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The Odd Case of Book Reviews

by **David Shatz** (Professor of Philosophy, Yeshiva University, Stern College for Women, 245 Lexington Avenue, New York, NY 10016) <shatz@yu.edu>

Gripes about peer review are a dime a dozen, but seldom is there heard a questioning word about the institution of book reviewing. That is unfortunate, because an array of questions beg to be asked. Why does the practice of book reviewing exist? How well do book review publishing procedures cohere with other scholarly publishing practices? How can we enhance the fairness and usefulness of book reviews?

I emphatically do not call for abolishing book reviews. Besides generating enjoyable gossip, they serve at least three more weighty purposes.

- (1) They function like *Consumer Reports*, telling people what to acquire and what to shun.
- (2) Reviews are needed for “credentializing.” They aid academic committees and administrators in making tenure and promotion decisions; they make book authors’ names and works known, for better or for worse; and they point presses and universities to capable scholars.
- (3) Reviews create scholarly conversations and advance intellectual discussion.

These are all important goals, and examining problems with our current book reviewing practices can help us better achieve them. Which function we adopt as primary may affect how we reason about some of the issues I will raise.

Peerless Review

Book reviews differ from most scholarly publications in a glaring respect: they are not peer reviewed. This is understandable. Refereeing book reviews would require engaging additional people to read the book, which is impractical. Also, if book reviews were peer reviewed, scholars might fear wasting effort on them. Given that book reviews carry little weight with tenure and promotion committees, how many scholars would undertake a book review without an assurance of publication? Furthermore, suppose a journal editor were to guarantee publication provided the reviewer harkens to reviews of the review. Would the hassle of revising be worth the reviewer’s time and labor?

So, for perfectly defensible reasons, book reviews are not expected to meet the gold standard for scholarly publication — peer review. Naturally, unrefereed reviews are part of our culture, whether the subject is movies, plays, TV shows, software, wines or restaurants. Scholars, however, typically insist on having more rigorous canons for accepting works. Book reviews, which flout some of these canons, generate a charge of inconsistency.

Many book reviews also lack the rigor and thoroughness of quality scholarly articles. Book reviewers frequently put forth peremptory

judgments and assertions, devoid of serious argumentation. This unfortunate situation is not necessarily the fault of reviewers — it is rather, in part, a consequence of length restrictions. Consider a 500-to-750 word review. By the time the reviewer finishes describing the book, there is often no room to *argue* for anything. Aggravating the situation, book authors are generally not allowed to reply, whether in the original journal or elsewhere, reducing a reviewer’s incentive to provide strong arguments. (To be sure, some publications print author replies, and some even allow rejoinders by the book reviewer to the author’s response.)

There are other contrasts between book reviews and other published critiques of scholarly works (such as reply articles or segments of articles and books). Book reviewers often use space to comment on style (“slow going,” “brisk,” “elegant,” “syntactically tortured”), occasionally accompanied by quotations of a raucously bad sentence or two; and they comment as well on organization (“byzantine” “exquisite”). Small, nitpicking “gotcha” points abound. Such matters are not routinely raised in *articles*. Nor do editors typically let article authors write pejoratives like “In a pedestrian chapter, Jones maintains...” Book reviewers get away with that.

Suggestions to Improve Reviews

We can’t eliminate the anomalies I described, but we can do more about them than is presently done. Here are some ideas:

- Allow more space for reviewers, encouraging review essays, and ask reviewers to use the expanded space to produce arguments and evidence in lieu of brief impressions and summary judgments. This suggestion may not be feasible for print journals that produce a large volume of reviews, but Web publications can allot substantially more space than print journals.
- When word limits force a book reviewer to choose between expressing judgments about style and expressing judgments about substance, comments on substance should be given priority.
- Have book reviews count more in tenure and promotion cases, thus increasing the incentive for reviewers to produce quality. This is especially important if book reviewers will be expected to write longer, more substantial reviews, as per my first suggestion. Many tenure and promotion committees do not count book reviews as full fledged publications. Junior reviewers and Associate Professors up for promotion therefore have fairly small incentive to do a thorough job, or even undertake the job at all in lieu of working on other projects. Many or most scholars, at every rank, do reviews conscientiously and well, I think. But book reviews would be better, I believe, if

they mattered more for professional advancement. This is not to deny that some book reviews catapult their authors to prominence.

