

About Writing a Professional Book Review

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It is probably quite a good idea to write a book review every so often, as it keeps one's hand in; it also keeps one up-to-date with recently published books; book reviews further offer a relatively quick route to publication; and finally you usually get to keep the review copy.

The process of getting to write a book review often starts something like this, with a communication from a journal editor: *"Dear ... (Your Name) ... You expressed an interest in reviewing one of the newly published books that have been sent to 'us' (the Journal of ...) for review."* Or your professor, tutor, lecturer, or mentor might have said: *"Have you read such and such a book? How about writing a review of this? It could be a good exercise for you."* Or you might have just written to the publishers directly, requesting a review copy of a newly published book.

The Purpose of Book Reviews

In any professional field, quality book reviews have a few very important functions: they inform and advertise about any new books, via the readership of the Journal and the visitors to the Journal's and/or publishers' website; they provide an essential level of peer critique (not necessarily a criticism, which is often sadly missing in an increasingly sycophantic age); they help in the process of sorting out the "wheat from the chaff" – as not everything published is worth reading; they also provide the beginnings of a dialogue about the particular topic or theme of the book and a comparison with similar aspects in other or parallel fields; and they form a part of the whole process of development for any particular field.

On a personal level, they help to hone one's skills of reading, comprehension, intellectual digestion and critical faculties, as well as one's writing skills, and they can also help to build relationships with the professional review process that happens in professional and scientific journals, and also with the editors of these, that can be very fruitful and productive over time.

Book reviews "are an important and neglected literary genre – an art in its own right." There is even a USA \$10,000 prize for (poetry) criticism¹ that is *"intelligent and learned, as well as lively and enjoyable to read"* (Cambridge University, 2010). However, they can also be the refuge of failed writers and academics; a way of seeking revenge, and an opportunity to slate a

rival's work. Artists don't often like reviews as they feel that reviewers and critics have no right to comment on other people's art; publishers sometimes don't rate them, or only use (and publish) the more positive reviews; booksellers are often indifferent, unless the review brings in more sales; and not all reviewers can be trusted, as some reviewers only write reviews in order to get a free copy of the book.

Most members of the public, or most of the journal readers, will never read the book, only the review – your review, so this is also a way – for better or worse – to start to get your name 'known'. But, be careful: you may be 'judged' by the quality of your review. Savage reviews may 'sell' newspapers: but they can also bounce back on the reviewer, or the publisher of the review: an archetypal example, much quoted, was written by a reviewer calling himself, *Aramis*:

“.. appears to have been written by a perverted lunatic who has made a speciality of the literature of the latrine... I have no stomach for *Ulysses*... James Joyce is a writer of talent, but in *Ulysses* he has ruled out all the elementary decencies of life and dwells appreciatively on things that sniggering louts of schoolboys guffaw about. In addition to this stupid glorification of mere filth, the book suffers from being written in the manner of a demented George Meredith. There are whole chapters of it without any punctuation or other guide to what the writer is really getting at. Two-thirds of it is incoherent, and the passages that are plainly written are devoid of wit, displaying only a coarse salacity [*sic*] intended for humour. (The Sporting Times, 1922)

One colleague of mine also used to write book reviews under various different pseudonyms, wanting to give different perspectives, but not necessarily wanting all of these to be ascribed to him/her-self: that is the charitable viewpoint anyway.

Preparing for the Review

The best book reviews provide a useful summary of the material in the book, for fellow professionals and prospective readers. They also offer an informed opinion about the book and evaluation of its scholarship.

