

You know me. Predictable, dependable, stolid old Graham.

But I hate to be taken for granted! Every now and again I step out of character. This morning, for instance, I gave money to a beggar, just be different.

It is my nature to overlook small discourtesies and trivial insults. But get this old curmudgeon aroused and every now and again I will lash out.

A young woman asked me to do a favor for an acquaintance of hers, a woman named Kimberly. A teacher at one of the international schools, she has a hobby of adopting street dogs in Kyiv. Kimberly nurses them back to health and gets them adopted. She wrote a 40 page book entitled "Happy Tails" about her good works. Every chapter featured Saint Kimberly in some heroic rescue effort.

Here is the favor. St. Kimberly needed nine reviews on Amazon for some reason or another. I am an Amazon reviewer; my friend asked if I could write one? I said, certainly. And so I did, writing by far the longest review posted. I gave the book a top rating.

The next day, a smile on my face, I looked to see how the review was doing. It had only one vote. An unhelpful vote! The first person who read the review did not like it! Who could that be?

I emailed the woman who had requested the favor and asked what was up. If you ask me as a favor to write a review, you kind of have to like the review. I asked her to please ask the author to get in touch if she wanted me to change something.

My friend was a little bit chagrined. She and one other person then gave the review helpful votes, but Saint Kimberly herself let it be known that "she had moved on to other things" within her celestial realm and that she couldn't be bothered.

The calm voice of reason (and the voices of Mark Taylor, my wife, and others I could hear echoing in my head), told me to let it go. And I usually would. But I hate to be too predictable! And besides that, this incident played to one of my favorite prejudices, that against American women. It is so typical of them to use a man and then treat him like dirt.

I amended my review to say as much. "One word comes to mind. The female of canis lupus, the common dog. You bitch!"

I got a rather distressed email from the young woman who had asked the the favor saying that a swearword like "bitch" was offensive. I refuse to be mollified. As you in Toastmasters know, the beauty of the English language is that pejoratives come in a marvelous range of strengths, of which bitch is one of the weaker. I asked her to get out of the middle and please ask this Kimberly to contact me directly. I implied that I would take it down if asked politely.

I had of course conjured up a delicious mental image of Saint Kimberly. She seemed to be a woman who is terribly impressed with her own virtue, saving wounded puppies. She sits at the very center of her own universe expecting worship. She has no practice apologizing because she has nothing to apologize for, ever. At least in her own mind.

I presented her with a difficult moral choice. She could either do nothing, allowing my unflattering review to stand on Amazon, or she could humble herself to actually get in touch with me and make amends. An agonizing decision!

It took four weeks for her to work it out. Weaving a web of unlikely circumstance, she claimed that she had not been able to access the Internet for a month and that she merely found the review "too long." The woman who asked me to do the review gives this story the lie. She said that, as I suspected, St. Kimberley was continually pressuring her to get me to change things. Kimberley could not condescend to contact me herself.

The truth hurts, and Kimberley finally gave in. I graciously edited the review back to its original form, giving it four stars.

It would have been a true miracle if St. Kimberly had changed her "unhelpful" vote. It would have bolstered my belief in God. Feminism might be less than I imagined. I would have quickly changed the review to five stars. But that kind of miracle never happens. Kimberley lamely wrote that it wasn't her who made the "unhelpful" vote. I am sure that such a saint must have an evil twin.

For me this has been an occasion to assess my own humanity, my own morality and sense of right and wrong. It is also a great topic for a speech

This is how the review stood as of August 7.

The original review had been posted four weeks earlier, on July 11.

<<This is my original review>>

Feral cats and dogs are a fact of life throughout Ukraine, the same as one sees from Mexico to Argentina and in Southeast Asia. Animal control is a low priority for countries on small budgets.

Our family in Kyiv has adopted some neighborhood cats, or rather they have adopted us. They show up regularly and we feed them scraps. A couple of members of our household have bought cat food. It keeps them coming.

Most of the ownerless cats and dogs are quite comfortable with people. The dogs have the run of the streets. Although my young son is sometimes afraid of them, they have never done anything mean, and in fact only rarely bark at him. Of course, they bark at each other all the time. If there is anything good to be said for life on the street, it is that these have pretty much normal personalities. They don't acquire neuroses from overly doting owners. They aren't fat.

Kimberly ascribes breeds to the dogs in her neighborhood. Not ours – most are just mutts, generic dogs for the most part – the ur-canines that our ancestors domesticated from wolves. They are quite attractive, two to three feet high, maybe 30 to 40 pounds, well-formed, with brindled coats. Most of them have learned to avoid cars, although we occasionally see another one learn the hard way that they are a dangerous thing to chase.

Conversely, the dogs do chase bicycles. The only night I have spent in the Kyiv hospital was as a result of trying to outrun a pack of dogs. I hit a pothole and went sprawling. I don't know what happened to the dogs – I was unconscious. I woke up with my wife and an ambulance asking me anxiously how I felt.

