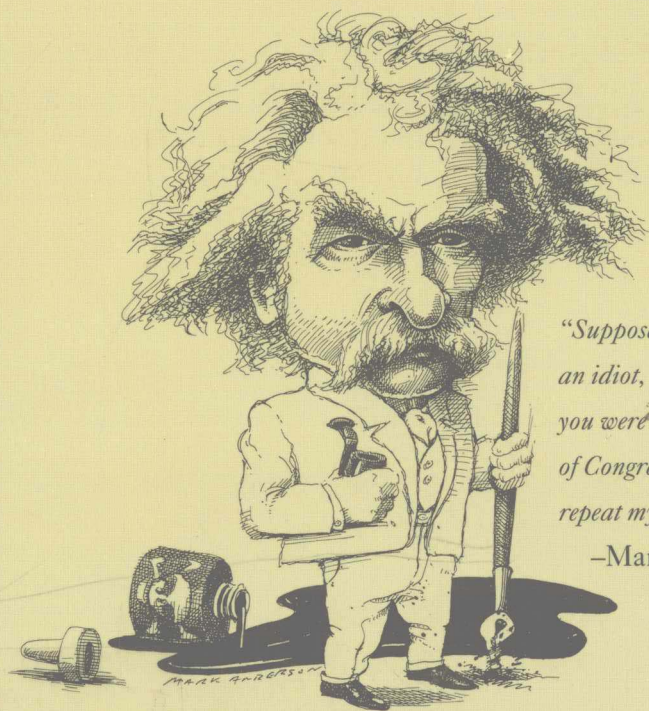


# THE BOOK OF POISONOUS QUOTES



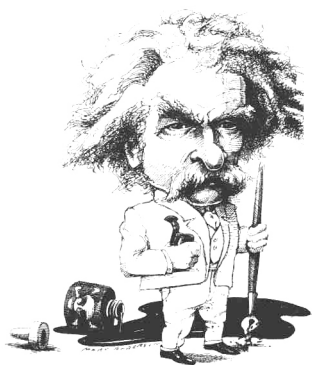
*"Suppose you were  
an idiot, and suppose  
you were a member  
of Congress, but I  
repeat myself."*

—Mark Twain

Compiled by Colin M. Jarman

# THE BOOK OF POISONOUS QUOTES

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# INTRODUCTION

Beauty is only skin deep.  
But ugly goes clear to the bone.

*A. B. Evans*

And so it is with poisonous quotes—a little bit of praise may go a long way, but insults go on forever.

This *Book of Poisonous Quotes* has thousands of choice cutting criticisms and willfully wicked witticisms to choose from. Nobody is safe from these stinging salvos—pillars of society are pilloried, authors written off, sports stars run down, celebrities defamed, financiers discredited, and actors hamstrung.

My propensity for things poisonous started back in 1987, when I was told by a sports editor that I could not call the (yet-to-be-disgraced) Canadian athlete Ben Johnson a “human cheetah.” Ever since that letdown over a put-down I have been in search of my personal Holy Grail—the perfect (or perfectly acceptable) insult. Six years of research have led me to believe that the perfect put-down has not yet been uttered—but there has never been a shortage of people who have tried to discover the aqua regia of acrimony. A year’s

research in the United States left me with the impression that the American Uncivil War was still being fought—between commentator and politician, critic and artist, reviewer and author.

In their traditional evening-wear battle dress and fueled by a proud motto ("The pen is mightier than the sword"), the critical snide snipers have always had their sights firmly set on their favorite targets—be it a Nixon, a Streisand, or a Whitman.

This war of the words is not a one-sided combat zone. Critics with bitchy trigger fingers may draw first blood, but they are not sheltered from hostile fire being returned. Reviewers may go over the top from the comfort of their own writing desks, but the likes (or dislikes) of Rich, Simon, Mencken, and Woolcott are constantly shelled with the repercussions of their own critical fallout.

You can't say civilization don't advance—for every war they kill you a new way.

*Will Rogers*

And so it is with poisonous quotes—civilization advances with a new crossbreed of critic, a new strain of reviewer, and a new generation of Grouchos—after all,

The tongue is the only instrument that gets sharper with use.

*Washington Irving*

—Colin Jarman

# HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

*The Book of Poisonous Quotes* has been compiled to be used as either reading or reference material.

The table of contents lists the subsections within the major categories.

Within the sections, the quotations are listed alphabetically by individual subject or, if there is no individual subject, by source. Within each subsection, the quotations are listed alphabetically by source.

The index contains the names of the subjects of the quotations as well as the names of the people quoted.

Biographical details include birth and death dates, if known. This information is given to place the quotes in a time context rather than in the interests of providing a definitive biographical reference.

Sections containing reviews are alphabetically listed in two fashions—either by reviewer or by subject as indicated in the table of contents.





# 1

# CRITICS AND CRITICISM

## GENERAL

---

A critic is a man who writes about things he doesn't like.

