

péter's picks & pans



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Metacritic, New York Times Book Review Archive, and Booklist Archive of ALA

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Summer is here again, so I've dedicated my column to databases that can be helpful not only in your reference or collection development work but also in your private life—reviews written by professional critics. My picks include Metacritic, an exquisite gem of movie and music reviews with a twist. It analyzes film and album reviews published in the best newspapers and magazines; converts the star, thumbs and other gizmo ratings of professional critiques; calculates a metascore; and includes the juiciest paragraph from the reviews in the masterfully designed results list. Plus, it links to the free full text of most of the reviews. This is a superb reference and collection development tool you can use to find a variety of high-quality reviews—a single query produces a mightily efficient scorecard for making educated choices. Metacritic service offers recreation in and by itself and serves as a brilliant example for fighting the mental health hazards of "infobesity."

It would be wonderful to have a similar service for book reviews, but lacking that, my second pick is the New York Times Book Review Archive, which offers its much revered, substantial reviews from 1996 onward free of charge. That the full text is searchable is not always a blessing since the software does not allow you to limit the search to the reviewed author, resulting in noisy, sometimes irrelevant results.

The pan is once again the ALA Web site for having made *Booklist*, the excellent review collection of books, a disappearing act. Its treasured collection of more than 6,200 book reviews published between 1997 and 2002 and posted on the Booklist Web site is not searchable anymore, let alone viewable. The directions given by the gatekeepers of the ALA Web site for finding the reviews are on a par with what some Parisians do when asked by tourists for directions. It tells you something about the attitude, competence, and care of the Web paramedics at the ALA Web site and its managers that the official centralized ALA search engine cannot even find information about many of the *Booklist* reviews, let alone bring them in full text to your screen. The freeware software used before the reckless disorganization project in 2003 could do this; the Amazon software still does, smartly and efficiently. *Booklist* (and the librarian community) deserves better treatment on its 100th anniversary.



the picks

METACRITIC

Most general-interest newspapers and magazines have sections for book reviews, film reviews, and music reviews. The best ones have full-time critics on their payroll. Reviews (at least for currently released titles) are freely available on the Web on many magazine and newspaper sites, but it is not a swift enough procedure to look up several of them and mentally consolidate their conclusions

and different ratings. Metacritic [www.metacritic.com] is light years ahead of the traditional method of looking up reviews in various sources. Its volunteer, but obviously competent, staff members read the reviews of 60-70 of the best newspapers and magazines, assign a score to each of them on a scale from 1 to 100, then calculate the Metascore of the reviews. This is the weighted average of the individual scores.

The weight reflects the clout of the reviewers and/or the primary sources, so that Ebert's reviews, or reviews from *The Los Angeles Times* count more than those published in newspapers of lesser clout. (There is a short and long explanation of the process on the Metacritic Web site).

The results are presented in a visually very attractive, content-rich, and highly informative score card format that provides at-a-glance, quantitative information about the opinion of a number of critics, along with basic production, cast and crew information, and perfectly chosen sentences from the reviews. There are links to the full text of most of the reviews.

The number of reviews varies, depending on the importance of the movie or the album. In my test, the movies had 35-40 reviews, the albums had eight to 10 reviews. Often you can see a high consensus, as is the case with the flick *Lost in Translation*, which garnered 88 Metascore from 43 reviews, reflecting a universal acclaim, or Dr. Seuss' *Cat in the Hat*, with an abysmal 15 Metascore from 37 reviews, reflecting overwhelming dislike by critics, with the notable exception of *The Washington Post's* reviewer, who gave it the equivalent of 70 points. Reviewers are not mincing words; often, the short excerpts suffice to dissuade you from wasting your time and money on a film or an album.

The movies and albums can be browsed and searched by a number of criteria. There are not only top lists but also bottom lists. There are reviews for more than 2,600 movies, nearly 1,500 albums (as well as 4,000 computer games, which you might care about if you have teenagers around the house). It is a substantial collection culled from the best primary sources. The excellent RottenTomatoes site [www.rottentomatoes.com] does the same, with more movies from

more sources (although some of them are hardly relevant for anyone), but it does not cover music albums.