- Publish suitably rigorous reactions to book reviews — including author replies — to keep conversation going. Books could be reviewed in an “author meets critics” format, where several reviewers assess the book’s thesis and argument, each perhaps focusing on a different aspect, and the author then replies. Journals that do this have produced what I find to be quality discussions. The format also pressures book reviewers to do a good job — since they will not have the last word.
- Send authors a draft of the review so they can correct misunderstandings and perhaps defend themselves before the review is published. (This suggestion has more disadvantages than the others, I think, but some journals follow the approach.)
- Granted that peer reviewing of book reviews is impractical, editors should use a heavier hand than is now common. Book reviews often are accepted in exactly the form in which they arrived. Using whatever input they can get from other scholars, editors should critique reviewers aggressively on style, tone and substance, without alienating them from the project. (What constitutes an appropriate tone, e.g., how much kindness and diplomacy is called for, is a disputed question.)

Choosing the Reviewers — and the Books

It is possible to think of a book review as a referee report that gets published and therefore publicized. Unlike a journal article referee, the book reviewer knows the identity of the book’s author, and the book’s author knows the identity of the reviewer. Hence book reviews violate yet another condition that is normally imposed on scholarly publishing (journal publishing more so than book publishing), and editors need to be alert to resulting problems of bias and conflict of interest.

Recently, a top journal in a humanities field published a harsh book review that some found savage. Speculation emerged that the reviewer disliked the book’s author because the author had once insulted him, and that the reviewer also disliked the author’s political views, which had nothing to do with the book. Whether or

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not those charges were true, we cannot on the one hand insist on anonymity for referee's reports in order to reduce or eliminate bias, and then act surprised or skeptical when a reviewer who does know an author's identity is suspected of having let bias intrude.

Personal considerations can produce favorable reviews no less than unfavorable ones. There can be arrant cronyism. And when a junior faculty member, or an Associate Professor angling for a promotion, reviews a book by a major senior scholar in the same specialty, one expects, at the least, a certain caution on the part of the reviewer.

Editors should do their best to prevent cases like those just mentioned. They also should be wary of self-initiated, unsolicited book reviews. Some journals choose to bar such submissions; at the least, editors who receive unsolicited reviews should do some checking about possible motives.

In some situations where bias threatens to rear its head, it is not always clear which way the editor should decide. For example, book reviewers should generally be specialists in the area of the book they are reviewing. But if the reviewer is a person of stature, his or her name is likely to be mentioned in the book, and the reviewer's work may have been discussed in the book at some length. (It has been said that a scholar is someone who upon receiving a book immediately looks for his name in the index.) If the reviewer's name isn't mentioned or isn't featured, bias may again infect the review. How should the editor proceed? If he or she assigns the review to a non-specialist, the editor sacrifices expertise. To be sure, even anonymity in a referee's report is no guarantee against bias resulting from an author neglecting or disputing the referee's work. Indeed, the problem is arguably less severe in the case of a published book review because the audience may pick up on the conflict of interest. But the editor has a dilemma nonetheless. A helpful editorial strategy is to vary or rotate book reviewers in a particular subfield, since using the same reviewer several times means that each review could be tinged by bias in one direction or another.

To make discussion balanced and interesting, some editors specifically assign books to reviewers who they know will not agree with the author. Some book reviewers feel and express admiration for books they disagree with, but too often disagreement results in a negative and even harsh review. Giving the book review to an ideological adversary advances the goal of conversation very well, but it could have an unfair impact on the author's reputation, (even granted that getting a bad review may be preferable to not being reviewed at all and that one bad review won't necessarily ruin a reputation).

