

## Catalyst – for change in book reviews

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**Chemistry & Biology** September 1997, 4:651–652  
<http://biomednet.com/eleceref/1074552100400651>

© Current Biology Ltd ISSN 1074-5521

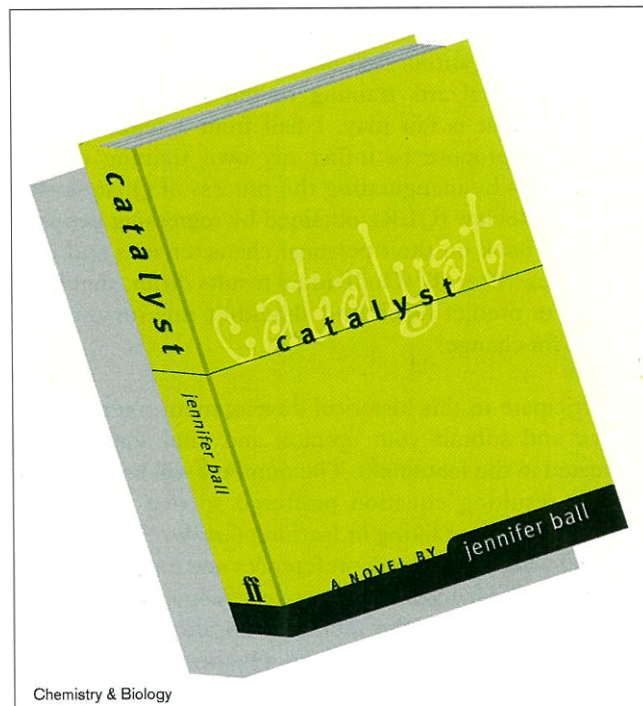
**Catalyst** by Jennifer Ball, Faber and Faber Inc., 1997. 300 pp. \$24.95 ISBN 0-571-19915-1

In Jennifer Ball's novel *Catalyst*, a tale of love, chemistry, and scientific fraud, Shelby (the ex-theater-major protagonist) is married to chemist Max, but the marriage is on the (igneous) rocks. Shelby should put effort into salvaging it. But she can't. She is too f\_\_ing busy; or *vice versa*. (Lest you care, this is not foul language but literary allusion. Dorothy Parker is credited with serving up a cognate remark, in the first person, as an excuse to her publisher for being late with — what else — a book review.)

Thus the book is a proper substrate for a *Chemistry & Biology* analysis. For first there is Chemistry, between man-who-happens-to-be-chemist and woman; and then there is Biology, in the fine tradition of amplexus\* — or marginally kinky sex, anyhow. Check out the discussion of poles as props for the libido. (I do not refer to dipoles.)

The book as a whole adheres to the principles of the Romantic Comedy. The sole goal of a Romantic Comedy is to contrive, for the first 150 pages (or 2 hours if a screenplay) to keep apart two persons who will clearly end up together. But Jennifer Ball serves up the Romantic Comedy with a twist. She contrives to keep the protagonist, Shelby, from not one but two persons with whom Shelby will clearly end up. Moreover, one is the best friend of the other. And the other is her husband.

The chief 'plot', such as it is, consists of Shelby — who is evidently unfulfilled in her career performing singing telegrams — undergoing a mild personal crisis. For solace, she partakes of extramarital pleasures. (Between times she makes observations on science and its practitioners.) Interlarded in the personal tale of limerence<sup>†</sup>, self-involvement, and Wonder Woman costumes (a prerequisite — and perquisite — of Shelby's job), is a tale of science and scientific fraud. Rahda, a graduate student from India, stretches the truth just a bit by pretending to have accomplished something she is on the brink of succeeding at, she is sure. The route from honest citizen to fraudulent perpetrator of crime is deftly drawn. To cover her tracks requires some crafty thinking, plus a little mayhem and attempted



murder whelped of that sociopathy that so becomes a scientist. (Rahda's scheme, incidentally, explodes Shelby's *affaire du coeur*.)

Ball's depiction of scientists is credible; for instance, the author understands and articulates the unique criterion alone needed for obtaining a PhD — persistence. One minor blemish: there is excessive enthusiasm about basic principles of science. (Yawn.) Us real scientists save our *cutis anserina*<sup>‡</sup> for more rarefied esoterica.

Interpersonal dynamics are also nicely charted. Ball draws smoothly the development of attraction between a woman and her-husband's-best-friend-and-chief-competitor-in-the-same-scientific-field. And Ball formulates well the ensuing complications. In testament to her prowess, she accomplishes these feats so convincingly that by the book's end I could be found prancing about, Hosanna-ing to Methuselah in gratitude that my own spouse's best-friend-and-chief-competitor-in-the-same-scientific-field is safely ensconced in a frigid land to the North.

The book does less well in its depiction of science. For instance, we learn that it is now trivial to convert other metals into gold. We are told so twice. "All you need is a lab." (Those of you with a lab will want to know this.) And failed experiments can be casually ascribed to violations of

the Second Law of Thermodynamics. It's that or fraud. One needn't concern oneself that there may be other factors one has not thought to consider. Though I enjoyed the book, "Individual results may differ" — as all the best technical disclaimers say.

To recapitulate, author Ball had a 'novel' idea. She would apply her liberal arts training to the world of science. Well, turnabout is fair play. I hail from a science background and propose to inflict my own training on the liberal arts — by inaugurating the process of Quantitative Literature Review (QLR), obtained by regressing people's rating of a book on their personal characteristics and past preferences. After all, if individual results differ, shouldn't we seek to predict how? And shouldn't this review be a Catalyst for change?

To participate in this historical development, merely read *Catalyst* and submit your opinion and vital statistics (as delineated in the footnote<sup>§</sup>). The numbers will be crunched and the resulting equation proffered so that others can predict their risk of liking or loathing *Catalyst*. Later renditions will utilize prior book preferences and employ sophisticated nonlinear methods. Lest few responses accrue, I should now describe the merits of an alternative formal system: the SQLR (Systematic Qualitative Literature Review). But I can't. In the fine tradition of Dorothy Parker, I am late with my review. Or *vice versa*.

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\*Amplexus refers to a mating behavior seen in amphibians.

†Limerence is a term used in psychiatry for the experience of being in love.

\*Goosebumps', to the medicalese-challenged.

§E-mail the following vital statistics within three weeks to [bgolomb@hsrd.ucsd.edu](mailto:bgolomb@hsrd.ucsd.edu): birthdate, sex, ethnicity (optional), occupation, education, college major (if any), graduate school field (if any), marital status, religion, enthusiasm for romantic comedy (Golomb scale of 1 [hate] to 5 [adore]). And cooking ability. (It may be a proxy for something. Like whether I want to come for dinner.) And please, the dependent variable: did you like this book? (Yes or no.)