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Book Review [How I Turned Ordinary Complaints into Thousands of Dollars and A Public Citizen's Action Manual]

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BOOK REVIEW

HOW I TURNED ORDINARY COMPLAINTS INTO THOUSANDS OF DOLLARS. By Ralph Charell. Grossman Publishers: 1973.

A PUBLIC CITIZEN'S ACTION MANUAL. By Donald K. Ross. Stein and Day: 1973.

Ralph Charell has *chutzpah*. For those readers who are not familiar with this concept, *chutzpah* is the attribute exhibited by the defendant who, after having been convicted for the hatchet murder of his father and mother, throws himself on the mercy of the sentencing court on the ground that he is, after all, an orphan.

Charell's *chutzpah* has several manifestations. To begin with, he has allowed his publishers to charge \$6.95 for *How I Turned Ordinary Complaints into Thousands of Dollars*, a slim volume which may easily be digested while waiting in line to purchase gasoline. Lest the reader think that Charell is therefore also a *gonif*,¹ I must hasten to add that he lacks the requisite criminal intent, for his objective is to instruct, and to inspire us in the punctilio of militant consumerism. Lesson number one is that we cannot safely venture out into the marketplace unless we are prepared to take care of ourselves. The meek may one day inherit the earth, Charell might say, but meanwhile they had better picket the testators before the legacy disappears.

The middle-class reader will instantly identify with Charell's odyssey through consumer-land. Which of us has not been bedeviled by the washing machine repairman who, combining incompetence with profit motive, somehow manages to transform a simple repair into a three-visit engineering miracle; or the expensive gift shop which cannot seem to deliver anything on time except the bill; or the mysterious charge which, once having wandered onto one's monthly statement, takes on a life of its own, remaining there month after month with all the tenacity of barnacles on boat bottoms; or the customer service clerk who has

1. *Gonif* (gon' if), *n.* literally, a crook. More precisely, a *gonif* is one who pilfers your car from your garage and leaves the dirty ashtrays behind for you to empty.

learned to identify consumers as the enemy; or the car rental agency whose confirmed reservations are worth the paper they're *not* written on? Even the detached denizens of Park Avenue and Grosse Point will feel a shudder of recognition as Charell chronicles his protracted guerilla warfare with the telephone company.

But Charell is not like the rest of us. For one thing, he actually enjoys these epic struggles. With thinly-concealed self-satisfaction, he observes that handling his own complaints is "extremely rewarding and lots of fun, . . . a relaxing break from demanding professional tasks." If this seems perverse to some of us, he hastens to explain, "So far, my record is perfect." Like a weekend duffer waiting in worshipful silence while Jack Nicklaus tells how he does it, the reader devours the book for tips on consumer self-defense. The results are somewhat disappointing. It is as if one paid Nicklaus \$6.95 to be told, "keep your eye on the ball" and "have a good mental attitude."

When all is said and done, the secret of Charell's success is neither his artifice nor his wiles, but his passionate need to win, his abundance (apparently) of free time, and, of course, his *chutzpah*. His specific suggestions (for example, haughtily observe to your adversary that your time is very valuable; drop the name of your "friend", the company president; complain to the parent company in the conglomerate which owns the perpetrator) pale in comparison to those signal virtues necessary to achieve success. And Charell's recommended gambits are of little avail when one is left on "hold" for an hour and a half.

Charell, after all, is not really interested in *changing* the system; he is having too much fun *beating* it. If we cannot learn from him how to beat it ourselves, we can still smirk with vicarious satisfaction as he terrorizes clerks and sandbags store presidents. His shrill complaints are music to our ears.

Donald Ross, as befits a Ralph Nader disciple, has loftier, more grandiose ambitions for us in his book *A Public Citizen's Action Manual*. No smirking allowed, he seems to be saying; this is serious business. Ross, who has spawned a network of student-funded "public interest research groups" throughout the country, tells us that our private and public institutions urgently need reform at the hands of an outraged citizenry. Did you think that the American Automobile Association was the St. Bernard of the highways, serving the motorist in distress? Wrong. It is the ally of the automobile industry, the handmaiden of the highway lobby, an organization controlled by a self-perpetuating elite indifferent to the interests of its members. Ross tells us how to change all that. Did you think that the property tax system was hopelessly corrupt and irretrievably unfair? Wrong again.

