

The Three Star Review: On Indifference

After we checkout, after the anticipated thing arrives at our door, after we unwrap it and hold it in our hands, once the excitement has subsided, once we finally see the thing as what it truly is, we decide whether it's what we wanted. Maybe we return to the moment before the checkout— revisiting our expectations, the original needs or desires for the thing that plagued us, the specific considerations that led us to the thing in the first place (the color, the price, the ratings), the images or testimonials that sold us on it— and ask, is this really that thing? For me, the answer tends to be no— I am almost always indifferent about what I've ordered. But I live with it anyways, folding it into my life in one way or another. The enormous citronella mosquito candle that arrived with no discernible wick is now a bookend; the yellow exercise band that was seemingly made for a toddler now secures an opened bag of coffee beans. This is because I hate the process of returning things. For people who don't hate returning things (between 5-15% of Amazon shoppers), the next step is a series of steps. And for some of those people (<1%), the final step in that series is to write about their experience with the thing, in the form of a review. Sometimes (roughly 0.0002%), the review is a three-star review.

Because the phenomenon of the three-star review is so marginal, with so little at stake, is precisely why it caught my interest. I first thought about the three-star review a few days ago, when I was looking at a product on Amazon called (coincidentally) the Stiga Three-Star ping pong ball. It has 4.7/5 stars, with 1,384 total ratings, and comes in a pack of six. The reviews are overwhelmingly positive. "These are great." "Perfect bounce." "Bright and easy spot." I scrolled down, past the five-star reviews, and paused at a customer-supplied photo of a ball that inexplicably displayed *four* stars below the logo where there should have been only three, a new star conspicuously jammed between the second and third stars for no apparent reason: the customer asked, "four stars?? is this a real Stiga product?," and supplied a rating of three stars. Another three-star review: "They're okay." I continued scrolling, and stopped at another three-star review in which the reviewer states: "My neice's son requested this brand. I don't know if the gift satisfied him." My first thought was: is there even a name for one's niece's son? I looked it up— he would be the reviewer's "grand nephew"— a term that

sounds even more distant than “niece’s son.” So we’re unsure of how the grand nephew felt about the gift from their uncle; the three-star review, in its absence of an actual review, redirects our attention away from the product and towards this unrequited familial exchange.

When I discuss the peculiar nature of the three-star review, I’m not talking about the three star review that has power; of course, in some contexts the three-star review can be the downfall of a restaurant, salon, book, etc. I’m referring to the three-star review of an inanimate, everyday, mass-made household object that is already widely reviewed and overwhelmingly positive. These three-star reviews are arguably negligible: they throw the item’s rating neither to the left nor to the right. The three-star review is a neutral and highly observant form of participation on the internet—a space that is not neutral, and highly polarized. It is a style of writing distinct from other reviews; rather than emphasizing emotional, deeply felt feelings (“Exactly what I wanted, on time, perfect ball”; “Finally a ball I can trust”), it instead elaborates on the completely neutral, indifferent feeling that accompanies buying something (“I guess you get what you pay for.”).

On that day, particularly adrift at the mercy of the internet’s currents, my curiosity about the three-star review was met with very little resistance, and I read hundreds of them. It came to my (admittedly, highly imaginative) attention that these perhaps constitute a sort of genre in and of themselves. If approached as a form of microfiction, the three-star review is surprisingly successful at capturing the predicament of indifference, which— in writing, and in art—seems to be a rather difficult thing to do. The playwright David Mamet encourages writers to harness feelings of indifference: “A good writer gets better only by learning to cut, to remove the ornamental, the descriptive, the narrative, and especially the deeply felt and meaningful.” This advice is so strange, but it makes some sense: it is difficult to write with a stance of objectivity, and even a slight detachment or indifference, toward a subject that we have strong feelings about. Without at least a little bit of indifference about a subject, how can one be expected to cut scenes and descriptions, and make drastic changes about something they care deeply about? To that end, when there is proof that the writer does

not care deeply about their subject– in a anonymous forum, where the stakes are low– what can we glean about the feeling of indifference?

One of the more ubiquitous visual examples of indifference towards an object is the notion of the readymade in art. Duchamp describes the “readymade” as ordinary, functional, rather dull– a thing he was interested in “based on a reaction of visual indifference, with at the same time a total absence of good or bad taste.” The theory behind the readymade was explained in an anonymous editorial published in 1917 issue of an avant-garde magazine run by Duchamp and two friends:

Whether Mr Mutt with his own hands made the fountain or not has no importance. He CHOSE it. He took an ordinary article of life, and placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view– created a new thought for that object.

In ruminating on the objects mediocrity, rather than its success or failure as an object, the three-star reviewer is creating a new thought for that object. In the act of writing the three-star review, the passion is about the process of reviewing itself– not affecting real any real change in the overall rating, not in expressing a sentiment that will change the feelings of the readers.