

Academic Librarians and Book Reviewing

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Abstract

This article illustrates academic librarians and book reviewing. Key features covered are library periodicals with book review columns, book review requirements, suggestions for book reviewers, types of books to review, taking notes, criteria to include, start and finish, submission of a completed book review, sending a thank you, and book reviewing profits. The author reveals techniques used by book reviewers on reviewing a book from start to finish. Readers discover several library periodicals the readers can serve as book reviewers for. Book reviews are so essential to numerous stakeholders. Reviewing books may be an important career strategy to advance in the academic librarian profession because book reviewing can be added to vitas, annual evaluations and dossiers creating a promotion, an increase in pay, or a new job. Additionally, book reviews are an important contribution to scholarly communication since book reviews increase a librarian's knowledge that is shared with patrons and fellow librarians. The role of book reviews in serving the academic librarian community is to assist book buyers and acquisitions librarians in the decision to purchase books. Reviews are so invaluable to authors and publishers for the promotion of the sale of their books.

Keywords: book reviewing, publishing, academic librarians, academic librarian profession



Introduction

Book reviews are priceless to numerous stakeholders. Reviewing books may be an important career strategy for advancement in the academic librarian profession because book reviewing can be added to vitas, annual evaluations, and dossiers for the purposes of promotion, campaigning for an increase in pay, or securing a new job. Additionally, book reviews are an important contribution to scholarly communication since reviewing books can enhance a librarian's knowledge to share with patrons and fellow librarians. The role of book reviews in serving the academic librarian community is to assist book buyers and acquisition librarians in the decision-making to purchase the best books for libraries to improve scholarly communication and serve the needs of the community the library serves. Reviews are also very vital to authors and publishers for the promotion and sale of their books.

Library Periodicals with Book Review Columns

Library periodicals with book review columns that would serve librarians in the southeast region of the country – or anywhere really – include *Louisiana Libraries*, the periodical of the Louisiana Library Association (LLA); *Tennessee Libraries*, the periodical of the Tennessee Library Association; *Mississippi Libraries*, the Mississippi Library Association periodical; and *North Carolina Libraries*, the North Carolina Library Association periodical. Others are *Catholic Library World*, the periodical of Catholic Library Association (CLA); *Southeastern Librarian*, the Southeastern Library Association (SELA) periodical; *American Reference Books Annual (ARBA)*; and *Codex*, the journal of the Louisiana chapter of the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL). The websites for these periodicals provide their book review editors' contact information and book reviewing requirements.

Book Review Requirements

The book review editorial boards of periodicals require key points that should be covered in the review. The book review editor will send new reviewers the book review requirements. Usually, a reviewer may obtain a free book to keep after reviewing. The book review editor will ask the reviewer what topics the reviewer is knowledgeable about or interested in to review. In the article “Every Reader a Reviewer,” Barbara Hoffert (2010) comments on book review assignments: “The traditional review has always been defined by the idea of authority; presumably, the book has been assigned to a reviewer who has some knowledge of the subject, is sufficiently versed in the literature to make valid comparisons, and embraces the obligation to write an unbiased and closely reasoned assessment for a broad audience” (p. 23).

Suggestions for Book Reviewers

Be sure to read a little on the book each week so there will not be last-minute writing or a rush to review due to not reading the book until the week before the deadline. Most book review column editors allow book reviewers to select a book to review. Book review editors tend to email lists of books from which the reviewer can pick. A book reviewer may opt for a book with fewer pages when the book reviewer has limited occasions to read and write a book review. Or the book reviewer may decide on a lighter topic such as a children’s book, fiction, romance, a mystery book, a biography, or a history book. Larry Cooperman (2008), in his article “Writing Book Reviews for Professionalism and (Some) Profit,” shares his thoughts on the added concentration academic librarians give to book reviewing. Cooperman (2008) observes that “one common complaint of librarians (or probably of any busy professional) is lack of time, a common refrain being: ‘I have to read another book?!’ Yes, that is true” (p. 8). But Cooperman (2008) also adds that a reviewer “can also review books on tape or on CD, listening in the car, at

home, or on your lunch break. It can be easy to find time to listen to a book” (p. 8). Cooperman (2008) concludes that “Overall, writing book reviews may be time-consuming, but the rewards of enhanced professionalism and collection development are worth the effort to any librarian” (p. 8). James Hartley (2010) emphasizes the value of book reviewing in his article “The Anatomy of a Book Review.” He observes that “the whole procedure lasted several days-because, for me, writing book reviews is an enjoyable activity that I intersperse between other more mundane tasks” (Hartley, 2010, p. 476). For example, an academic librarian could read a book and type the book review when working as a reference librarian at the reference desk.

