

Is quality, like beauty, in the eye of the beholder? The elusive art of book reviewing and its impact on reading, discovery, and sales

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What is a book review? Many have attempted to answer this question over the last few decades in a multitude of ways—from informed scholars, librarians, and booksellers to publishers, authors and readers. While their views differ widely on how successful book reviews are in bringing us closer to a book’s quality—and whether this is even possible—their definitions of book reviews and their core purpose seem to be in sync. To start, book reviews are a ‘genre’ in their own right, as they have features specific to them, and they can be as entertaining to read as the books they put under the microscope. These features, of course, depend on the context in which the books are reviewed (e.g., reviews found in academic journals are more in-depth and lengthier than those found in mainstream newspapers and magazines), but the general purpose of book reviews is always to serve as kind of an economic model, helping readers—whoever they may be—to decide if they should spend their money on a book, be it for entertainment, enlightenment, or scholarly pursuit. In other words, the main purpose of book reviews is to reduce search costs and uncertainty (Clement & others 78). In this sense, then, readers hope that book reviews will guide them in the direction of the books they both want and need.

If we examine how information professionals and scholars have perceived book reviews over time and in varied settings, we can conclude that despite their imperfections and sometimes contradictory performance and impact, the presence of book reviews in scholarly and mass communication is understood to be both necessary and helpful, not only to guide readers through the maze of published literature—which today exceeds 2.2 million new titles in any given year, according to UNESCO estimates published in 2017—but also to point to the cultural conditions of our time and to give us alternate views on particular subjects. Indeed, the world needs different opinions. As Peyre put it, “unanimity in any acclaim for a book (whether or not by a Nobel Prize winner), a play, a concert performer, or an artist, even if he has become as venerable as Picasso or Chagall, should arouse suspicion. It can only be a sign of conventionality, of intellectual laziness, or timidity” (Peyre 130).

Yet despite such explanations for the necessity of diverse opinions, there has been no shortage of views pointing, sometimes harshly, to the inherently self-defeating nature of book reviews. From Nabokov’s “Sterile instructors successfully endeavor to produce by reviewing the books of more fertile colleagues” and Leigh Hunt’s “The critic is often an unsuccessful author, almost always an inferior one,” to W.H. Auden’s “One cannot attack a book without showing off” and Channing Pollock’s “A critic is a legless man who teaches running,” book reviews have since their emergence in both popular and academic culture often been exposed to the same kind of criticism they often projected onto others. No

wonder, then, they have been the subject of countless studies that have examined their effect from just about every angle imaginable.

Book reviews are studied usually in terms of several criteria: review length, lag-time, orientation, evaluative slant, and reviewer identity (Rehman 127). They are also studied in terms of their influence on author reputation and career advancement, as well as in terms of their power to predict a book's critical reception and, ultimately, its financial success. Questions that appear frequently in such studies include, for example: How have book reviews and our perception of them changed over time? How often are critics truly objective in their analysis? Should they strive to be more descriptive and less prescriptive in their analysis? Are book reviews only about the book or do they also reveal details about the critic? What is the impact of negative reviews on a book's sales and on an author's public image? What is the role of professional editors in the process of preserving ethical standards behind book reviewing? How much influence do editors have in deciding what books are reviewed in professional publications and by whom? How often and in what ways are book reviews used as marketing tools by publishers, authors, and such middlemen as PR agents? And, perhaps most relevant, just how many books can possibly be reviewed in a world that sees 2.2 million titles published annually?

Types of book reviews

To answer such questions with as much objectivity as possible and to understand the multi-layered impact of book reviews on culture, education and society at large, it is necessary to understand the types of book reviews that exist, what makes each different from other types, recognize some commonalities among them, and—drawing from the substantial research already available on each review type—draw conclusions about what we may expect in the near and distant future. Upon closer examination of available literature (and based on my own experience as a professional book review editor at *Library Journal*), I have come to identify four major types of book reviews: academic reviews; trade reviews; mainstream media reviews; and, since the advent of modern technologies and social media platforms, user reviews. The first three types refer to the book reviews written, edited, and published by professionals, while the fourth refers to the reviews we encounter online and all over the Internet; they are usually written by amateurs who voluntarily share their thoughts about a book (often anonymously).

