

BOOK REVIEWS

Some Basics for Authors and Reviewers

SELECTION OF BOOKS FOR REVIEW

The selection of books a journal can review is limited by the titles that publishers send to it. Some publishers send to editors once or twice a year a reviewer check sheet asking them to identify in advance the titles they would be most interested in evaluating for review. Other publishers simply send seasonal catalogs, leaving it up to the editors to request suitable titles. Most publishing houses, however, have their own publicists or promotional departments that determine which books to send out and then ship them unsolicited to book review editors. Some book review editors take an active role in the selection process by scanning such periodicals as *Publishers Weekly* or the *TLS* to identify titles of potential interest. In addition, publishers usually allow authors to suggest specialized journals that would be interested in reviewing their books once they appear in print.

The number of books that are received depends very much on the journal, its circulation, and its reputation with the publishers in terms of coverage, placement, and punctual return of tearsheets. Specialized journals with relatively small circulations may receive review copies of a substantial portion of the books in their fields, but this may amount to only a few hundred titles at most. Other journals, which have very large circulations--sometimes upwards of 10,000 subscribers-- may cover many topical, geographical, and temporal fields and thus receive thousands of titles annually but perhaps only a portion of the new publications in each individual field.

The selection process is naturally limited by which books are received. Most editors are extremely reluctant to commission reviews for titles that they have had no opportunity to examine or assess. Exact methods and procedures may vary, but several important selection considerations are common. Foremost among these is the *readership of the journal*. The editor is ultimately responsible to the subscribers, who have paid to receive book reviews with the expectation that certain sorts of books will be reviewed there. For a small, highly specialized journal, the readership may be a very limited group--in some cases fewer than 400--of expert professionals and the research libraries that serve them. Such a journal may select books for review with an appropriately narrow scope or specialized focus more readily than other journals. Publications with quite broad professional appeal--encompassing many fields and time periods--may have a varied and diverse readership to keep in mind, including highly focused specialists, scholars who teach in a field but do not research in it, well-educated general readers, and graduate (sometimes even advanced undergraduate) students. In such a case, the editor will try to provide a degree of balance so that every issue of the journal contains reviews of interest for each portion of the readership. Given limitations of space, the editor may be required to review only a sampling of what has been published and will have to be much more selective than the editor of a small specialty journal. Still other journals have a relatively narrow topical focus, which may be imposed by a factor such as geography, and serve a substantial number of general readers with only a few area specialists in addition. The editors of journals such as these often have the general reader foremost in mind and will make their topical selections on that basis.

Although editors must first have their readership(s) in mind, other, often related,

considerations shape their decisions about which books to commission for review. A book review editor is very much concerned with the potential *significance of a book* in the scholarly community. Journals with large circulations and diverse readerships often rely on regional or topical sub-editors or a professional staff of advanced graduate students to help make that sort of determination. This important assessment is based on a variety of elements including topic, method and approach, scope, novelty of interpretation, place in the literature, the series in which the volume appears, the reputation of the author, the standing of the publisher, and other factors. The book itself is carefully examined; the dust jacket read; the table of contents studied; the citations and bibliography considered; and portions of the introduction, text, and conclusions read.

Editors take note of other factors, too. They consider whether *similar studies* have been published or reviewed recently. An editor may, for example, elect not to review the fifth biography of a regimental commander to appear in a given year, unless some other compelling reason for doing so is obvious. If the editor knows in advance that several similar or related books are coming out at almost the same time, they may be grouped for a joint review or even a review article. Reprints and subsequent editions of books are unlikely to be selected, unless new materials have been added that make them noteworthy. *Balance and representation* are factors as well. Unless the journal is a highly specialized one, care is generally taken that political-diplomatic, social-economic, and cultural-intellectual topics are represented among the books selected and that interdisciplinary approaches and traditionally neglected points of view are given their due. *Genre* is a consideration; the overwhelming majority of books that are selected for review are monographs and collections of essays, but some editors routinely include newly published primary sources, short specialized surveys, and reference works. Editors keep in mind, also, the publishers that supply the books and try to ensure that the widest possible variety of presses are represented by their selections over a given period of time. Finally, consideration must be given to the *likely outcome* of an attempt to commission a review. Some books, by virtue of approach, scope, or topic, are especially difficult to place. A substantial collection of essays, for example, may have so many contributors that dozens of potential reviewers become ineligible. The editor sometimes has to make a judgment concerning the likelihood of the return of a timely review and the number of attempts--given both time and finite resources--that can be afforded to place a book with a suitable reviewer.