The system can be changed and Ross shows us how to begin. The nuts and bolts of citizen action (such as, obtaining public information, organizing research, incorporating as a tax-exempt group, holding citizen hearings) are laid out before us, along with the battle plans for several dozen specific citizen action projects. Titles of projects such as "How to Help Savings and Loan Associations Serve the Public Interest," "How to Turn Blue Cross and Blue Shield into Consumer Advocates" and "How to Improve the Image of Women in Textbooks" betray an audacity, self-righteousness and self-assurance which would be risible if self-mockery were permitted in the consumer movement. Written in the earnest, humorless idiom of liberal self-improvement, the *Action Manual* is the modern Puritan's primer, a do-it-yourself roadmap to temporal justice, consumer style.

If the thought of armies of outraged citizens carrying banners emblazoned with "Public Interest" and pouring out of their houses and into their local savings and loans to demand justice gives you pause, that is not what Donald Ross has in mind. He constantly exhorts his readers to learn the facts before acting and to pursue modest but achievable goals. He points out that allies may be found in the most unlikely places, that organizational activity is difficult and often deeply frustrating, and that there is simply no substitute for hard analysis. His book holds a great deal of useful information on a wide variety of subjects, and Ross unearths a treasure trove of program material for issue-hungry grass roots consumer, taxpayer, civic improvement and civil rights organizations.

Unlike Charell, Ross is concerned not with the individual consumer's recourse to redress particular grievances, but rather with the rehabilitation of institutions whose *modus operandi* routinely affect large numbers of consumers. Where Charell seeks recompense, Ross seeks reform. This difference is significant in highlighting the failures of each. While Charell awes and amuses with his department store derring-do, he offers no solace or anodyne to those who can manage neither the time nor the *chutzpah* to fence with the faceless clerks and anonymous functionaries who, with Kafkaesque grimness, bar the gates to individual consumer redress. The isolated individual can take comfort in Charell's hard-won triumphs, but ultimately, they are not his or her triumphs.

Ross does have an answer for such people—citizen organizations. However, like most answers, it raises more questions. To begin with, why should a citizen join such an organization? If he is rational, the citizen, however zealous, will withhold his time and money from the organization, letting others perform the hard

work of "Turning Blue Cross and Blue Shield into Consumer Advocates," while enjoying the fruits of their labors free of charge. Ross calls this phenomenon "public apathy," which is inaccurate and does not really address the root problem. Citizen organizations will never attract significant numbers of active participants unless they can solve this "free rider" feature of organizational life. Consumer cooperatives and credit unions have overcome this problem by offering identifiable economic benefits to members, while excluding non-members. Other groups must rely upon the irrational loyalties of their hard-core constituency, or the allure of names like Ralph Nader or John Gardner.

Ross also writes as if citizen concern, good issues, and competent research are the crucial ingredients for successful citizen organizations. In fact, however, creative leadership—the ability to inspire, motivate, and manipulate—is at least as important, yet Ross hardly mentions it. This omission may perhaps be forgiven in a "how to" book such as this, for leadership is a quality of ineffable, political and affective dimension; it can neither be reduced to a prescription nor taught in organizational workshops.

Finally, how is a citizen organization to identify the "public interest?" Is it a discrete policy, locked in the guarded vault of the savings and loan association, waiting only to be liberated by consumer advocates? Or is it simply a procedural framework, requiring only some vague "input" from citizen organizations? Needless to say, citizen organizations are no more arrogant than other private groups in asserting and organizing to implement their conceptions of the public interest. But they labor under peculiarly burdensome handicaps in maintaining their organizational effectiveness. And Ross, while recognizing these obstacles, does not suggest how to overcome them.

Inevitably, most of the hard work in assuring justice in the marketplace will always rest with the solitary consumer. The availability of *individual* remedies, legal and otherwise, must underlie and supplement any organizational strategy. Small claims court remedies, consumer class actions, reimbursable attorneys' fees, along with the more visible, aggregate strategies involving consumer organizations and regulatory reforms—and just plain *chutzpah*—will remain the important arrows in the consumer's quiver.

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