Reference Reviews: A Publisher's Critique

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In reference publishing, we need reviews both for simple and obvious reasons and for more complex, not-so-obvious reasons. The simple, obvious need is to sell our books and stay in business. In particular, we need reviews in the publications that librarians read: Library Journal, Choice, and Booklist, Against the Grain, and other key periodicals. We are aware of librarians’ increasing reliance upon these publications to help them make the difficult choices of how to spend their limited budget dollars.

In the past couple of years, more and more customers have been waiting to read reviews before ordering a reference book, even one from a reputable publisher whose scholarly quality they trust. Consequently, it has become more important than ever not only to receive a good review but also to have that good news appear as early as possible. Libraries striving to maintain top-notch collections, as well as publishers, benefit from early reviews, and we are grateful to those library magazines that accept page proofs for reviews in publication.

What is perhaps a less obvious—but vital—benefit of reviews, is that a thoughtfully penned critique can offer publishers an array of valuable lessons and help us improve the quality of our books. We look to reviews to reaffirm that the investment we are making is worthwhile and potentially profitable, not just in general but in specific ways. I can probably speak for every reference editor, publisher, and marketer when I say that we went into this business because we love big, beautiful, scholarly books that students, scholars, and researchers rely upon for many years to provide information and enlightenment. We like striving to turn the chaos of facts and knowledge into order, structure, and balance; we like to work with scholars to define a field and present it to an audience wider than that field. It is wonderful to have customers who appreciate high quality and therefore make scholarly reference publishing a sustainable and profitable business. However, as patrons’ habits change and needs in libraries change, so the definition of what constitutes quality undergoes continual revision, often in subtle but nevertheless significant ways.

Transcending the competitiveness natural to any businessperson, my reaction to reviews has become, perhaps surprisingly, disinterested in whether the subject of the review is my book or another publisher’s book. If reviewers are knowledgeable, careful, and fair, that is good for the business of reference publishing at large, because it will encourage us to continue to strive for high quality in the product that we produce. On the other hand, if reviewers do not notice or appreciate aspects of our books that we thought essential to high quality, I worry that quality of that type may deteriorate in the reference-publishing business, as a matter of economics, because every quality feature costs the publisher money.

Over twenty years of reading reviews of library reference books, I have become appreciative of well-done reviews, because I like the lessons that they are teaching, and critical of those that are less well done, because I fear the cumulative effect of such reviews on the business of reference publishing. Following are the six most important things that I like and don’t like to see in reviews, with some thoughts about the messages that certain types of statements or omissions send, whether intended or not.

1. I like to see comparisons with previously published works.

Because reference works often stay on library shelves for a long time, reference editors who are conducting competition research for a new-book proposal often must consider works that are up to twenty years old. In a review, a comparison with a previously published work tells us whether or not we made a good decision competing directly against an already-existing reference work, and if we’re the publisher of the already-existing work, it’s good to have it appreciated, especially if it’s still in print. It also tells us how long reference works are currently considered useful.

I wonder sometimes, if a previously published work on the same topic is not mentioned, whether the reviewer did not research other works or whether he or she has assumed that an older work is no longer a viable resource. Fairly recently, several excellent reviews of an encyclopaedia appeared that did not mention a multi-volume set on the same topic that was published in the late 1980s and won the Dartmouth Medal. Such omissions can ultimately send the message that only the most recent works are useful, which might lead some libraries to discard classic resources. They can also increase the pressure on reference publishers to publish more and more new product to sustain sales, thereby creating a glut in a shrinking print market, which hurts all reference publishers, not just the one that published the eight-volume set so many years ago. Preferably, a review can point out ways in which a new volume and a classic older set are complementary, or make it clear if an earlier work is completely supplanted by a new one.

2. I don’t like to see a preface repeated verbatim without analysis.

If the publisher’s words are repeated without attribution or comment, clearly the reviewer has not done his or her homework. I like to see the reviewer comment on the publisher’s words; sometimes we learn a lesson about who will use our book versus who we had hoped would use it, for example.

I first noticed this phenomenon several years ago when researching competition in an area that I hoped would be a viable topic for a new reference work. A review of a previously published work stated that the index listed people, cities, countries, companies, and organizations. Looking at the work at the New York Public Library, I saw the same descriptive sentence in the preface while recognizing that the index itself was, in simpler terms, a proper-name index. There are many kinds of indexes for many purposes, and one could argue that a proper-name index is appropriate for the work; however, if the reviewer had an opinion on the relative value in this work of a proper-name index versus an analytical index, he or she did not share it. The publisher was surely encouraged to continue to provide proper-name indexes, which are comparatively easy and inexpensive to produce, and I wondered, albeit briefly, whether it was still worthwhile from a business perspective to invest in costly analytical indexes. Finally, this review taught me the importance of a good selling preface, surely not the lesson the reviewer intended to teach!