Academic reviews are almost always written by scholars. Appearing in various academic journals, their prime function is to analyze literature outside the reviewing scope of trade journals; reviewers of academic reviews are most interested in assessing the contribution to a field of knowledge. One caveat here: the academic practice of 'peer reviewing' is not the focus of this paper, therefore it is not covered here; the purpose of peer-reviewing, although it bears some similarities to regular book reviewing, serves an entirely different purpose, which warrants a separate treatment altogether. Trade reviews (i.e., reviews found in business-to-business publications) serve to assist librarians and booksellers in the book selection process. In other words, libraries and bookstores usually buy titles based on the reviews found in trade publications. Mainstream media book reviews appear in major newspapers, magazines, and on web portals and, as such, reach large numbers of people. Their purpose is less to facilitate the selection process and more to inform the public. Lastly, user book reviews are, at their core, 'feedback' provided by readers on various sites where books may be sold (e.g., Amazon) or recommended (e.g., Goodreads).

Each of these book review types warrants a proper definition and a closer analysis, as each carries a unique set of traits, issues, limitations, and even ethical concerns in an age that is still seeing rapid changes to how content is published and disseminated. Long gone are the days when book reviews were thought of as an entity belonging to an exclusive group of people qualified to write them. And long gone are the days when information needed to travel a great distance, on paper, to reach its desired audience.

Academic book reviews

Of primary interest to scholars, academic librarians, and academic publishers, academic book reviews rank second only to recommendations by other scholars as the most important source of information on new books in academia. In fact, most scholarly journals devote significant space to book reviews. According to some estimates (e.g., Buttlar, 1990), at least ten percent. They are usually longer than trade and mainstream media book reviews and provide deeper analysis. Because they must satisfy intellectual needs of experts in certain fields and, ideally, explain how new arguments contribute to already-established hypotheses, the identity of reviewers must always be revealed and, along with his/her credentials. The reviewer is, therefore, expected to place the work in a larger context, evaluate the contribution to preexisting knowledge in the field—this, in fact, is sought after the most (Bilhartz 529)—and identify strengths and weaknesses of the author's argument so that those reading the review may decide which of the two main academic purposes the book may serve: for one's own research and/or for one's teaching.

Although this general description of academic book reviews applies across the board, differences do exist among scholarly disciplines—and many studies have pointed to this. For example, research suggests that noticeably fewer book reviews are written in the natural sciences than in the arts and humanities and the social sciences. Scholars in the latter fields rely more on books and monographs for their teaching than do scholars in the natural sciences (Hartley 1195). In addition, some scholars are under more pressure to contribute new knowledge to an existing corpus of knowledge than others. Some, like literature professors (sometimes called the “eternal reappraisers”), seek to discover new layers of meanings in classics (Peyre 131), which then serve as plausible new interpretations of works of literature, rather than definitive statements on an author or his book, thus making such reviews less susceptible to the rigorous criticism present in other disciplines of the humanities. The importance of diversity of views is equally important in such settings. In Peyre's words: “The worst that can happen to any department of literature is to have achieved such a unity of methods and views among its members that dissent no longer stimulates the students, and their critical sense becomes dulled by dogma” (130).

Similar conclusions about differences can be drawn when studying academic book reviews over the course of several decades. Every decade sees a shift in perception and priorities by reviewers, which significantly shape not only the structure of reviews of their time but also their contents. When viewed through the prism of the ever-changing cultural patterns they belong to, academic book reviews can be said to serve as useful primary sources—as historical documents in their own right. After Bilhartz analyzed the reviews in the *Journal of American History* over the course of several decades, he found that each decade showed clear tendencies of book reviewers. On the whole, he concluded, the fifties was the era for “friendly and uncritical evaluation” and “gentlemanly reviews”; the sixties was the era of change, the era that saw reviewers increasingly more critical of the book's content and the era that saw the number of negative reviews rise overall; the seventies was the era in which the ‘historian’ had entered the world of the social scientist, therefore, critics highly valued boldness in interpretation and arguments that were thought-provoking and original, even if not thoroughly researched; while the eighties were less impressed with originality but more with analysis and deep research (Bilhartz 526-528).

We also encounter differences when examining the reviewers' backgrounds beyond their fields of study, especially their gender, age, and status in academic circles. Studies have suggested, for example, that men and women reviewers favor books written by members of their own sex (Moore, 1978); men tend to write more negative reviews than women (Moore, 1978); older reviewers tend to provide more positive evaluations than their younger peers (Snizek and Fuhrman, 1979); the higher the reviewers status, the more favorable the review (Hirsch *et al*, 1974); and readers perceive negative reviews as more competent and intelligent than positive reviews (Amabile, 1983).

