Should one say ‘vicious circle’ or ‘vicious cycle’? That’s a question that just goes round and round inside my head.

In the case of the American novelist and screenwriter William Goldman, he has always abhorred reviewers (‘whores and failures’, in his eyes), and the reviewers have returned the compliment. When he was paid $400,000 for the script of Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid in 1969, it was the highest price ever for a screenplay, and the pundits were quick to pan it. The public differed, and the film was a smash hit (the script, of course, is a masterpiece). But it’s interesting to consider why Goldman has always been quite so critical of the critics.

Part of it, I believe, is a rebellious attitude — anti-old, anti-system — stemming from arrested development caused by two adolescent traumas. The first was the suicide of his alcoholic father, for which Goldman always blamed himself (if he’d only got home earlier that day). The second was his mother telling him her deafness was the result of complications when she gave birth to him — which wasn’t true, as she revealed on her deathbed. From this it followed, if my theory is correct, that Goldman’s mindset became fixed at around the age of 15.

Perfect, in other words, for penning some of the greatest movie scripts of his time. Goldman was originally going to place his younger character first and call his best-known film The Sundance Kid and Butch Cassidy, but was persuaded out of it on the basis that the actor playing Butch (Paul Newman) was a star, while the Kid (Robert Redford) was unknown. The idea was that the film should flout the hoary conventions of the Western, with heroes who were beautiful rather than butch (Newman’s genial portrayal rendering his character name comically ill-fitting), more likely to crack jokes than skulls, and willing to play unfair if necessary: witness the kick in the groin by which Butch neutralises, and nearly neuters, a mutinous gang-member.

That script won Goldman an Oscar, as did his script for All the President’s Men (1976), which told perhaps the greatest anti-establishment story of the 20th century. Goldman being Goldman, he didn’t bother to turn up to either ceremony, on the grounds, he claimed, that he didn’t think he’d win, and in any case, the awards weren’t such a big deal in those days.

The stars of Goldman’s movies seem manly compared with the epicene heartthrobs to come, but they also were mainly locked in adolescence. Redford and Newman, yes, but Dustin Hoffman, too. Having starred in All The President’s Men, the 5’ 5” actor was picked, at 39, to play the 20-something hero in the film of Goldman’s 1976 bestseller Marathon Man (his nickname, note, is Babe), who, struggling to come to terms with the suicide of his old man, ends up being dentally tortured by a sinister father figure in the form of Laurence Olivier.

There was method, as well as Method, in that scene. Yet it’s a craft that Sean Egan (May I borrow your drill, Larry?) largely fails to acknowledge in his cursorily researched, wretchedly written study of William Goldman’s oeuvre. It may seem mean to pick out, in order to pick on, a minor book written by an obscure British author for a small American publisher. But to quote another cinematic Butch (the boxer played by Bruce Willis in Pulp Fiction), ‘I don’t feel
the least bit bad about it.’ Why? Because Egan shows little mercy in his assessment of Goldman.

Concentrating, for no good reason, on the novels, he lambasts ‘the phony profundity’ of Boys and Girls Together, which was the summer hit of 1964. In Egan’s opinion, the novel of Marathon Man is ‘massively flawed’, while The Princess Bride (1973) — the only one of his novels the eternally self-deprecating Goldman admits he can read without despair — is ‘boring where it is not pleased with itself’. So says Sean Egan. The author, he concedes with breathtaking condescension, is ‘clearly not an unintelligent person’, but he has ‘never developed the verbal eloquence common among writers’. Verbal eloquence, eh? As opposed, perhaps, to the physical eloquence of athletes, or the sexual eloquence of porn stars?

We needn’t take this seriously. Elsewhere, Egan refers to Hoffman as ‘a smouldering sex-bomb’ and to Mel Gibson as ‘an effortlessly fine thespian’. (Has he seen either of them ever?) But it stings to watch the great Goldman being slapped about. And for the record, Marathon Man, which I first read when I was about 15, is an exemplary thriller.

Its author, who is 83 years old, apparently granted Egan three interviews to help him write this book. This is his return? Circle or cycle, I’d say that’s pretty vicious.