Once you have received or accessed a copy of the book to be reviewed, firstly, do a simple 'clearance' of any other 'projects' that might impact on your ability over the next few days to formulate and write a reasonable review. Essentially, you are going to get 'paid' the retail value of the book for writing this review (sometimes costing as much as £30 or \$50), so try to invest some suitable quality time and energy in so doing. Given that it can take some considerable time to read a scholarly book and then to write a reasonable review, it is reasonable to assume that the book will be within your area of expertise. Here's a succinct synopsis of the role of a Book Reviewer:

As a reviewer, you bring together the two strands of accurate, analytical reading and strong, personal response when you indicate what the book is about and what it might mean to a reader (by explaining what it meant to you). In other words, reviewers answer not only the **what** but the **so what** question about a book. Thus, in writing a review, you combine the skills of *describing* what is on the page, *analyzing* how the book tried to achieve its purpose, and *expressing* your own reactions. (Indiana University: 2011)

Another archetypal piece of advice is John Updike's first rule of reviewing: "Try to understand what the author wished to do, and do not blame him for not achieving what he did not attempt". However, this should not always be followed, as this could excuse someone leaving something crucial out. Further 'rules' can be found in *Picked Up Pieces* (Updike, 1977).

Now we come to the "nitty-gritty" of actually beginning to formulate your opinion – the substance of the review. It is probably best to read the book through once, quite quickly, and then (at least) a second time, more slowly, to allow a more reflective view. Maybe, you can jot down some impressions after the first reading, and/or during the second reading. Then put it to one side and “see how it cooks” – see what impressions it still makes on you after a couple of days.

You may now want to (or it is suggested that you ought to) go out and do a little bit of research: what has already been written on this topic; by whom; when; – if you can, get hold of the (all or some) of these important references – if you can, read a bit into these books / references, or read the reviews of some of these books / references. If it is possible, read a bit into, and around, the topic of the book – what are others saying? You might also want to see what else the author might have written (and how was that reviewed?) – and what is the ‘competition’ – what is the background – and where does this particular book ‘sit’ in the field that it refers to?

Next, you might want to compare what the author is saying with your own experience. Even if the author is a professor of ‘this’, or a writer of several books on ‘that’, he or she is still speaking to you – the reader – and how does that feel? Are you Informed? Patronized? Bored? Excited? Educated? Enthralled? Confused? – or What? Your opinion is very valuable: especially as you are / might have been (one of) the potential readers (buyers) of this book. Hopefully, you also have some direct experience of this field, or topic: or else why are *you* reviewing the book? Do you have anything to add, or do you notice that anything has changed, as a result of reading this book?

Jot these impressions, thoughts, feelings, reflections, opinion, etc. down. These can or may be incorporated into your review. Don't also hesitate to comment or reflect on the layout, feel, cover, presentation, design, language, syntax, illustrations, metaphors and usage of imagery, price,

etc. All of these aspects are relevant as part of the material of the review. Make sure that you keep any of these notes: make sure that you have the references to hand, and any quotes (inc. the page numbers), either from the book itself, or otherwise, that you might want to incorporate in the review. All of this forms the preparation.

Planning the Review

Essentially, there are several types of Book Reviews, but I offer two examples, from different ends of the spectrum:

* Type A - about 500-750 words - which describes the book, its contents, how it makes you 'feel', enthuses a little about the author and/or their views, keeps the publisher happy, etc. etc. Possibly acceptable, but rather boring! This wouldn't necessarily inspire anyone to buy the book, and might (indeed) turn them off from so doing. Many reviews in this category could even be made by people just wanting a free copy of the book and then knocking out a minimum review. Perhaps Journal editors should be more discriminating.

* Type B (possibly coming from the more desirable end of the spectrum) - utilising maybe 1000 - 1500 words. This type of review uses the production of this particular book as an opportunity to review somewhat the field of literature on "... (this particular topic) ...". It may also include a couple of quotes, to indicate the author's particular writing style – good or bad – that you want to draw the readers' attention to and to give the reader a flavour of their syntax.

This type of review may also include several references to other (similar or contrary) books or examples – and then compares these with this book, and concludes as to how this particular book: either brings a fresh new perspective; or (sadly) fails to bring a fresh new perspective, to the field of "... (whatever the topic is) ..."; or succeeds moderately (or doesn't) in *this* particular respect, *that* particular aspect, and/or another point, and/or how – in your professional opinion (or even as an amateur) the book does ... 'this', 'that' or 'the other'. If you are a professional, you might indicate – as a result of trying out these ideas on a particular population (with the appropriate supervision and safeguards) – whether your results confirm or disprove the book's thesis.

