

Snark Bites

Book Review by Suzanne Ross

Denby, David: *Snark*.

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David Denby bravely wades into a nasty and often violent landscape with his insightful little yellow book *Snark*. He diagnoses the why and wherefore of a growing phenomenon, what he calls online “vituperative” language or snark. He has a keen grasp of the way snark functions at the personal level as an expression of resentment and frustrated envy and at the group level to establish cohesiveness at the expense of a victim. If he had stopped there, I would have no quarrels with his analysis. But his ultimate goal is to find a systematic way to separate snark into two types, the condemnable and the permissible. His failure to do so illuminates his subject more thoroughly than any of his successes.

Denby understands that snark begins in resentment, that nasty emotion that is both dependent upon and despises its unlucky target. In fact, the target is hateful precisely because of having inspired a desire that cannot be sated. Here’s how Denby describes it:

“In the common estimation, American life is a viciously competitive race, in which every ego has to fight for a limited amount of oxygen. In that atmosphere, then, adoration of another is experienced as a loss, a wound. Reduced in some way, we want to hit back... Admiration flips into hatred, and the ego is repaired, restored, and soothed in snarly put-downs... The punishment for capturing our love never ends... Almost everyone participates in the narrative of ascendancy and decline. The national ritual may lead to recurrent bouts of nausea, but a sick stomach never stopped anyone from consuming for very long.” (84)

Denby rightly describes the phenomenon: I am inspired to admire you, but if you are admirable, what am I? I can never be you, but perhaps I can destroy you and take your place. Denby says it succinctly, “I see you; I insult you; I am you.” (52) Snark is the insulting, hateful language that seeks the destruction, however perversely, of its target in order to subsume the being of the destroyed one into my own endlessly desiring self.

What is clear to Denby, and what inspires him to decry snark, is that snark is verbal violence. He understands only too well the desire to commit death by snark. He says, “From time to time, some of the people who professionally attack others have boasted that their words are strong enough to make their victims disappear—go away, give up, even kill themselves.” (18) “Don’t many writers of snark secretly hope that their victims will crumple, collapse, and disappear?” (23) He notes the phenomenon of cyber-bullying in which online character assassination has led to “depression, or, in a few cases, suicide.” (97) He even tells us that “the United States has an intercontinental nuclear cruise missile called the SM-62 Snark.” (19) Snark may be just words, but words can kill as surely as any other weapon.

What strikes Denby as particularly unfair is that when it comes to snarky accusations, truth is beside the point. The point is a restoration of self-esteem, and as such no courtroom logic applies. One simply feels better when engaging in snark and the feeling better is the proof that the victim is guilty and deserving of punishing attacks. Actual guilt is unnecessary and superfluous. Denby recognizes another goal, the effect of establishing a sense of belonging and group solidarity. The best snark involves what Denby calls an “in-group knowingness” (4) that defines us against that one whom we are excluding. He presents this typical snarky scenario:

“Two girls are sitting in a high school cafeteria putting down the third, who’s sitting on the other side of the room. What’s peculiar about this event is that the girl on the other side of the room *is their best friend*. In that scenario, snark is abusive or sarcastic speech that operates like poisoned arrows within a closed space. Its intention is to offer solidarity between two or more parties and to exclude someone from the same group.” (4-5, italics are Denby’s)

With masterful brevity, Denby captures the twist from admiration to resentment, the disregard for truth, and both the personal and group benefit derived from really good snark. The perpetrators of snark have derived an elevated sense of their own goodness at the expense of someone else’s well being and they have done so without a smidgen of remorse. Feeling fully justified, they perpetrate the isolation of one of their own with pitiless glee.

So far so good. Up to this point, Denby is accurate but I believe incomplete and in some cases completely misguided. He spends a great deal of time trying to distinguish between what I will call good snark and bad snark. He is searching for a set of criteria by which to judge whether or not snark is justified, because he begins with the pre-supposition that some of it is. According to Denby, Snark is a low-brow form of something that has merit in another form. Snark is deteriorated satire and irony, robbed of literary skill and poetic art. Snark, he says, “lacks imagination, freshness, fantasy, verbal invention and adroitness—all the elements of wit.” (9) Snark also is devoid of a noble or redemptive purpose, such as rhetoric that aims to expose the secret, evil ways of the powerful and the corrupt. “Savage insult, especially insult directed at the powerful, is a necessary part of democratic culture.” (11) So for Denby a well turned phrase and a noble purpose are enough to excuse the savagery of insult intended to destroy its target.