Metacritic is more selective, focusing on the most popular review sources. It shows a very smart model for extracting, analyzing, compressing, synthesizing, and visualizing information. I bet Roger Ebert would give "two thumbs up, way up" to this gem.

NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEWS ARCHIVE

I wish Metacritic would also cover book reviews, but it does not, at least not yet. Unleashing its power on the reviews of even a small fraction of the 150,000 fiction and nonfiction titles published every year would be an excellent idea. It's likely that Metacritic would give the highest weight factor to *The New York Times Book Review*, which has been the most revered source for book reviews, often having the best novelists as critics, such as John Updike. No wonder that its reviews were published in book form at the hardly affordable price of \$275 for 1 year's reviews. Beyond the fund-starved public libraries, the free online access to the New York Times Book Reviews [www.nytimes.com/books], dating back to 1996, is a particularly big deal for the millions of readers interested in perusing book reviews from the convenience of their homes or favorite cafes (if not every Sunday, then at least when planning their recreational time).

Approximately 12,000 reviews are available. This does not mean the same number of unique titles because some books get reviewed twice or even more, or the same review appears twice with a slight difference in the number of words. Laudably, book reviews from the Arts/Cultural Desk, and the Leisure/Weekend Desk are also free (although not consistently), as are all items published in the past 7 days, such as interviews with authors.

Most of the reviews from the Book Review Desk are substantial, running well over 1,000 words, and sometimes more, such as the one for the *Encyclopedia of Dance*, which has 3,233 words. In most aggregators' full-text databases, *The New York Times* reviews have only bibliographic citations. Even the best Web bookstores quote only a sentence or two from

metascore 88

A Metascore in the 81-100 range suggests **Universal Acclaim** from critics. [Learn more.](#)

film details:

Lost in Translation

Romance | Drama | Comedy

MPAA RATING
R for some sexual content

105 minutes | Color
USA

WRITTEN BY
Sofia Coppola

DIRECTED BY
Sofia Coppola

THEATRICAL RELEASE
Sep 12, 2003

Received four Oscar nominations, including Best Picture, Best Director (Sofia Coppola), Best Screenplay (Coppola, who won both the Oscar and the Golden Globe) and Best Actor (Bill Murray, also a Globe winner). Won the Golden Globe for Best Picture (Musical or Comedy).
Winner of four Independent

Starring **Scarlett Johansson, Bill Murray, Giovanni Ribisi, and Anna Faris**

Unable to sleep, Bob (Murray) and Charlotte (Johansson), two Americans in Tokyo, cross paths one night in the luxury hotel bar. This chance meeting soon becomes a surprising friendship. Charlotte and Bob venture through Tokyo, having often hilarious encounters with its citizens, and ultimately discover a new belief in life's possibilities. (Focus Features)

what the critics are saying:

100 Boston Globe / Ty Burr:
Longer on atmosphere and observation than on story, but you don't mind: Coppola maintains her quietly charged tone with a certainty that would be unbelievable in a second film if you didn't suspect genetics had a hand.
[READ THE REVIEW](#)

100 Chicago Sun-Times / Roger Ebert:
I loved this movie. I loved the way Coppola and her actors negotiated the hazards of romance and comedy, taking what little they needed and depending for the rest on the truth of the characters.
[READ THE REVIEW](#)

100 Christian Science Monitor / David Sterritt:
Smart, funny, and splendidly acted.
[READ THE REVIEW](#)

Numeric scores of reviews for *Lost in Translation*.

them, making this particularly valuable content.