Because of the academic rule of ‘publish or perish,’ academic journals in every discipline receive many more papers than they can publish, and given the tight space devoted to reviews, a rather small number of academic books can, in fact, be reviewed. This begs the

question: should academic journals review more books to better reflect the tides within certain disciplines? To answer this, it helps to ask: are book review sections of academic journals read as much as actual papers? Is this what scholars would even advocate for? According to a 2003 study, book reviews were among the least read parts of professional and academic journals (Hartley 1196). Which brings us to the issue of validity and reliability of academic book reviews. Are they not read as much because scholars doubt them to be dependable assessments of the academic merits of a book? Furnham is among the scholars who see many drawbacks behind the art of book reviewing in academia, citing three key weaknesses (31-34).

First, Furnham says, we must be aware of the dangers of being a reviewer of a scholarly book. The most rudimentary question to ask, therefore, is: who is the critic and what may be his agenda? Could the reviewer indeed be the 'less fertile' colleague good at producing reviews rather than contributing his own original ideas, as Nabokov suggested? Second, the issue of the consequence of giving a positive vs. negative review must not be taken lightly. As Amabile's study showed, pessimism and negativity tend to sound profound to readers, while optimism and positivity sound superficial (Amabile, 1983). Furnham makes a strong point here when suggesting that "intellectually insecure people may, in an effort to preserve their self-esteem and enhance it in the eyes of their critics, be particularly negative." And third, there is a troubling aspect of book reviews related to the faults of editors. Here we enter the territory that is beyond the author—the territory that exposes the enormous influence of the editors who decide who reviews what book, how, who checks the reviewer's claims for validity, and what books get reviewed in the first place.

Journal editors indeed have a lot of power in the business of book reviewing, not only in academia but well beyond it. Given my experience at *Library Journal*, where I served as Senior Book Review Editor covering the fields of arts, humanities, literature, communications, and reference materials (leading up to and during the digital revolution of the early 2000s), I am inclined to argue that trade book review editors play an immense role in shaping the collections of world libraries and bookstores, therefore directly influencing which of the very small percentage of the books published around the world permeate our collective psyche.

Trade book reviews

So what exactly are trade journals and magazines? Put simply, they are the publications usually not read by the general population but instead by the professionals who have a vested interest in a topic. In the business of books, their role is to satisfy the needs of people who buy or sell books to institutions such as public, academic and school libraries, bookstores, and various other institutions of learning and education. Several trade journals dominate the market of book reviews. In no particular order, they include: *Publishers Weekly* (read widely by publishers, agents, librarians, booksellers, and book buyers, covering both the adult and children's market), *Library Journal* (reviews of books and other materials most suitable for public libraries or large academic libraries), *School Library Journal* (children's books, from picture books all the way through Grade 12); *Booklist* (reviews of books and audiovisual materials for all ages), *Choice* (reviews of books intended for academic library collections, and *Kirkus Reviews* (a wide range of fiction and nonfiction, including children's).

Sajjad ur Rehman describes the key traits of trade reviews: Unlike academic reviews—which appear later, provide a detailed and critical treatment, and are evaluative—trade reviews are short, relatively current and descriptive, “without a critical examination of substance” (Rehman138). What's more: the reviewer's identity—very important in academic circles—is not always revealed (e.g., *Publishers Weekly*). Trade book reviewers are usually not scholars but highly informed professionals, often avid readers and authors in their own right. In the case of *Library Journal*, for example, the reviewers—who do not get paid but get a byline as

well as a complimentary copy of the book reviewed—are working librarians helping their peers sort through the maze of published literature, recommending books for various collections.

Librarians devote a significant portion of their time to collection development, and acquiring books in an age that sees so many published in every category is a daunting task. Since individually evaluating each book ever published is impossible—an ideal and unlikely scenario—the next best, to quote Ranganathan, is for librarians to “depend upon evaluation of other competent persons.” The same can be argued for booksellers. And this is precisely the goal of such publications: to provide useful reviews of books, written by competent persons, to facilitate the selection process. On the face of it, it appears as if the trade reviewing media have an effective system in place that helps those who acquire books (for lending or selling) to populate their shelves (or digital collections) with the best the world literature has to offer. Many such publications have been around for decades, some close to a century.

Trade journal editors are inundated with a tremendous volume of books (more than other types of book review editors)—sent to them by publishers, big and small, as well as, more recently, self-published authors—expecting review coverage. From that sea of books, the editors (usually in charge of covering certain subjects, genres, or disciplines) select titles to be reviewed. Editors engage in two types of selections here: the selection of the book/author to be reviewed and the reviewer entrusted with the task of evaluating the chosen book. Both activities require a great deal of responsibility on the part of the editor, as he or she is expected to select books representing both quality and uniqueness of style as well as to select reviewers who will provide as objective an assessment as possible. Is this always the case? Is this even entirely possible? What have studies and testimonials revealed about such practices?