Finally, you might say how this particular book (or author) might / could / should, have (been) improved (by) ... including *this* point, *that* perspective, *this* reference, or the ubiquitous 'other'. Or, if the book is (judged to be) deficient in any way, giving a better example.

Before you write, please plan a little which 'type' of book review you are writing: a quick knock-off; an in-depth review; or something in between.

Writing the Review

With respect to the actual task of writing – and referencing – you are referred to some of the more general comments made, in this Journal, about publishing professional articles (Young, 2010).

A “good” book review contains several different ‘sections’: **1)** The title of the book, the publisher’s name and city, the type of cover, number of pages, and its full bibliographic citation (including the edition, price and ISBN); **2)** A paragraph summarizing the overall concept of the book, and its direction and style; **3)** Next, should come a paragraph giving your basic evaluation: is the central direction of the book well dealt with; do you feel that it has achieved its stated aims; is the thesis clear, authoritative and accurate; what are your basic feelings about the book?

Having made sure that you have mentioned the main theme of the book early on in the review and having described how the author basically develops this theme, you could do well to describe next a few more details: **4)** How does the author reference it, how does he develop it further, and then how does he (or she) conclude it. Here are some questions that you might ask yourself: Is the argument and/or evidence convincing? Is the book unique, or does it present a different / new / interesting viewpoint? How good are the author’s credentials, and how clearly does s/he reference and use these? Or would you have expected something different from this person? What types of criteria are needed to judge this book? How coherently was all the material put together? You might also try and ‘look for’ or ‘tease’ out any anomalies, gaps in logic, imperfections, sections which are not well-developed, or areas where the author has not gone. Your thoughts or opinions on these topics could (or should) form the next couple of paragraphs **5)** and **6)** detailing the book’s strengths and weaknesses.

Your final paragraph, **7)** ... should come to a sort of conclusion. You are advised – always – to keep the ‘reader’ of the review in mind as you write. Even if your review is critical, you might also want to keep the author of the book in mind, and make sure that your review is scrupulously ‘fair’: he might turn out to be a colleague – in the future.

Style & Finishing

If you are new to book reviewing, you might want to have a look at other book reviews in this Journal, or similar professional Journals, or even a couple of the classic *The New Yorker* book reviews, or those from *The Scientific American*, in order to get a feeling of the ultimate ‘style’ of your review.

Then – as always, re-read, revise and re-check the article and any references. See whether

any paragraph is incomplete, or tries to deal with too many points, or wanders off into another theme. Avoid overlong sentences, like the one a few paragraphs above. Avoid repeating yourself, or re-iterating anything.

Is any of this helpful? Or is it all too open-ended? It is absolutely OK to fall somewhere in between the two extremes of Book Review types that have been outlined. Your review must remain ultimately *your* review.

There is often no particular timeframe for writing Book Reviews: other than (perhaps) sometime within the first 6 months or within the first year of publication. The Book Review almost certainly needs to be formatted in MSWord (.doc or .docx) and according to the ‘normal’ “Instructions for Authors” put out by the Journal.

You may also want to go to the book publisher’s website for any technical details (size, publication date, page numbers, ISBN, etc.) and even (perhaps) a copy of the book cover – saved as a .JPEG file. You might want to give some of the ‘details’ as outlined in the initial pages: Dedication, Introduction (by someone else?), Other Titles (by the author), etc.

And finally – dependent upon your particular situation – you might want to run your (draft) review past your professor, mentor, tutor, colleague, or whatever, and get a little bit of feed-back, praise, or assistance, from them, or someone like them, before you actually submit the review. Then you can incorporate some of that feedback, or not, into your final draft.

Submission of the Book Review

The review – once it is ready to be submitted – needs to be sent to the Book Review Editor (or similar), as outlined on the Journal’s website or inside pages.

Some Journals – especially those associated with the ‘big’ publishing companies like Taylor & Francis, or Elsevier, etc. often have a “Manuscript Central” submission process. This is where you, as the author, have to input your name, postal address, e-mail, affiliations, etc. – and then submit a full and an anonymous version of your ‘manuscript’ (article or book review), both of which have to be uploaded digitally; any illustrations will also have to be uploaded separately. You may also be asked for the names and e-mails of any possible reviewers, though these will probably not be used for your particular article or book review.