Types of Books to Review

The books reviewed should be current, preferably within one to two years of the current year. Caroline Knott (2011) in her article “Book Reviews: Is there a Value to Book Reviews, or Are They Promotional Hype?” comments on the importance of reviewing new books. Knott (2011) observes that “book reviews pertain to newly-published books that purport to bring something new to an area of research, theory, or practice” (p. 75). If a reviewer identifies a book in their local library or through some other source, a book review editor can tell the reviewer if it is appropriate for their periodical. In the article “Reading and Writing Book Reviews Across the Disciplines,” Hartley (2006) touches on reviewers obtaining their own books to review: “Some editors accept unsolicited reviews, provided that they meet the required standards” (p. 1198).

Academic librarians may be asked to review electronic books. Chia-Yu Lin and Ming-Hsin Phoebe Chiu (2010) in their article “Analyzing Online Book Reviews for Scientific Popularization Genre: A Genre Analysis Study” comment on electronic book reviewing. The authors note that “due to the rapid development of information technology and the internet, online book reviews have become an alternative information source for book selection” (Lin &

Chiu, 2010, p. 269). With an increase in open access (OA) resources, this is of particular importance to libraries, especially academic libraries that support open education resources (OER) and/or open textbook initiatives.

Taking Notes

Reviewers should take notes while reading the book. These notes will be invaluable in the review writing process. There are different ways a reviewer can make notes or highlight critical aspects of the book. Hartley (2006) designed a table in one of his reviews which provides examples of how academics can write reviews. He also comments that when he's reading a book, he makes notes for "possible points for inclusion on (i) what the author says the book is about, (ii) possible key findings, and (iii) controversial statements. I then decide on which of these to include and which bits of the book to write about and what to leave out (because of space limitations)" (p. 1203). Hartley (2010) describes book reviewing in another article, "Anatomy of a Book Review":

Most commentators on writing book reviews focus on the content and what they think is important for book reviews to contain (e.g., see [2,4-6, 9]). Few comment on how reviewers write reviews. In this article, however, I have tried to do the latter. As noted above, the process of book reviewing for me typically follows the path outlined in this article:

- I make notes (or mark on the text) of possible points for inclusion in the review;
- I decide (because of space considerations) which points to include and which to leave out;
- I write a first draft that sequences this material and includes as many of the main points as possible to see how long my complete text is going to be;

- I then shorten this to the required length by cutting some points and re-sequencing the material; and
- I edit and polish the final text several times in order to make it more readable. (p. 477)

Criteria to Include

Australian Library Journal (ALJ) editor John Levett (2006) reveals questions book reviewers should ask: "...what is this book about? How effectively does the author carry out her/his self-appointed task? Where does the book stand in relation to others in the field? How does it compare? Is it value for money? Should the reader contemplate purchase for herself or her library?" (p. 264). Book reviewers should note in book reviews, regardless if it is required, the intended audience and the types of libraries that should have the book. By the same token, Hartley (2010) thinks mentioning the intended audience is significant. He observes that he usually completely reads the books he's reviewing to make sure he does not misunderstand them (Hartley, 2010). Then, Hartley (2010) notes, "I start by saying what the book is about and the intended audience (since having this information first may allow readers who are not interested to skip the rest of the review, and readers who are interested to raise their attention)" (p. 473).

In his guest column article "Writing Book Reviews for Professionalism and (Some) Profit," Cooperman (2008) highlights four factors needed to compose a book review. Cooperman (2008) describes those factors, which can serve as criteria, thus:

In the introduction, the reviewer announces his topic, the introduction to the review; in the narration, the author presents relevant background information about the book. In the confirmation, the author presents the principal reasons in the support of his opinion of the book; in the conclusion, the author restates his opinion and explains why this book is worthy of reading or not reading. These elements are the scaffold on which to build a successful

book review. (p. 8)

Identifying illustrations or other graphic representations in a book is also important.

Reviewers should consider counting the number of photographs in the books and separate them into the number of pictures of places, pictures of people, and pictures of maps, charts, and diagrams and include it in the book review. Also, a reviewer should refer to any places being listed with the National Historic Register and what places provide tours. This can enhance a reader's experience of the title being reviewed and underscore historic importance.

Catherine Sassen (2010) in her article "Reference Book Indexes Reviewed" underscores the value of making use of the indexes in books, noting that such elements should be commented on in reviews. Sassen (2010) asserts that the index "is considered a significant part of any nonfiction book" (p. 26). She adds, "In many cases the indexes were described very succinctly with little explanation.... Two indexes were described as accurate, one as concise, and one as well organized" (Sassen 2010, 29). Therefore, reviewers should consider commenting on indexes in their reviews.