Editors thus attempt to balance a number of sometimes competing considerations, such as the interests of readers, an estimate of a given book's potential significance, what else has been reviewed lately, limitations of space and resources, genre, publisher and series, and likely placement outcomes. No journal can review every book that it receives, and the particular combination of considerations may vary from journal to journal and editor to editor. Nonetheless, a good editor tries to be conscious of such considerations, and publishers, authors, and potential reviewers should become aware of them as well.

SELECTION OF REVIEWERS

Book review editors rely on a variety of resources to identify suitable reviewers for books that have been selected for review. In addition to the editor's (or sub-editor's) personal knowledge of the field and professional experience, most journals maintain registries of potential reviewers. Such registries may be simple lists by topical field drawn from an organization's directory, a

system of file cards recording more detailed information, or a sophisticated electronic database that is continually revised and updated. Such in-house registries generally record research and teaching areas, publication topics, and self-identified keywords. Editors may consult other journals or conference programs to see who has been doing work recently on the same or related topics. Book review sections are sometimes consulted to see who has published in the monographic literature lately, and, at the same time, who other book review editors have relied upon in a given subject area. The bibliography and citations of the book itself are often helpful in identifying scholars on whose work the author him/herself has relied. Editors also have at their disposal the listings of books that their own journal has received and can examine these records--and sometimes the books themselves--to see who else has expertise on the topic. Most book review offices have a good supply of organizational directories on hand, such as the *AHA Guide to History Departments and Organizations*; some of these are quite detailed and specific, and, if they do not provide a direct indication of who would be appropriate to review, they at least provide a list of specialists of whom the editor can make inquiries.

The book review editor has to identify persons who should not be asked to review a book. The acknowledgments are scanned to see who has been thanked for helping with the research and preparation of the manuscript; naturally, someone who has contributed to the book in such a fashion should not be asked to render an objective opinion on the final product. Similarly, a person who served as a referee of the manuscript for the publisher or editor of the series in which the book appears should not review the volume, because (s)he has already given a professional assessment of the work. A hint about who read the manuscript for the publisher is sometimes to be found in the quotations on the dust jacket, but editors must rely on the integrity of referees to recuse themselves if such a relationship to the book is not readily apparent. Editors should not ask reviewers who are clearly known to be hostile to a particular author or antagonistic to an interpretative school. No one benefits from stacking the deck.

Unfortunately, there are a variety of potentially disqualifying circumstances of which editors cannot readily be aware. In such situations, a person who has received a review invitation is obliged to decline or--at the very least--state the potential conflict of interest that poses a barrier to undertaking the review. Some circumstances are clearly disqualifying, such as an intimate personal or blood relationship with the author or previous acceptance of a commission to review the same book elsewhere. The author has a right to the widest possible professional evaluation of the work and not the same opinion, by the same reviewer, in several venues.

Editors are grateful when invitees stand down in potentially questionable circumstances, such as reviewing a work by a mentor or former student, a relative, a member of one's own department (when academic affiliations have changed), or when the reviewer has experienced a particularly savage review at the hands of the author, or when previous professional relationships might compromise the review (in unhappy tenure outcomes, for example). In circumstances such as these, the person invited to review a book should make any potential problem or conflict clear to the editor before the invitation is accepted. In short, reviewers should state any potential conflict of interest or compromising situation that could be construed as tainting their review. Knowing the author is certainly not a disqualification, but any relationship or situation that might affect reasonable objectivity is one.