I start by shedding light on my ten-year experience as a trade book review editor. On any given day, a book review editor at a publication like *Library Journal* receives tens of galleys and/or manuscripts, sometimes hundreds. The best he or she can do is select titles that, to the best of his or her ability, appear to be professionally published and covering topics that will be of interest and relevance to the core readers of the magazine. Certain galleys and/or manuscripts will catch the editor’s attention more than others. For example, if they bear the imprint of a reputable publishing house, if they are written by well-known authors or provocative public figures whose books have been eagerly anticipated, if they cover an area seldom written about (therefore fill a visible void), or, in rare cases, if a plea has already been made by a colleague or a reviewer, who expressed interest in advance in reviewing a book.

Have there been cases where I overlooked books and authors owing to my own lack of knowledge (of a subject and, possibly, its relevance), the lack of available reviewers (who are, quite frequently, moving targets), or the lack of space in the magazine? Probably. Have there been cases where I didn’t always match the right reviewer with the right book? Certainly. While I did keep a detailed log of my reviewers’ interests, expertise, and credentials, and tried to pair each book with the best possible reviewer available at the point of need, there were forces at play in the process beyond my control. For example, books sometimes did not reach reviewers at their libraries (where they were mailed), or they arrived late; books got lost in the process of reaching *LJ* offices; reviewers fell ill and resigned before being able to return their last review; or I was away for long periods of time and in my absence, books didn’t get reviewed as promptly as they usually would on my watch. Perhaps the most frustrating part of the job was the sheer volume of books received and the continuous effort to squeeze in as much book review coverage into each issue as possible.

How does my experience compare to the studies that have examined the contents of trade journals? There are certainly more similarities than differences. Blake highlighted a number of studies pointing to the effect of trade book reviews in his 2008 paper “The Role of Reviews and Reviewing Media in the Selection Process,” including, for example, Kennel Tisdell’s study dating back to the late 1950s, which found that the more often a book was

reviewed, the more likely it was to be held by libraries. He also found most reviews published in trade journals to be positive rather than negative, or even neutral. Over two decades later, Serebnick came to the same conclusion, reaffirming the power of trade journals in the book and library industry (Blake 8).

Serebnick also sought to identify the titles reviewed in trade journals and found that an elite group of publishers received the most reviews. In fact, 15 percent of publishers represented over 50 percent of books reviewed in six trade journals (Blake 9). Other studies have also pointed to similar findings, leading researchers to conclude that the books of the “non-core publishers” have a low probability of being reviewed, therefore purchased. While I am not aware of any recent studies examining the presence of reviews by independent or small publishers in trade journals, my assumption is that the gap has narrowed in the past 20 years, owing partly to the fact that trade publications have a strong online presence and are no longer constrained by the same print limitations (e.g., page cuts) and are thus able to review books by many more publishers, even if only in digital format. The question remains open, however, as to whether the small portion by the elite group of publishers is still reserved for print editions. The world’s biggest publishers—referred to in the book industry as “the Big Five” and including Penguin Random, Hachette, Macmillan, Simon & Schuster, and HarperCollins—are usually the ones who send the most galleys for review (and my experience confirms this). They have also been known to support trade journals with substantial advertising budgets.

While advertising certainly doesn’t guarantee a publisher book review coverage, it would be naïve to assume that advertisers don’t have certain expectations and that trade journal management isn’t aware of them. It would also be naïve to assume that trade journals—quite often for-profit publications owned by corporations that expect quarterly financial growth (e.g., *Publishers Weekly*, *Library Journal*, *School Library Journal*)—are not under constant pressure to perform and deliver monetary results, without which there would be no possibility of employing book review editors and reviewers in the first place. Here we touch on a controversial issue that is not the subject of this paper but that certainly warrants a deeper analysis: What is the correlation, if any, between reviews published in such journals and the advertisements that appear in them? Can we draw parallels between the publishers represented the most and the advertisements that appear in certain print issues or online? This is not to suggest malpractice but to merely point to a factor that requires closer analysis in determining why certain publishers get more review coverage in such publications.

Mainstream media book reviews

Advertisements are equally important (if not more) in the world of mainstream media, including mainstream newspapers, magazines, and various online portals. Without advertisements to support such publications and their mass distribution, there would hardly be any journalism left, especially in an age of declining print subscriptions and dominance of social media platforms. As powerful as advertisements are—and publishers have historically relied on them to boost their marketing and PR efforts—they don’t seem to be as effective in helping a book or an author receive attention as an actual review, especially if the review is written by an opinion leader, i.e., a literary critic of great influence.