Exactly as the book describes, the dogs live in whatever shelter they can find. In our neighborhood of dachas (summer houses) that includes abandoned and demolished buildings. They seem to be pretty resourceful. The book describes a number of truly pitiful animals, dogs that were half dead when they were rescued. The dogs in our neighborhood seem to be in better health for the most part. They don't appear to have mange or parasite overloads. It may be that I'm not seeing something. One of the cats we feed has scratched his ear raw. He must have something like ear mites. He won't let us hold him still to put anything on it, and he really is not our cat, so the problem persists.

Safonov writes about the need to spay the dogs. I have read in the newspapers that there are two schools of thought here in Kyiv – one wants to round them up and euthanize them, the other wants to spay them and release them. We see some with ear tags, so we assume that the latter group was the first to find them. Neither group, obviously, has the resources to really address the problem.

This book is short and direct, a very fast read. It is a touching description of the problem that evidently will be with us for quite a while, and the compassion that a few dedicated people have to improving the lives of at least a few animals.

<<Postscript:>>

I posted this review at the request of a Ukrainian friend, an acquaintance of the author. The author needed to get a certain number of reviews – nine or so – to qualify for some recognition by Amazon.

It is a thin book, not much substance, easy to read. I did the favor and gave it five stars.

In return, I expect the author at least to like it. She did not! Without contacting me, asking for any clarification, or writing a comment as to why she did not like it, Kimberly gave it an "unhelpful" vote.

I told the Ukrainian who had asked me that this is not the way you treat a guy who has done you a favor. I invited her to email Safonov, and have her tell me what she didn't like about the review.

The answer I got was that Safonov had "moved on to other things" and could not be bothered.

I have only one word for such a person. The female of canis lupus, the common dog. You bitch! It goes without saying (I have not even heard) that she is an American woman.

This is a prime example of why I am an American expatriate. And why I changed the rating from an inflated five stars down to one.

Safonov is a teacher in one of the two international schools here in Kiev. This incident only reinforces my commitment to homeschooling. The schools teach entitlement, not courtesy.

I console myself that she devotes herself to dogs instead of her own children. I can only pray for the school children under her tutelage.

PPS one week later. My Ukrainian friend told me three days ago, three days after my amendment of the review, that she considers my language above to be extremely strong. I invited her to ask Safonov to write me or call me to work things out. No word yet. If she is content to let it stand, so am I.

Emails

This is the email I got from Kimberley on August 7, and my response. I have x'd out the name of the woman who asked the favor, email addresses and other personal data.

----- Forwarded Message -----

From: Kimberly (rest deleted)

Sent: Saturday, August 6, 2016 3:47 PM

Subject: re: amazon review for xxxxx's friend kim

Dear Graham,

This is my first opportunity to write you, as we have been traveling and are now helping my aged parents in Ohio.

First, I wanted to take the opportunity to thank you for reviewing my book, "Happy Tails" on Amazon. That was very kind of you. And I told Xxxxx to thank you for me.

Second, I believe Xxxxx didn't understand what I wanted to relay to you regarding the review. I told her I appreciated the review, but asked her if it could please be shortened a bit. I'm not sure how this got relayed to you, but it seems that there was a misunderstanding to the point of you thinking that I was unappreciative of it or that I found it unhelpful or something along this line. That is not the case at all. I am grateful for everyone who takes their own time and opportunity to read the book at all. I know that people are busy with their own lives and not everyone wants to do this. So for this, I want to thank you again!

I was only very surprised to see the new review that you posted after that. I was traveling and wasn't on internet for several days. And now we are busy helping my elderly parents and again I am not on internet much during this time.

Would you please kindly consider taking the edited review down? My book is not political or controversial that would call for a critical review, so I ask you to please consider removing it. If you don't feel that the book is deserving, then you can feel free to remove the whole review.

Thank you so much for your time again and your kind consideration.

Sincerely,

Kimberly



Graham Seibert <grahamseib@gmail.com>

8:23 AM (26 minutes ago)

to kim

Certainly. I was shocked and disappointed, as noted, that after posting the review the first vote was "unhelpful."

An independent reviewer has the same artistic control over his/her product as an author. It is not an especially long review. Readers will comment when they think a review is too long. In this Facebook / Twitter age most people tend to favor brevity. I know something of the feral cats and dogs in Kyiv, and chose to add my observations.

I have changed it back to its original form. I appreciate your courtesy in getting in touch with me.

to me

Thank you Graham.

By the way, I never voted that post as "unhelpful". I don't know who did that. Sorry about that.

Appreciate your kindness and understanding.

Email from Xxxxx on August 8

Good that she wrote finally - I kept asking her to write directly rather than to me. She also says that it wasn't her who gave 'unhelpful vote'.

Best regards,