Editors have differing opinions as to whether a person who volunteers to review a book should be allowed to do so. Each editor has to make an assessment of what has motivated the request and consider this in addition to all the elements of qualification and conflicts of interest noted above.

Some editors are concerned with ensuring diversity among their reviewers. They may seek women and minority reviewers. They may consciously try to balance reviewers from a variety of types of institutions (public and private, research and teaching, community and four-year colleges) as well as reviewers from among public historians, university professors, and independent scholars. Additionally, editors may try to match the reviewer to the book's author in terms of experience and reputation so that books by senior scholars are reviewed by persons of consonant stature.

Many book review editors develop a short list of likely reviewers and cross-check this list against their records of who has returned reviews in the past, and if so, whether they have been on time and in good order. (A journal that has to be selective about what is reviewed cannot afford to send out books for which no review is returned, and most journals will not ask a scholar to review again if he or she has reviews outstanding. A review that is published as the book goes out of print is not very useful and may adversely affect the rate at which publishers send books to a journal in the future.) Editors work down their short lists as invitations are declined (or not answered), taking suggestions from those who offer them until an invitation is accepted or enough time has passed that a review can no longer be published in a timely fashion.

In short, editors seek to make the closest match by field and demonstrated expertise that can be found between author and potential reviewer. Reviewers with a record of reliability and who have displayed substantive analysis, balance, punctuality, and elegance of style are naturally preferred.

WHAT GOES INTO A GOOD BOOK REVIEW

A book review is considerably more than an assessment of a work by a peer who is knowledgeable in the field; it should also inform the reader in some detail about how and why a particular book is of value and to whom it will be of interest. Some readers will want to know if and how the book might contribute to their own research, while others will be interested to learn where it fits in the historiography and their course bibliographies, and still others will be trying to determine if it warrants purchase from their limited library budgets. Finally, some readers will just be interested in what they can learn about the subject matter of the book from the review and may decide to read in an area of study that is altogether new to them.

The reviewer should keep in mind that the audience for the review is generally broader than just other specialists. Excessive references to the literature in the field take up valuable space and are unnecessary unless a particular point of contrast needs to be made. The reviewer need not demonstrate his/her own expertise; this is assumed. References by the reviewer to his or her own work are usually inappropriate.

A good book review gives a clear indication in one or two sentences of the *subject* of the book and of its particular focus. The *scope* of the study should be made readily apparent, and the

thesis should be explicitly articulated by the reviewer, even if the author has left it rather less so. The reviewer should try to convey something of the substance of the book; there is not room to summarize the entire work, but the review should not be so full of critique that the reader is left wondering what the book says. The *organization* of the book should be pointed out and the form or course of the *argument* summarized as succinctly as possible so that the reader understands the method and approach that the author has brought to bear on the subject. Judicious use of brief quotations can be very effective and at the same time convey both style and point of view, but they should always be cited by page number.

There is plenty of room for analysis, criticism, and praise in the review, but experienced reviewers know that sometimes a well-placed adjective can be more effective than an entire paragraph of explanation. Readers should encounter a straightforward assessment of the *originality* of the work and where it fits into the historiography, but there is not space for a litany of other books and articles. It is often good to recount the most salient features of the author's analysis, but it may not be possible to enumerate them all. There should always be an indication of the types of *sources* that have been consulted together with an assessment of how effectively they have been used. The review might indicate how readable the book is, and for whom, by commenting on *style*. The critic should point out *significant errors or omissions*, but a long recitation of minor errors is not appropriate or useful. There should be an indication of who would enjoy or benefit from reading the book as well as some statement as to its overall *contribution*.

Writing an effective, balanced, fair, and informative book review--in just a few hundred words--is an art. Not every scholar is suited to it, but when it is done well the reader has a good sense of whether a book will be of use or interest and of just how and why it might be so, together with some important information on the subject at hand and where it might fit into our knowledge of the past.