Opinion leaders tend to have greater credibility than advertisements (Eliashberg & Shugan, 1997). Therein lies perhaps the key difference between a *New York Times* or a *New Yorker* critic and a trade journal critic—the former is more likely to be a well-known literary figure or columnist with an established following and has a proven record of influencing readers. This is not to say that a mainstream media review probes deeper (although such reviews do tend to be longer in length), but it is to say that the reach of an opinion leader far surpasses the reach of a lesser-known (even if highly knowledgeable) critic contributing to trade publications. Likewise, the reach of a mainstream publication far surpasses the reach of a trade journal.

This brings us to the inevitable discussion of the ever-expanding roles of a book critic. While they vary from context to context, and from setting to setting, the complex nature of critics and their motivations surfaces more vividly in mainstream media, where we encounter book reviews read by the masses. Such reviews are not meant to persuade book professionals to add certain titles to library or bookstore collections, instead, they are packaged as highly sophisticated reflections on a book's literary merit, very often as entertaining to read, if not more, as the books themselves. Because of their mass appeal, it is no wonder they serve as vehicles to advance the careers of literary critics. To quote from a 2007 paper "Do Critics Make Bestsellers," in an ideal scenario, critics "represent independent advisors, informants, and opinion leaders whose judgments are interpreted by the consumer and reinforced by word-of-mouth effects...however, critics may be economic agents who not only serve the reader, but also follow their own interests, including personal rewards, financial security, and prestige...[their] self-conceptions lead them to act on the basis of their influences, which can distort their selection and judgment" (Clement *et al* 81).

Clement *et al* suggest that such judgments are a result of several "roles" of critics, including: The Employee (who must follow certain internal agendas); The Self-Promoter (who chooses to review books that will enhance his/her public image either as a touch critic or a kind one); the Predictor (who, owing to public pressure not to fail a prediction, chooses to review books likely to do well); the Talent Scout (a critic who views him/herself as supporter of emerging talent); the Literary Expert (one who has an 'elite taste,' which runs counter to the broader public's taste); the Colleague (one who keeps a watchful eye not only on the reaction of readers but also of fellow critics, thus acting as an opinion leader for other critics); and The Target of PR/Marketing Activities (one who feels pressure by advertisers supporting a publication or a publisher expecting a quote for the cover of a new book).

I am inclined to argue here that the roles of a critic, as Clement *et al* see them, are also the core roles of an editor. The editor, too, is, first and foremost, an employee (even more so than the critic, since many critics are freelancers, rather than full-time employees), a predictor (the act of selecting what to review is the first step in deciding a book's faith), a talent scout (always on the lookout for fresh new blood; it certainly helps a journal to be the first to notice new talent, the same way it matters to a newspaper to publish a breaking news story), a colleague (keeping an eye on what editors in other publications are covering and how), and, lastly, an even more obvious target of publisher's PR/Marketing activities (and expectations).

We've seen that academic book reviews have different effects within different disciplines and are always subject to (sometimes unpleasant) scrutiny by scholars, who usually view them as inferior contributions to literature compared to actual papers. And we've seen that in the world of trade journals, book reviews directly shape the world's library and bookstore collections. Should we assume that mainstream media book reviews—given the enormous influence of opinion leaders who contribute to them and such publication's mass reach—must have an even larger impact on book sales and an author's reputation? What exactly happens after a book receives a review in a major newspaper and magazine?

When Sorensen and Rasmussen analyzed the impact of *New York Times* book reviews (of hardcover fiction books) in 2004, they found that both positive and negative reviews increased sales—62.9 percent for positive and 34.4 for negative reviews—which suggests that consumers' opinions about a product are malleable (Sorensen and Rasmussen 12). Such findings stand in opposition to the findings of the impact of academic reviews, which can encounter serious objections in many forms and damage careers, and trade reviews, which have a greater effect when books are explicitly recommended for purchase and carry positive undertones. Is any publicity good publicity then? This and other studies (e.g., Basuroy, 2003) suggest that is, indeed, the case, at least as far as the persuading of the general population goes.