My personal opinion is that these “Manuscript Central” submission processes might make things quite a bit easier for the editors, but they are pretty impersonal; not always very nice or useful; can be confusing; and don’t do a lot, especially for a ‘new’ author. However, there will be – should be – someone (like an Editorial Assistant, who would otherwise have to keep track of

everything) to guide you through this submission process and get your review properly submitted.

Review of the Book Review

All submissions (articles and – unfortunately – book reviews) are usually sent out to two separate and independent reviewers. So then you may have to wait – possibly for two or three months – whilst your Book Review is put through a 'double-blind' peer-review process (whereby the anonymous version (with your name removed) is reviewed *and* the referee's names are removed from their comments to you). They will not know who you are; they will not know who the other one is; and you will not know who they are; but their comments will eventually be sent back to you (suitably anonymised); along with any comments from the Editor and/or the Book Review Editor (“too short”; “too long”; “poor English”; “not enough references”; “major re-write”; etc.).

Then, and only then, can your original book review (possibly) be revised by you in the light of any (or all) of the pertinent feedback from the editors and reviewers.

And now we come to a “caveat” – a word of warning! Don't necessarily comply with every single suggestion, criticism or request from each and every reviewer and/or editor. These are essentially – just – suggestions, or criticisms, or requests. You do not *have to* comply with them. Your review is still *your* review, and it must remain *your* review. However, it is often, but not always, wise – or judicious – to follow (at least) some of their suggestions, take notice of their criticisms, or comply with their requests – not just to keep yourself ‘sweet’ with these people, but also because they have (usually) a considerable degree of wisdom and experience. And yet, so might you!

Re-submission

Whatever internal processes go on, having received this feed-back, you will eventually revise and re-submit your Book Review. Remember, you may have to ‘upload’ the revised version, having first deleted the original version, in the technocrat Manuscript Central process and so it is very wise to keep differently labeled copies: “BookReview_Title_YourSurname_version” (e.g. BookReview_OneFlewOverTheCuckoosNest_Young_v.1.3_251212.doc). And probably – hopefully – eventually, this Book Review will be approved for publication.

Unfortunately, there is one more ‘hurdle’. It now has to be typeset and so you, as the author, will have to proof-read this typeset version. People from within the publishing company (possibly Taylor & Francis, Elsevier, etc.) or the editorial staff, will be in touch with you about that, and may question – or ask you to correct – certain words, items or references. Any

corrections – and this is really your last chance – must be identified now. If you want to make very small changes to the text, this *might* be all right, as it is your very last chance and any changes to punctuation, references, etc. must be finalized now. And you may be asked to sign and return a ‘permissions’ form or publication agreement. That is pretty much the end of the process for you. You don’t have to do a lot more.

Publication

However, exactly how and when the Book Review finally appears in a published form, now depends on a number of external factors: the available space in that issue; the balance of the articles in that issue; how other people have kept to *their* various deadlines; and several other anomalous factors. Just don’t hold your breath!

But – thanks to the miracles of modern science – your Book Review might appear in its formatted (final) version several weeks or months before it is actually ‘published’ in a hard-copy hold-in-the-hand version, on the Journal’s website, as a ‘download’. A copy of (or link to) this will (should) also be sent to you. You can (usually) put this version, and any earlier versions, up on your personal website, but only in accordance with the conditions (read the small print) in the publication agreement.

Once the Book review has been formatted and typeset, then it can also be sent to the book’s publisher. This completes the tacit (or sometimes explicit) agreement that you had with them and then you can legitimately keep the review copy of the book. That’s it! I hope that it was all worth while.

You should also – as an author – eventually receive a hard copy of that particular issue of the Journal in the post. As an ‘author’ – if only of a book review – you now might be asked to review someone else’s article or Book Review. And so it goes!

References

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Endnotes

- ¹ Randall Jarrell Award in Criticism: Poetry Foundation:
www.poetryfoundation.org/foundation/awards