

WRITING GOOD CRITICAL BOOK REVIEWS

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WHY?

Critical book reviews are a staple feature of academic publishing. Most academic journals have a critical book review section, and this serves several purposes which are worth knowing before submitting a critical book review to a journal. First, publishers supply books for review to all major publishers (and bloggers, etc) because it is free publicity which puts the book in front of the right audience and increases the chances of better sales. So, there are market forces at work here. Second, busy academics don't want to have to trawl through entire libraries looking for the right work to use in their research—accurate and well written reviews are a way to sift large volumes of information quickly and efficiently. These are the major reasons behind the critical book reviews industry. But I think there is another reason for book reviews, namely, they are an effective way to develop good reading, writing, and critical thinking skills by academics themselves. These three reasons, at least, seem to me to be the major factors behind the publication of critical book reviews.

WHAT?

Noting the reasons critical book reviews exist helps in answering the question as to what they should seek to achieve. A book review can be as short as several hundred words, but that is not a critical book review. A critical book reviews would normally be anywhere between 1,000—2,500 words. Anything longer than 2,500 words constitutes a critical review essay and, in that instance, should then be developed to come in at 3,500 words or more.

Critical book reviews should provide a clear and concise precis of the book—one which honestly and accurately describes the book, its intent, and content. If that is all that is done, however, then this constitutes a book review. A critical book review should then proceed with an informed critical interaction with the book. This can be achieved in several ways. Sometimes the entire scope of the book will be the focus for critical comment; other times it will be a chapter by chapter approach; and still other times a critical review will choose to pick up on a certain limited number of themes and comment on those. There is no one way to do a review and the nature of the book and the arguments being made will largely dictate how the review is conducted. Edited books, especially large ones, prove to be a challenge given the limited word count of the review can't begin to do justice to the volume. In these instances, a comment is normally made on the scope of the project and then several chapters might be singled out for specific comment to illustrate the overall arguments and direction of the volume.

The author of the critical review should speak as one expert writing to other experts about the book under review and that should form the basis of their critical interaction. Does this book engage with the latest scholarship? Is it comprehensive? Does it achieve what it sets out to do? Where does it fit within the

wider scholarship? What should be made of the book? How could it be used? Is it worth purchasing? These and other related questions form the *raison d'être* of the review for the reviewer.

Some general virtues should guide the reviewer, including but not limited to: honesty, charity, respect, don't write anything you wouldn't say to the author's face, integrity, and academic rigour. Academic publishing is premised on the idea that research is published for the scholarly community to interrogate its claims and to collectively negotiate its usefulness. A critical review is one way to contribute to this aim. So be honest but be fair and don't entertain *ad hominem* arguments or set up any straw men which you then take down. Seek first to understand then be understood is a good general principle.

HOW?

The mechanics of writing a review will differ from one academic to another so what follows is simply how I go about writing a critical book review in the hopes that a window into one person's routine might prove useful to others. To-date I have published over 55 critical book reviews, so I have some modest experience. As I read the book under review I open a file on my computer and take notes from the moment I start reading. I am looking for the central thesis of the book, for its key research questions, and for how the author/s develop their argument. The scope of the book is considered and how comprehensive the topic has been covered are things I am especially looking for and noting. I note down key contributions, things that stand out in the book—the good, the bad, and the ugly, as it were. Strength, weaknesses, gaps, and unique contributions are all noted.

Throughout the process of reading the book I am especially looking for the argument, the development of ideas, the level of scholarship, and the usefulness of the work. I am working through what I think of the work and how it should best be considered. I also begin to develop my own ideas on the topic—why else am I reviewing this work if I don't have my own ideas on the field of study—and what I might contribute in my finished review.

By the end of reading the book I have some reasonable notes and can then sit down and in light of the whole book go through those notes and formulate a coherent review. I normally have far too many words for the review by this stage and so I then edit the work down to the journal's requirements. This editing process is helpful as it forces me to think about what is most important in the work, what most needs to be said, and what I think other academics will most need to know about this work. I also keep in mind that the author, who, if they are anything like me, will no doubt read this review, and so I want to be charitable and responsible, but also have something to say. I then check for spelling and grammar, which normally results in a rewrite of a paragraph or so, and then send it in to the journal with a short prayer.

WHEN?

In my experience early career academics (1–6 years in) should do multiple critical book reviews each year. For the reasons stated above this develops good habits in researchers, it gets people's names out there in

the academic community, and it is a way to forge some important networks with publishers and editors. If the reviews are well written it is also a way for other academics to identify up-and-coming researchers who may be invited to participate in various publishing projects in the future. So early career academics should be doing reviews regularly. Mid-career academics (7–10 years in) normally do a lot less reviews as they are now invested in their own projects and other commitments such as committees and leadership tend to take up any remaining time. Senior academics (10 years +) don't tend to do many reviews and the ones they do complete are normally at the invitation of the publisher, editor, or author. These reviews are important and hearing from senior academics in these concise and constructively critical ways is both important and informative.

As an editor of several theological journals I know how important critical book reviews are and how well-written reviews by researchers who know what they are talking about are deeply valued. *PJTR* welcomes book reviews. Please contact the Book Reviews editor Dr Greg Liston if you require further information.