Even though the publisher’s words can be useful in describing the work—how many articles it contains, or how many different countries the contributors represent, for example—in general, reviews that parrot publishers’ words are not likely to lead to improved quality of the product over time, or to greater honesty in prices and marketing copy.

3. I like to have an excellent index appreciated.

It is important that reviewers continue to demonstrate intense interest in indexes. Sometimes I wish that I could have a follow-up conversation with a reviewer about the legitimate and necessary choices that are often made in indexing, but in general, reviewers’ specific praise and criticism affirm that our investment in thorough, analytical indexes is worthwhile.

Two examples on the extremes of the critical spectrum will illustrate my point. In one sad case, I did not see a sample of the index or the finished index until the book was ready to go to the printer. The index alarmed me; it was short and lightweight, more of an outline of the work than a real index. To keep production on schedule, I hired a different indexer to improve the index as best she could over a weekend. It appeared that I had made a good business decision until the reviews appeared. Reviewers criticized the index severely, a highly unusual event for Reference. I was stunned. The reviews not only taught me that it is impossible to “fix” a bad index in two days, but they also reminded me that a solid index is good business as well as good pedagogy.

A happier story is one about an index that cost a hefty price. The indexer was especially...
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well suited to index this innovative multi-volume
work, and their deep understanding of its
scope and purpose led her to open many alter-
нативные windows into the content that the entry list
and the cross-references could not provide. She
worked late into the night for weeks to meet our
deadline; the index was so long that even when we
typest it in three columns in very small type it
still occupied 120 book pages. The Booklist
reviewer wrote, “The index is thoroughly ex-
cellent.” I still glow with pride at that high
praise, and with pleasure at the recognition that
the thousands of articles were understood and ap-
preciated, and the investment justified.

4. I don’t like to see page count ignored
in comments about price-per-volume.

Comments about price are one way that we
continue to learn about the customer’s percep-
tion of value. Reference publishers know that
our books are considered expensive, and we
understand that the decision to purchase is of-
ten difficult. Unfortunately, however, the per-
ceived fair price for one reference volume does
not seem to change with the size of the volume.
For example, recently I read a review compla-
ing that $195 was an “exorbitant price” for a
900-page reference book. If the publisher had
split the volume in two, without adding a word
of content, and charged $250 for the two-vol-
ume set, the reviewer probably would have
thought the price was fair. I would ask review-
ers to keep in mind that there is a significant
difference between 900 and 600 pages: 300
more pages means more words to commission
and contributors to pay; more deadlines to track
and reminders to send out; more manuscript to
pay scholars to review; more manuscripts to
revise and finalize; more copyediting, typeset-
ing, proofreading, indexing to supervise; more
paper to purchase.

Profit margins in reference publishing are not
high, at least insofar as I am aware of them across
the industry. If a volume is only a volume,
no matter what its size, publishers will
keep prices lower by creating shorter volumes,
perhaps not the result that reviewers intend.
It might be helpful to develop a general aware-
ness among reviewers and publishers of price-
per-page instead.

5. I like it when a reviewer notes that
articles are signed and looks at the qualifi-
cations of the contributors who signed them.

An encyclopedia that assembles the work of
numerous professors is a feat of organization
and labor as well as scholarship, and it is im-
portant for reviewers to let the publisher know
that the investment of time and money is needed
and appreciated. At Routledge, most of the ref-
erece works that we create contain hundreds of
articles written by scholars and experts because we believe that such works have the best chance of containing thorough, author-
itative material in every entry. It is especially
helpful when a reviewer of a scholarly ency-
lopedia notes that each article was written by a
qualified expert in the topic and recognizes that
a peer-review process has taken place for each
article. If, in addition, through the work of in-
house editors and scholarly advisors, the work
presents a topic or field of study in a way that is
coherent, balanced, perhaps even pathbreaking,
it is terrific to have that achievement recognized.