Start and Finish

The top of the book review usually starts with the author's name, title of the book, place of publication, publisher, date, number of pages, illustrations (or not), index, size of book, and price. If the price is not available, consider looking on a resource like Amazon.com for a general idea of the full price. Sometimes, the book review editors request the book review to end with the book reviewer's name, position, and the library where the book reviewer works. Other book review editors ask the book reviewer to provide a separate cover sheet with name of the reviewer, position, place of work, and a small biographical paragraph on the book reviewer. Hartley (2006) also discusses the inclusion of details on reviewer and bibliographical and

citation data, too. He notes that “For some journals a good deal of attention is given to how to head the review with the appropriate format for the journal (e.g., Author-surname first, date of publication, title-in bold, place of publication, publisher, number of pages, ISBN number, price)” (p. 1197). He also observes that “similarly, there are often instructions on how to end the review with the reviewer’s name and institutional affiliation, and perhaps some biographical notes” (Hartley, 2006, p. 1197).

Submission of a Completed Book Review

Book review editors usually request that completed book reviews be submitted as an attachment via email, though some publishers use Internet-based submissions systems, like ARBA. The book review editor may have specifications regarding the formatting and layout of the review, such as a particular font and whether to use double spaces or single spaces in the book review. A book review column editor may send a paper notice with the free book stating the book review due date, the address to which to mail the review, the citation information, and a book ID Number. An editor may provide the option of submitting a book review online by giving the book reviewer a login ID and password for a website for submitting the review.

Upon submitting the book review by a designated deadline, the book reviewer may ask the editor an anticipated date of publication. Hartley (2006) also comments on submission of book reviews. He observes that usually “there are instructions for submitting the finished review, for example: ‘Please send your review by 6th August to meet the November deadline’” (Hartley, 2006, p. 1198). He also comments on the means of submission: “Completed book reviews are submitted by e-mail or downloaded directly using electronic editing software” (Hartley 2006, p. 1198). Submitting a book review prior to the day of the deadline may be beneficial to the book review editor. But it is important to submit it on time; procrastination is unprofessional. Choose

a book review with a longer due date if you do not have many occasions to read and review.

Pace yourself and submit early if you feel you have covered what is necessary.

Sending a Thank You

Sending a thank you is a powerful networking reputation brand builder. Email a thank you to the book review column editor for publishing a book review. Lynette Felber (2002) in her article, “The Book Review: Scholarly and Editorial Responsibility,” states that as a book review column editor she makes a point to thank her reviewers. She adds that the journal for which she edits “published thirty reviews and review essays in our last volume year, and the proliferation of new journals continues” (Felber, 2002, p. 166), which is not small undertaking. Felber (2002) notes that “given this competition, I am grateful to those dedicated scholars who took the time from their own research and teaching, and from their departmental and other professional service obligations, to review for us” (p. 166).

Book Reviewing Benefits

Book reviewing by academic librarians can be profitable, though not necessarily in a financial sense. Academic librarians can educate themselves from the books read which might be used to answer questions in the library. Writing skills improve which also may aid in assisting students writing papers. Book reviewing is a plus to add to librarian annual evaluations, vitas, and dossiers to stand for promotions or new jobs. Additionally, a reviewer may generously add the usually free review copies of the books to his or her work libraries’ collections or the reviewer may keep the review copies of the books. Cooperman (2008) shares this sense of profitability. He discusses the benefits including that “the first is that many publishers allow reviewers to keep the materials that they review. These are usually new books, so they make a welcome addition to any library collection (especially if you review materials that can be utilized

by your library, such as young adult books or books on tape or CD-ROM)” (p. 8). Additionally, “writing reviews is an excellent way to get noticed professionally in print and in writing for peer-reviewed publications (which is another area in itself)” (Cooperman, 2008, p. 8).

Felber (2002) promotes book reviewing, too, though her focus is more academically-oriented than Cooperman’s focus. She asserts that tenured faculty who are criticized for not being productive enough should consider reviewing books “as a way to keep up in their fields and to demonstrate their continuing commitment to their discipline” (Felber, 2002, p. 170). Academic librarians who review books are likely to receive recognition on annual evaluations by publishing more than one book review during the year. Book reviews are so important to book buyers and acquisition librarians because these different constituencies read book reviews to decide on the purchase of materials for libraries.

Conclusion

The role of book reviews is quite important to a variety of different constituencies. Academic librarians benefit from book reviewing by obtaining knowledge from reading books to contributing to scholarly communication with patrons and fellow librarians. Book reviewing enhances writing skills which can assist at the reference desk with students. Academic librarians may keep the usually complimentary books or donate the books to their libraries. Book reviewing can be added to vitas, annual evaluations, and dossiers which may lead to promotion, salary increases, or new jobs. Book reviews are essential to the academic librarian community and scholarly communication beyond advancing the reviewer’s own career. Book buyers and acquisitions librarians read book reviews to clarify purchasing for libraries. Publishers and authors can benefit from book reviews improving the sale of their books. So, academic librarians please read, review, and reap the profits of book reviewing.

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