hank Green for Vlogbrothers – YouTube, 5th June 2021

Hank Green makes a good point about how Twitter functions, and how this is also the way Twitter is designed: it gives you big, controversial headlines, and encourages you to debate them, to have your say, to broadcast your opinion, all in no more than 280 characters. Send tweet. Social media actively teaches us to weigh in on things that we don't know about, or maybe don't even care about, without considering the repercussions.

And what's the effect of this? Condensing longform discourse around complicated issues into short and snappy statements kind of forces you to think dichotomously. A dichotomy refers to two contradicting ideas. 'Good' vs 'bad' is a dichotomy, as is 'problematic' vs 'unproblematic'. But the thing about dichotomies is that they represent two extreme ends of a sliding scale, and leave out all the bits in the middle. And this complicated middle bit is where most things exist – art included. Upholding a text as inherently 'good' and undeserving of criticism because it hasn't had a major controversy, I think deprives us of the opportunity to discuss the nuances of art. Beyond the dichotomy of 'good' and 'bad', or 'problematic' and 'unproblematic', there's a lot more energy to be spent, but I think it leads to deeper understanding.

Part Two: Criticism does not mean your love for something has wavered

I acknowledge that The Bachelor franchise is rooted in heteronormative and patriarchal values, and the reality TV format it uses is manipulative and exploitative and yet ... [laughs] and yet I still watch it and I still love it. Actually, at the time of this recording, um, The Bachelor is on tonight, and yes I will be watching it at 7:30. Just as media can be complicated and contradictory in how it's made and what it represents, our feelings, too, can be complicated and contradictory. Acknowledging and understanding faults in your favourite text doesn't have to diminish your love of something if you don't want it to. You're allowed to have a complicated and nuanced relationship with a text – that's where the interesting discussions lie. In fact, that is often where my ideas for podcast episodes come from. That's when I'm at my most creative; when I have conflicting feelings about something and I want to discuss them.

Part Three: Criticism deepens your understanding of a work

From years of being a painfully ambitious student in English class, to now having to read and learn film scripts, I've trained myself to read everything with a critical eye. A critical eye doesn't mean I'm looking for faults in a text, rather it means that I'm combing through it carefully, looking for clues that point to what it's trying to say. If I happen to find something I disagree with in a text, or something I consider a 'fault', then I use that as a signal to dig a little deeper. What is the text trying to say with this? What overarching themes and ideas does it explore? Turning a critical eye on a text helps me engage with a work more meaningfully, and it can even deepen my understanding of the things I love about it.

Part Four: It helps you in arguments

I never liked debating exercises in school. It has always baffled me why anyone would voluntarily argue for the sake of arguing! I just – I hate confrontation – why would I choose to do it for fun? Arguing always makes me flustered and upset, so in a very practical sense, it's helpful for me to know in advance the faults in the texts that I love. This way I'm prepared if people bring it up with me, and I'm able to have a productive discussion, rather than a distressing argument. If I must debate, let me have mental notecards prepared first!

Part Five: It encourages you to remember how much impact art has on the world

I've done a series of episodes on this podcast in which I compare an old text with a new one – I'll have some of them linked the show notes if you'd like to listen. And whenever I begin my reading and research process for those episodes, I am astounded at how many common problems, themes and ideas I encounter in both texts – sometimes these texts are hundreds of years apart. It's a reminder that art from years ago still impacts art today, which means that art today will impact art years from now. On that same note, if I find an issue or something I disagree with in a text that I love, it's a good reminder that our world's issues are present in everything, everywhere we look – we can see the roots of it in older texts, and how it carries over, or is subverted, in newer texts. It can be exhausting, for sure, but I don't think it's a bad thing to be constantly reminded of how our society impacts the art that is created and shared. It reminds us that art isn't created in a vacuum. Art is influenced

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by the world its created in, but also influences the world. And so reading a text with a critical eye can help you to look at the world with a critical eye, too.

[theme music fades in]

So there you have it: a few reasons why I think it's important to practice critical thinking of all texts and media, but specifically the media you love. I really do think critical thinking and meaningful discussions are going to save the world. And science, obviously. Science is going to save the world, too. If any of this has been helpful to you, or made you think, then I'm really glad! Of course, this is an ongoing discussion, and I'd love to hear from you what you think about this topic. My Instagram is @the_community_library. I don't respond to DMs, but I do go through them often to take suggestions from the audience, so I am reading them. You are very welcome to follow me there on Instagram, I'd love to have you in this community! Until next week, I hope you're all reading great books with a critical eye. See ya!