*Anonymous*

The most important critic is Time.

*Anonymous*

Critics are the stupid who discuss the wise.

*Anonymous*

Criticism is the disapproval of people, not for having faults but for having faults different from ours.

*Anonymous*

American critics are like American universities. They both have dull and half-dead faculties.

*Edward Albee (1969)*

Critics are like eunuchs in a harem. They're there every night, they see it done every night, they see how it should be done every night, but they can't do it themselves.

*Brendan Behan*

Critics are eunuchs at a gang-bang.

*George Burns*

*To an anonymous critic*—Thou eunuch of language; thou pimp of gender, murderous accoucheur of infant learning, thou pickle-herring in the puppet show nonsense.

*Robert Burns*

In judging others, folks will work overtime for no pay.

*Charles Carruthers*

I do not resent criticism, even when, for the sake of emphasis, it parts for the time with reality.

*Winston Churchill (1941)*

I love criticism just so long as it's unqualified praise.

*Noël Coward*

It would be nice if sometimes the kind of things I say were considered worthy of quotation. It isn't difficult, you know, to be witty or amusing when one has something to say that is destructive, but damned hard to be clever and quotable when you are singing someone's praises.

*Noël Coward*

Taking to pieces is the trade of those who cannot construct.

*Ralph Waldo Emerson*

Any fool can criticize, and many of them do.

*C. Garbett*

A critic is a man created to praise greater men than himself, but he is never able to find them.

*Richard Le Gallienne*

Critics are probably more prone to clichés than fiction writers who pluck things out of the air.

*Penelope Gilliatt*

Don't pay any attention to the critics—don't even ignore them.

*Samuel Goldwyn*

A good review from the critics is just another stay of execution.

*Dustin Hoffman*

To escape criticism—do nothing, say nothing, be nothing.

*Elbert Hubbard*

One gets tired of the role critics are supposed to have in this culture: It's like being the piano player in a whorehouse; you don't have any control over the action going on upstairs.

*Robert Hughes,  
'Publishers Weekly' (1986)*

Mediocrity is more dangerous in a critic than in a writer.

*Eugene Ionesco (1966)*

I find the pain of a little censure, even when it is unfounded, is more acute than the pleasure of much praise.

*Thomas Jefferson*

Honest criticism is hard to take, particularly from a relative, a friend, an acquaintance, or a stranger.

*Franklin P. Jones*

In the arts, the critic is the only independent source of information. The rest is advertising.

*Pauline Kael,  
'Newsweek' (1973)*

For critics, I care the five-hundred-thousandth part of the tithe of a half-farthing.

*Charles Lamb (1830)*

I won't quit [acting] until I get run over by a truck, a producer, or a critic.

*Jack Lemmon (1986)*

I never read bad reviews about myself because my best friends invariably tell me about them.

*Oscar Levant*

A critic is one who goes along for deride.

*L. L. Levinson*

He has a right to criticize, who has a heart to help.

*Abraham Lincoln*

Freedom to criticize is held to compensate for the freedom to err—this is the American system.

*Mary McCarthy*

Criticism is prejudice made plausible.

*H. L. Mencken*

I've always felt those articles somehow reveal more about the writers than they do about me.

*Marilyn Monroe*

A bad review is even less important than whether it is raining in Patagonia.

*Iris Murdoch*

The better and more honest a critic you are, the fewer friends will eventually send flowers to the funeral parlor.

*George Jean Nathan*

Insects sting, not from malice but because they want to live. It is the same with critics—they desire our blood, not pain.

*Friedrich Nietzsche,  
'Miscellaneous Maxims  
and Opinions' (1879)*

Critics?—I love every bone in their heads.

*Eugene O'Neill*

Critics are a dissembling, dishonest, contemptible race of men. Asking a working writer what he feels about critics is like asking a lamppost what he feels about dogs.

*John Osborne*

The trouble with most of us is that we would rather be ruined by praise than saved by criticism.

*Norman Vincent Peale*

A critic is someone who's at his best when you're at your worst.

*Tony Pettito*

As for you, little envious Prigs, snarling, bastard, puny Criticks, you'll soon have railed your last: Go hang yourself.

*François Rabelais*

Can't a critic give his opinion of an omelette without being asked to lay an egg?

*Clayton Rawson*



**All critics should be assassinated.**

*Man Ray*

**A critic is a man whose watch is five minutes ahead of other people's watches.**

*Charles Sainte-Beuve*

**Critics are like mayors of New York; nobody really wants to like them.**

*Dore Schary*

**Critics, like other people, see what they look for, not what is actually before them.**

*George Bernard Shaw*

**Contemporary criticism only represents the amount of ignorance genius has to contend with.**

*Percy Bysshe Shelley*

**Time is the only critic without ambition.**

*John Steinbeck*

**A bad review is like baking a cake with all the best ingredients and having someone sit on it.**

*Danielle Steel*