Clement and his colleagues, on the other hand, begged to differ, challenging this hypothesis by drawing attention to such influencing factors as the author's fame (famous authors are

known to carry the strength of a brand); the genre of a book (some genres are widely more popular than others); and a book's origin ('foreign' is not as attractive as 'native'). They even propose taking a closer look at a book's size, volume, layout, price, and any awards and prizes attached to an author or a book brand. All these traits may contribute to a book's popularity more than a book review that appears in a reputable publication, even when signed by an opinion leader (Clement *et al* 85-86). What's more, this same group of scholars also drew conclusions about the influence of the so-called "indecisive reviews" (neither positive nor negative) and found reasons to suspect they may 'hurt' sales more than blatantly negative reviews (Clement & others 102). Perhaps the main results of their findings may be summed up as follows: book critics do leave their mark, particularly the opinion leaders among them, but their influence is minimal (Clement & others 100) and can, therefore, not be relied on as the main factor determining a book's success.

User book reviews

If critics' opinions can't always be relied on to help us unmistakably predict what is a worthy read—although I cautiously add here that this remains the topic of debate—who can? Information scientists have spent much of the twentieth century trying to understand the impact of book reviews, coming to differing conclusions. Patterns do exist, however, and it seems that book reviews exhibit different strengths and weaknesses in different settings. Regardless of how they may be viewed or to what degree they are valued inside and outside their key audiences, they have become an integral part of the publishing process. What all three types of book reviews examined thus far—academic, trade, and mainstream media—have in common is that they are all written (and managed) by professionals, i.e., individuals or groups of individuals with certain skills—including writing, analytical, and editing skills, as well as proven expertise. All these scenarios involve vetting and filtering to some degree, making the business of book reviewing an art form that gets 'created' and released onto the world by a select few. The 'select few' entrusted to give their verdicts on a book's quality and worthiness are 'selected' largely owing to their ability to impart judgment in ways that, hopefully, transcends impulsive, overly emotional, and subjective responses to a written text.

Right around the turn of the century, the reviewing game changed entirely when the world entered the era of digital publishing, followed by the emergence of social media platforms like Facebook and online bookstores like Amazon.com. Community content—also referred to as user-generated content—started to be produced in dizzying quantities all over the Internet and the notion that everything sold online needed to be evaluated by the people who bought or used products (books were no exception) became the new norm. For better and for worse, technology has allowed us to fully democratize the idea of reviewing books and that's what millions of people have done for the past decade on a wide range of websites—from online bookstores like Amazon and Barnes & Noble, where users can purchase books and give their public verdicts about their reading experience, to sites like Goodreads, where they can recommend books to other readers and take on an even more active role of reviewers. Further, users are encouraged to rate books and these rating systems have had a significant impact on a book's popularity and commercial success. The old practice of word-of-mouth (WOM) migrated to the virtual world and became electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), whose influence on the fate of a book or an author continues to astound and, as studies show (e.g., Amblee & Bui, 2011) directly shape the reputation of a book, the reputation of an author, as well as the reputation of books in the same category or genre. As Amblee and Bui put it, "eWOM, when taken globally in an online market, can be considered a significant source of social capital capable of predicting shoppers' buying decisions" (Amblee & Bui 107).

In the world of online reviews of products in general (not just books), Amazon reviews matter the most. The sheer volume of academic papers evaluating the impact of Amazon reviews is staggering. A December 2017 *USA Today* article ("That review you wrote on Amazon? Priceless") revealed that online reviews directly impact about 20 percent of sales on websites like Amazon, and that customer (or user) reviews are valued at a whopping

\$400 billion (according to Power Reviews data)— this comes from about five to ten percent of customers who write reviews regularly. The percentage is much higher if we take into consideration how many people have written at least one review online (versus being a regular reviewer). A 2004 study by Henning-Thurau *et al.* found that 29 percent of males and 22 percent of females had written at least one review of a product (Yun Kuei Huang 98). The same *USA Today* article cited a survey by marketing firm BloomReach, which indicated that 55 percent of shoppers, in general, start their online buying research on Amazon. And, according to e-commerce analysis firm Market Track, half of all online shoppers rely primarily on Amazon for user reviews.

While it makes sense why sites like Amazon allow for and, in fact, encourage, customer feedback on their sites—one reason, of course, is to build ‘brand loyalty’ (Amazon is widely considered a trusted source of information) and, another, equally, if not more important, because study after study points to the positive effects of online reviews on sales—it also helps to understand why people read user reviews online in the first place, particularly when knowing they are written by complete strangers. What’s more, zooming back in on books, sites like Amazon include a wide variety of professional reviews from trade and mainstream media publications (not for all books, but for a large number, displayed prominently on each book’s page, usually just below bibliographic information), so one wonders why users would not stop there and why many of them go on to read posts by ‘amateur’ reviewers, most of which tend to be positive (Chevalier & Mayzlin 346).