I know that for librarians, whose primary goal
is service to their patrons, quality and use-
fulness are inextricably intertwined. If what we
have accomplished was unnecessary, and an-
other type of reference would have served as
ew or better, we need to be aware of that.
In general, though, with a free-for-all of unsub-
stantiated information influencing students
hourly on the Internet, one might argue that now
more than ever it is important for publishers and
librarians to continue to work together to de-
fine authority and provide quality resources.

6. If the book is appropriate for high
schools as well as for academic and public
libraries, I like to see the review say so.

“Highly recommended for academic and
large public libraries” is a typical conclusion
of a review of a Routledge reference work, and
it is certainly one of which we are proud. It is
appropriate for many of our high-level works
that have a theoretical or professional bent.
However, many of our works on historical,
cultural, and literary topics are appropriate for
a wider audience.

Although we rarely create reference works
specifically intended for schools alone, many
wonderful U.S. high schools continue to invest
in scholarly reference books and multi-volume
sets for use by motivated, college-bound students
for term papers and school projects. Many differ-
ent kinds and sizes of public libraries do the
same, to support local high school students as
well as adult researchers. Because the word “high
school” or the general phrase “all lib-
raries” is so often omitted from that all-im-
portant “Recommended” line, the librarians
who have developed and who continue to main-
tain these impressive curriculum-orien-
ted collections are missing some useful
resources, while publishers are missing sales.

Perhaps some reviewers do not find our
books useful for schools and most public librar-
ies. In any case, we continue to learn from re-
views about the market potential for our books
and about who our audience is. For example,
once we sent a single-volume encyclopedia to a
publication that reviews young-adult resources,
and the reviewer, while respecting the quality
of the work, criticized it for containing termi-
nology unfamiliar to young adults. The review
reminded us that at the school level, our books
are most useful to the top tier of students in the
eleventh and twelfth grades. An additional, per-
haps unintended result of the review was to
cause us to be very careful when sending re-
view copies to that particular journal!

On the other hand, recently the Pennsylva-
nia School Librarians Association picked six
of our reference works to honor in their “Top
Forty Reference 2003 Titles.” At least three
of the six had not previously been recommended
as resources for high schools in the library re-
view media. We are grateful to the Pennsylva-
nia librarians for their work to create this list
and for their enthusiasm, which we hope will
rub off on library reviewers everywhere.

The foregoing points might sound minor and
picky, but it bears repeating that creating each
reference work requires a sizeable investment
in money and time. It takes a team of scholars
and in-house staff several years to create an en-
cyclopedia, and the cost is significant—some-
times hundreds of thousands of dollars. Yet the
review that can make or break a reference work
is typically only a few column inches long.
Interestingly, once reference resources tend to be
longer; we look forward to receiving more of those
reviews as we extend our online publishing program.

Because every review teaches publishers a
lesson, whether intended or not, reviewers have a
tremendous responsibility. I do hope that does
not discourage librarians from taking on review
assignments. To conclude, I would like to offer
a few words to reviewers and review journals:
We have great respect for what you do. Even
though Routledge fortunately receives many
excellent reviews, we never become jaded or
blasé about them; when we receive a Best Ref-
ence rating or a starred review, there is danc-
ing in the halls! We know that keeping up with
the flood of new publications is an enor-
mos challenge for the review journals, and
yet we recognize that the quality of review-
ing continues to improve over time; please
keep up the good work. In an era in which
there is a great deal of worthy competition
and library budgets are tight, your dispassion-
ate reviews are crucial, helping our customers and
us make the best choices to serve library pa-
trons and communities.

Thank you to Barbara Bibe of Oakland
Public Library, who invited me to give the
panel presentation at ALA on which this ar-
ticle is based, and to the colleagues both in
and outside of Routledge who offered valu-
able comments. — SM

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price Students said they would purchase a text-
book if it was made an integral part of the course
by the instructor. And 90% of the faculty surveyed
by the Follett Higher Education Group, said that
“students absolutely need a textbook for this
course.” But when asked why students did not buy
the textbook, 29% of the time, faculty said that “the
text was not perceived as valuable.” Hmmm ... No
wonder libraries are sometimes asked by students
to purchase textbooks and place them on reserve.

The awesome Mark Walter (Consultant to
Content Technology Strategies) is pursuing
editorial and consulting opportunities. He is also
working with Frank Gilbane’s Bluehill Advisors
(http://www.bluehilladvisors.com). Mark can be
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And, last but definitely not least, just received
the new Special Issue to v41 of Choice, Current
Reviews for Academic Libraries, Web VIII. Can
you believe that Choice first published their Web
continued on page 83

<http://www.against-the-grain.com>