Armed with this understanding, Denby offers a series of extended examples in which he tries to apply this standard but it seems that even he is not convinced that there is a form of snark that is redeemable. In the midst of examples of justified snark, he says repeatedly, almost confessionally, that the “temptation” to snark can be “irresistible” as if it should be resisted, which is a quite different assumption. For example, he bemoans the use of snark in literary criticism, an arena he believes should be above such uncultivated language. But rather than asking literary critics to take responsibility for their language, he excuses them by pinning the blame on the state of arts education, media degeneration of literary standards, and the critic’s desire to relieve the “anguish that he no longer matters very much.” Amid all these excuses, he cites the critic and novelist Heidi Julavits who gives as an “example of justified cruelty” in a “nasty piece” by the literary critic James Wood. Wood is given

permission to be “vituperative” because he has an “almost religious belief in great writing” and this noble passion elevates his nastiness from bad snark to something defensible. (103)

Excuses, excuses. Denby defends Wood and many others on three points, that they are literary, truthful, and noble so their rhetoric, no matter how cruel, mean or nasty, is above reproach. This seems disingenuous to me. What comes to mind are two images. In one, a random bystander is pierced through the heart by a poorly educated, angry man wielding a sawed-off shotgun. In the other, the bystander is a corrupt politician who is pierced through the heart by a well-educated man executing a feat of elegant sword play. In both cases, a man has been pierced through the heart and to justify the one while condemning the other is to engage in the world’s oldest game, that of defending one type of violence (that which is wielded by me or my compatriots) while condemning another (that which is wielded against me and mine). What betrays Denby most profoundly is his constant attempt to reason with snark, to find a way to distinguish whether the victim of snark is actually deserving of such treatment or not. This thrashing about for a way to tell innocent victim from deserving bad guy reveals that he has failed to grasp the most elemental quality of snark: the guilt lies not with the victim but with the snarky perpetrator.

Denby fails to give voice to the one criteria that drives all his analysis, that of social elitism. He is a snob, plain and simple, and a liberal snob at that. He lauds critiques of the Bush administration by Stephen Colbert as high satire and truth telling (121) and condemns critiques of Obama on Fox News as mean-spirited and low-brow (62). In his search for a neutral principle to separate the good vituperation from the bad, Denby has settled on the least neutral principle of all, himself. His values trump all others and serve as the benchmark for when escalation to violence is permitted. And we are definitely in the arena of violence here, as we saw earlier in Denby’s insight that snarkers desire the destruction of their victims. Though Denby sees this he veils it behind some high-brow language. He uses the adjective “vituperative” to describe snark, a very serious and scholarly sounding word indeed. He could have chosen “abusive” or “punishing” or even “violent”, all of which are synonyms for vituperative but by choosing a high-brow word he at once promotes his theory of the literary justification of violence and perpetuates it by concealing the harsh reality in sophisticated language.

Though Denby never uses the word, what he has been participating in even as he has been analyzing it is called scapegoating and the key to its success is the blindness that descends upon its users. The essential ingredient of scapegoating that eludes Denby is the inability of any of us to see our own scapegoats. There is indeed a truth to be found, but it is hidden and possesses two complementary parts. Yes, the victim is innocent, that Denby clearly sees but only when the victim is not his scapegoat. He can see the guilt of the scapegoaters, too, as long as they are not he. What he fails to see, what all scapegoaters fail to see, is their own guilt. All the snarkers he cites, whether high-brow or low-brow, whether nobly motivated or infected by envy, believe whole heartedly in the justice of their cause and in the guilt of their targets. Somehow Denby can see through another’s self-delusion but the greater insight is to see through his own, which he fails to accomplish.

Denby closes his book by saying that “Vituperation that is insulting, nasty, but, well, *clean*, may live forever. Go and commit some. You’ll feel better. You’ll make other people feel better.” (132, italics are

Denby's) *Clean*, it seems, is his final attempt at justification yet all those commas betray his ambivalence. I wonder if he might write a sequel to *Snark*, one that begins with a different assumption. If snark is violent and destructive language, then rather than seek to justify it, he might aim to root it out wherever it appears. Holding everyone to a higher standard is indeed the task before us all. But the noble standard is not literary or political. It is to encourage everyone to accept responsibility for their own vituperative – may we now say abusive? – language. If Denby can help clear away all the violent rhetoric, even that of those with whom he agrees, even his own, he could make a valuable contribution to civil discourse. He could move our conversations beyond self-serving bullying to a place where the issues can be discussed on their merits. That would make us all feel better.

About the Reviewer

Suzanne Ross is a graduate of Bucknell University and a certified Montessori educator. She has extensive experience as a corporate training consultant, and is a former editor of the literary journal, *StoryQuarterly*. She is the author of *The Wicked Truth: When Good People Do Bad Things* and the soon to be released *The Wicked Truth About Love: The Tangles of Desire*.

In 2007, Ross co-founded the Raven Foundation with husband Keith. Based on the principles of mimetic theory, the foundation seeks to make religion reasonable, violence unthinkable and peace a possibility by challenging conventional wisdom and opening the door to new ways of thinking.