WHAT EVERY BOOK REVIEW EDITOR WISHES REVIEWERS KNEW

Responding Promptly Is Vital. Book reviewing is an extremely time-sensitive process. Editors will be very grateful for a quick response, even if a negative one, so that they can ask another reviewer in time for the same issue of the journal. Turning down an offer promptly will actually enhance your reputation for dependability. Alternative reviewer suggestions are always welcome.

Paying Attention to the Stylesheet Saves Time and Trouble. Editing will be much speedier if your review conforms to house style. Give special attention to the form of the bibliographic citation and how the journal treats quotations. When citing or quoting works other than the one under review, always give full bibliographic citations, along with page numbers, so that the editor can check the citations.

Some Spellings Are Hard to Verify; Double Check Them. Though the review will be repeatedly edited, the correct spelling of proper nouns, historical episodes, and foreign terms is sometimes difficult to check. The reviewer can speed up the process considerably by providing a manuscript that is free of spelling errors.

Provide Page Numbers for All Quotations from the Book under Review. Make sure that all quoted passages have page citations.

Your Review Will Be Edited. Editorial practice on book reviews varies widely. Some editors polish book reviews as carefully as they do articles. Others employ a light hand in the belief that it is important for the reader to evaluate the reviewer's voice. In either case, the editor will bring the review into conformity with house style, and other minor editorial changes may be made without consultation. Not every review can begin, "This book," or can mention the author by name in the first sentence. Some journals provide galley proofs for the reviewers' approval before publication, but the high cost of preparing book reviews makes it impossible for many book review editors to send page proofs unless substantial revisions have been required. Try to make the editor's job easier by avoiding long, complex sentences with lengthy series, numerous asides, excessive parenthetical allusions, and multiple quotations in the same sentence. Keep in mind that your audience may be broader than citizens of one country so that reference to "we," "us," or "in this country" will be altered.

Keeping within Assigned Word Limits Is Important. The amount of space available for book reviews is limited; additional pages often have to be purchased in multiple-page lots, which substantially increases the cost of printing, binding, and mailing the journal. The extra space required by one review often has to come at the expense of other reviews. Although few editors actually count the words, they will have to cut the review if it is overlong. If you cannot review a book in the space allotted, you should contact the editor in advance and discuss the need for additional space.

Late Submissions Often Result in Compound Delays. Editing and publication schedules are very tight; it is vital to submit the review on time. Missing your deadline often means extending the time in press by more than one publication cycle. Although authors and publishers are always eager to have their books reviewed, a review that appears after a book is out of print is not nearly as useful as a timely one. The review of scholarly books is integral to the tenure and promotion procedures of most universities; authors are entitled to timely peer review of their published work. And those responsible for book ordering want to read reviews of books that can still be obtained for their libraries.

Do Not Expect Return of Your Computer Diskette. Although many journals now encourage submission of book reviews on computer diskettes in addition to hard copy, the cost of returning diskettes to reviewers so far exceeds the cost of the diskettes themselves that it is not feasible to return them. Just keeping track of hundreds or thousands of diskettes is an enormous and expensive undertaking. Like the paper on which the review is printed, or the envelope in which it is sent, a computer diskette is one of the costs that a reviewer incurs when (s)he accepts an invitation to review.

The Reviewer Is Usually Entitled to Keep the Book. Although journals cannot afford to offer payment for book reviews, they typically allow reviewers to keep the book after submitting the review. If a reviewer discovers that (s)he cannot complete the review, however, it would be best to return the book to the journal in a timely fashion.

Reviewers Should Provide Contact Information. When you submit your review, provide adequate contact information in a cover letter including address, telephone, fax, and e-mail. Let the editor know how you may be reached for queries, proofs, and offprints for the academic year and during the summer. If special circumstances apply, such as a sabbatical leave, let the editor know your schedule and how you may be contacted.

Wit and Elegance of Style in Standard English Are Appreciated. Book reviewing is an art, and your review will appear among scores of others. A substantive, comprehensive review that informs while it assesses, and that does so in an engaging and entertaining way, will be especially valued by both the editor and the reader.

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