Another controversial issue is whether bias affects editors' selections of books for review. Some have charged that, in assigning reviews, journals favor books from high-pres-

tige presses. They label this preference a bias. At least one journal editor confesses that his journal's reviews are tilted in that direction, but he defends this result. He argues that while title selections are made on independent grounds, the high-prestige presses tend to have the best books and to attract the most interesting and important authors. A book editor from a less prestigious press, however, sought to rebut this assertion. He responded that the referees for his press, like those for the high-prestige presses, are drawn from the world's top scholars, and that acquisition editors at the elite presses are not necessarily wiser than those at other presses. An empirical resolution of this dispute — e. g., do reviews of books by high-prestige publishers really dominate? Where do good authors submit their manuscripts? — would require data. Regarding the normative question — *should* they dominate? — there appears to be no reason why books from certain presses should be favored, at least in terms of the first two goals of book reviews mentioned earlier: guiding consumers and conferring credentials on authors. Furthermore, once an editor is convinced there is a correlation between prestige presses and interest or importance, the possibility of that editor's ignoring books of great value due to bias becomes strong. Books from high-prestige presses certainly do not have a monopoly on importance and the ability to generate good conversation.

Summing Up

I close by quoting a 1979 statement by

editors of a publication (called simply *Review*) devoted to book reviews:

As long as universities fail to reward worthwhile reviewing and as long as editors pay little attention to reviews, we may continue to expect many reviewers to write hurriedly, to impose lax standards, and to turn out comments that are more often "cute," emotive, or biased than fair-minded or painstaking. Such performances, often shot through with backscratching and cronyism, will not be taken seriously by universities, and so the circle will go on and on (**James O. Hoge** and **James L. W. West III**, "Academic Book Reviewing: Some Problems and Suggestions," *Scholarly Publishing* 11, 1 (1979): 41).

I confess that in this piece I have violated my own strictures by not providing chapter and verse for my claims about the current state of affairs. But the thirty-year old admonition just quoted will, I think, resonate with contemporary scholars in a variety of disciplines, notwithstanding the progress that has been made over the years in the book review process. 🐼

*Author's Note: Certain of the issues treated here are discussed more fully, with references, in David Shatz, **Peer Review: A Critical Inquiry** (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), ch. 4.*

ATG Interviews Meris Mandernach

Collection Management Librarian James Madison University, Harrisonburg, VA

by **Katina Strauch** (Editor, *Against the Grain*) <kstrauch@comcast.net>

ATG: *Meris, you are engaged in a summer research project. Tell us about it.*

MM: In April 2008, I became the Collection Management Librarian at **James Madison University (JMU)**. As a means of orienting myself to my new position, I met with all of the liaisons at **JMU**. Each liaison at **JMU** is responsible for reference, instruction, and collection development/management of at least one department. Several liaisons suggested that a workshop in the general principles of collection management would be beneficial in order to develop a holistic view of their area of the collection at **JMU**. The goal of this summer leave is to visit other institutions, in-state and out-of-state, to examine how they train subject specialists/bibliographers in the areas of collection management and gather ideas for training liaisons at **JMU**. I focused my visits to universities of a similar size/make-up as **JMU**, schools that have a clustered approach to collection development, or schools that have exemplary collection programs.

ATG: *Where have you gone and who have you interviewed? What have you learned?*

MM: My target is to visit five to seven schools as part of this research leave. I visited **Miami University of Ohio** (**Aaron Shrimplin**), **Indiana University** (**Charla Lancaster**, **Lynda Clendenning**, **Angela Courtney**, **Robert Goehlert**, **Moirra Smith**, and **Julie Bobay**), **Virginia Tech** (**Paul Metz**), **The College of Charleston** (**Katina Strauch**, **Tom Gilson**, **Bob Neville**, and **Sheila Seaman**), **University of Virginia** (**Carol Hunter**, **Carla Lee**, **Dawn Waller**, **Lynda White**, and **Esther Onega**), and **Longwood University** (**Virginia Kinman**, and **Patricia Howe**). I also met with the **OhioLINK** State-wide Library Depository Coordinator (**Dona Straley**) where I learned some techniques for coordinating projects and individuals at various locations. I also spoke on the phone with the collection management coordinator at **Appalachian State**, **John Abbott**.

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