While it is wonderful that the full text of the reviews is searchable, your search term, such as "John Le Carré" as an exact phrase, may retrieve too many irrelevant hits from the full text when his name is mentioned only in passing. I found more than 10 reviews for his last four books, but a dozen other retrieved reviews were not about his novels, but someone else's. It would be very useful to have the name of the reviewed author as well as the reviewed title in a separate, field-specific index. By default, the full text is searched, but you can limit to the Summary field to improve precision. Limiting to the headline (title) field is possible, but I don't recommend it. In spite of software limitations, this is a valuable database.



the pan

BOOKLIST ARCHIVE ALA WEB SITE

April 2003 saw thousands of librarians who had bookmarks and links to various American Library Association Web sites busily picking up the pieces after ALA's disastrous reorganization (also known as Black April). Some of us voiced our displeasure about the careless and embarrassingly incompetent job, well documented by Marylaine Block [<http://marylaine.com/tracking.html>].

Many tried hard to fix their maimed, mangled, and marred bookmarks and links and to switch to the mightily messy new URLs. Amidst all the havoc, few realized that one of the free assets of ALA, the archive of more than 6,200 full-text book reviews from *Booklist* remained buried under the rubble, inaccessible by the low-IQ new search software. Before the ravaging, there were several indexes for volume, main entry, and others, as well as a modest search engine with a direct link to the full-text reviews posted on the *Booklist* Web site.

At the very bottom of the new *Booklist* site you can find the stern reply to the question, "Why can't I find a re-

view that was here before?" As of April 2003, *Booklist* reviews are no longer being archived on the Web site. Turn to the print *Booklist* for complete review coverage."

Aye, aye, Sir. So much for service and courtesy to members. It took an e-mail to confirm that the reviews were not transferred to the new site. This is not the best way of celebrating the 100th anniversary of *Booklist*.

Actually, there are semi-annual and annual indexes with "links" to the printed edition. If you want to find the reviews of some of Le Carré's recent books, three of which were in their full glory on the *Booklist* Web site in volume 95 alone before the reorganization, the search engine would search for them. Finding is another matter.

The new search engine shows a less-than-user-friendly result. Yes, a librarian can make sense from the crypto-summary, or explain it to the user with mild embarrassment, then download the 32-page semi-annual index in PDF, then scroll down to the 16th page, then find the reference to the review of *Absolute Friends*, then try to locate the issue—but it's more than likely that by this time you and the patron are not absolute friends with this ALA tool. Most of the PDF indexes are illegible both for the software at any resolution and enlargement on the screen.

In a fraction of the time and without any frustration, you can find the

full text of all three reviews, and then some, from *Booklist* and many other review sources, such as *Publishers' Weekly*, *Library Journal*, and *Kirkus Reviews*. How? Go to Amazon.com. With a single query, fill yourself up with dozens of informative reviews. What gives? While ALA shut off your free access to the reviews in *Booklist*, it happily licensed the reviews to Amazon, and some other Web services without bothering to advise you where you can find them digitally, let alone linking you to the sites.

Characteristically, Amazon offers a backlink to *Booklist*, but it is a one-way courtesy. I think that the clunky ALA Web site, its brain-damaged search engine, and unhelpful attitude remain an embarrassment to the profession. In the more detailed online preprint version of this article [<http://www2.hawaii.edu/~jacso/extra>], I offer you a link to a humble polysearch engine that simultaneously searches some open access Web sites for reviews from *Booklist* and other sources to see the difference and ease your pain. This is my way, as an outsider, of celebrating her 100th anniversary.

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Comments? E-mail letters to the editor to marydee@xmission.com.

10 **Slate** / David Edelstein:

Like being run over by a garbage truck that backs up and dumps its load on top of you. It's a sloppy and vulgar burlesque, one of the most repulsive kiddie movies ever made.

▶ [READ THE REVIEW](#)

0 **New York Post** / Megan Lehmann:

The narrative itself, attributed to three former "Seinfeld" writers who also worked on "The Grinch," reeks of desperation.

▶ [READ THE REVIEW](#)

0 **Village Voice** / Michael Atkinson:

Comes scarily close to being the most unendurable Hollywood creation of the last dozen years.

▶ [READ THE REVIEW](#)

0 **Wall Street Journal** / Joe Morgenstern:

An abomination, impure and simple.

The Cat falls flat in these reviews.