In his analysis of the motives for and consequences of reading book reviews on the Internet, Yun Kuei Huang identified five main motives behind the reading of user reviews online: 1) information need for cognition (if users are not sure if a book fits their needs, they read reviews to make their decision; 2) involvement (when purchasing books for other people, they seek out varying opinions); 3) hedonic reading (reading other people’s reviews, especially the really well-written ones, gives them the joy of knowledge; reading reviews therefore, becomes a hedonistic experience); 4) perceived benefits of information searching (reading reviews helps users save time) and 5) social orientation through information (the more positive the reviews are, the more affirmative the book reviews are from general readers, and these books usually attract more attention) (Yun Kuei Huang 102-105).

Yi-Fen Chen’s 2007 study showed that recommendations of other consumers (‘amateurs’) exerted greater influence on purchasing choices than recommendations of experts. The main reason for this, Chen argued, is ‘herd behavior’ effect. When people use reviews of others to determine a book’s quality on the Internet, online herd behavior occurs, i.e., they begin to use online herd ‘cues’ to acquire product information. *If a lot of people are saying good things about a book, the reasoning goes, I will probably like it myself.* This goes in line with Chevalier and Mayzlin’s 2006 study of the impact of reviews on book sales at Amazon.com and Barnesandnoble.com, which found that the addition of new, favorable reviews at one of the two sites resulted in an increase in the sales of a book at that site, relative to the other site (Chevalier & Mayzlin 346). In other words, the more positive reviews a book got on any of the two sites, the more likely that book was to continue getting positive reviews and, consequently, more sales.

The same study also found evidence that an incremental negative review was more powerful in decreasing book sales than an incremental positive review was in increasing sales (Chevalier & Mayzlin 346). Pei-yu Chen *et al.*’s study of Amazon reviews, released around the same time as these two, found that reviews written by the community (i.e., random users) were viewed as more helpful (thus had a stronger impact on sales) than reviews written by experts. Moreover, such reviews had more impact on less popular books than on more popular books (whose popularity is established through name recognition and/or already-reputable authors or book series (Chen *et al.* 1).

Also not to be overlooked in the discussion of the impact of user reviews is the phenomenon of starring products (including books) online—i.e., the one-to-five-star rating system available to users on sites like Amazon. Some scholars have already studied the correlation

between ratings (the quantitative analysis of a product) and reviews (the qualitative analysis of a product) and their findings have pointed to some interesting assumptions. Using a panel of data on over four thousand books from Amazon, Nan Hu *et al* examined in 2014 the inter-relationships between ratings, sentiments (feelings about and experience with a product expressed in reviews), and sales and found that the ratings alone did not, in fact, have direct impact on product sales but had an indirect impact through sentiments. In other words, this study suggested that the numeric ratings of products usually did not capture the “polarity of information in the text reviews” but played an important role in the early stages of searching, while the reviews played an important role in evaluation and, ultimately, choice. As the very title of their paper suggested, ratings lead reviewers to the product, but reviews help them ‘clinch’ it.

As if giving this kind of power to the people online wasn’t transformative enough for everyone in the book chain—from the author who gives birth to the book, to the reader who gives the final verdict its quality—Amazon (and other sites) took the game of reviewing to a new level when it introduced ‘reviews of reviews’ with a simple question aimed at the user: *Was this review helpful to you?* Not only were readers able to sound off on a book’s quality, they were now also able to rate the quality and usefulness of other users’ reviews. As it turns out, ‘reviews of reviews’ also play a role in predicting a book’s success, particularly if reviews are ranked ‘helpful.’ Like the staring system used for books, ‘reviews of reviews’ warrant a thorough analysis, as many dynamics are at play here, both convenient and problematic. For example, a review’s perceived ‘helpfulness’ depends not just on its content, but also on the relation of its score to the score of other reviews. Which means that a ‘top’ review may not always be ‘helpful.’ Its helpfulness is always relative to how other reviews are performing. The consensus, however, is that the ‘most helpful’ and “most recent’ reviews (which automatically rise to the top of the list) play a significant role in determining sales (Hu *et al* 2).

The bottom line

Clearly, we live in an age where there is an overabundance of opinion about books, and this opinion ranges from highly sophisticated and erudite to informative and laid-back. We also live in an age that values the opinions of all readers, not only those who review books to advance their careers. If the studies examined here are any indication, quality is, like beauty, in the eye of the beholder more than ever before in the history of book publishing. And more than ever before, our society values the difference in opinion and the use of technology to help people share their reading experiences. Regardless of the context and type of review, the goal is always to help the person not familiar with a book understand its utility in advance. Therefore, the goal is always to reduce uncertainty and minimize the risk of buying a book that would not suit one’s needs or tastes.

But as with other technological advances that have democratized the sharing of information in the twenty-first century, some bad does come with a lot of good. Book reviews are no exception. With great power—and any reviewer who publicly sounds off on the quality of a book exercises a tremendous amount of power—comes great responsibility. And this responsibility, of course, is no longer only attached to the professional editor familiar with the possible ethical pitfalls of book reviewing but to any reader who chooses to review a book online.

In the early days of book reviewing—well before the advent of the Internet and digital publishing—editors in academic, trade, and mainstream publications bore the heavy burden of ensuring that book reviews gave balanced, objective, and unbiased opinions. Or at least that’s what was expected of them in theory. As Tobin points out in “The Commensality of Book Reviewing,” certain questions had to be asked before any book underwent a reviewing process, and traditionally, editors have asked such questions, including, for example: Do I know enough about the persuasions of the reviewer to match the book fairly with the reviewer? Am I aware of prejudicial connections the reviewer might have with the author? Can the reviewer be critical but civil (Tobin 47)? In an ideal scenario, the same questions

should be asked in the context of online reviewing, but with some adjustments. Anyone posting a review online should indeed ask: Do I know enough about the persuasions of the author to give the book an unbiased review? Do I have any prejudices against the author that may cloud my judgment? Can I be critical but civil?

Unfortunately, this is not always the case. One of the key weaknesses of the democratization of book reviewing has been the explosion of fake reviews and “sock puppetry”—authors writing glowing reviews of their own books to further their careers and manipulating readers into buying their books through fake reviews. And these authors are not always unknown or aspiring writers; they have also included well-known and quite established academics. A good example is British historian Orlando Figes (University of London), who admitted posting reviews of his own books online (after vehemently denying any wrongdoing), telling the press he had been under “intense pressure.” His rival historian Robert Service, whose book Figes described in fake Amazon.co.uk posts as “awful,” said in a quote for the *Guardian*: “I have been made acutely aware that a solitary malpractitioner, if he has an abundance of money and malice, can intimate all and sundry—and that includes both scholars and journalists.”

These, of course, are isolated incidents and do not indicate that Figes’ misconduct is the norm of reviewer behavior online. It does, however, show, that it is present even among the authors held in high regard. Amazon has been very proactive in combating fake reviews and has launched over one thousand lawsuits against users who post them, according to *USA Today*. Amazon’s algorithms have also gotten more sophisticated over time, giving more weight to reviews by people who buy the book first (before posting) as well as to reviews that receive the highest ‘helpfulness’ ratings. The fact of the matter is that despite the effectiveness of Word-of-Mouth and the long-lasting effects of ‘any’ publicity, bad reviews can and do, in fact, hurt careers and reputations of authors who fall prey to the dark side of reviewing.

To be fair, this ‘dark side,’ has always existed, if not in the form of ‘fake reviews’ than certainly in the form of ‘scathing reviews.’ As Alan G. Gross articulates in “The Science Wars and the Ethics of Book Reviewing,” where he examined a negative review of his book by a colleague, “there is no danger whatever that our attention will be diverted by a bad academic book if it is simply not reviewed...but surely there is something wrong with using another human being’s work as a missile in a war not of his making” (Gross 449).

The art of book reviewing—despite its lucrative business qualities—is not without its flaws. None of the four sides of the book reviewing business described here—academic, trade, mainstream, or user-generated—is without shortcomings and limitations, if for no other reason than for the fact that no reader can be certain about a book until he or she has read it. No universal “bottom line” can be drawn about a book until it has reached its ultimately beneficiary—the reader. And there are as many “bottom lines” as there are readers in the world. Which brings me to one aspect of book reviewing that was not discussed in the articles I’ve come across and that, I believe, points to an unfortunate drawback of the omnipresence of book reviews in our lives: the lack of serendipitous discovery in the process of reading.

When we constantly encounter and buy books under the heavy influence from outside sources (be they professional or amateur), don’t we lose the opportunity to instinctively discover a work of fiction or nonfiction on our own terms? Isn’t the act of allowing for some spontaneity an important part of one’s intellectual journey at least as much as the ability to keep up with what’s popular and deemed worthy by others? If beauty is, indeed, in the eye of the beholder, and if, therefore, quality is in the mind of the reader, are we allowing readers to think for themselves or are we setting them up for more ‘herd behavior’ by training them to rely on the thoughts of others before forming their own thoughts? Could the greatest paradox of the democratization of opinion in the world of book publishing and book buying be that

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