

Thoughts of a Book Review Editor

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Abstract: What are the essential abilities that make proficient book review editors? They should preferably be a seasoned reviewer themselves, with the ability to read a book and write a review in short time in an emergency. They will develop a group of trusted reviewers—the ‘regulars’—which may include the editors themselves. However, there will also be a blacklist of failed reviewers not to be approached again. Recognising that book reviews were dropped by many journals, which were commonly wanting more printed space for research articles, does not mean that they will not be needed in the future. In the age of online publication, page space is no longer a valid limitation. If they are not on board already, electronic journals should be appointing new book review editors and expecting an influx of copy.

Keywords: research journals; reviewers; publishers; online publication; publication space

1. Introduction

When I first became a book review editor, I had not reviewed many books myself, although I was an avid reader of those reviews published in my favourite journals and newsletters. I was editor-in-chief of the *Journal of the Geological Society of Jamaica (JGSJ)* and I needed copy. My first annual volume, in 1989, included eight research papers and two reports of field meetings. Of those ten, three were co-authored by me, giving the new editor a profile among the contributors that was too high, at least in my own estimation. Yet, if I did not submit my papers to my own journal, who would?

In common with many small academic journals, *JGSJ* had a problem: too few people wanted to publish in it. It was a local journal, published annually and peer-reviewed, but with a low profile [1]. Contributors were mainly local, that is, authors were in easy reach of my own arm-twisting skills. The basic problem was how many arms do I need to twist to get more copy? Of all the variations that I tried, easily the most successful was to introduce a book review section.

Book reviews had never been a regular feature of *JGSJ* at any time and had only appeared sporadically, and a book review was not published for many years. So, I started requesting books from many publishers and with some success. In effect, I became joint editor-in-chief and book review editor. In 1989, there were 54 pp. of science in *JGSJ*; thanks to the new book review section, there were 61 pp. and 65 pp., respectively, in 1990 and 1991. This expansion was enabled in large part by the inclusion of seven (1990) and ten (1991) reviews in these two volumes. For a small journal such as *JGSJ*, book reviews were, and still could be, a significant contribution to each volume.

2. The Book Review Editor

From the above, it will be obvious that I consider the book review to be a significant part of academic publishing. I explained elsewhere why it is important that academics should write book reviews [2]. In short, reviewing books is a service to the academic community. Reviewers are encouraged to read a book, critically and in full. In their review, they can comment on current trends and ideas. That is, a review is a critical synopsis of a new publication written by an authority in the field. As such, it is a valuable academic communication, a work of scholarship in its own right.



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I do not intend the present communication to be a mere rehash of old arguments. Rather, I want to look at the other end of the stick, namely that grasped by the book review editor. A book review editor has a low profile and is, perhaps, a largely ignored or even forgotten member of the academic community. I have been a book review editor for three other research journals and record herein some of the ideas that were engendered by such responsibilities over the years.

First, and most importantly, a good book review editor is made by the reviewers who are aware that a book for review needs to be read first. They will make time to read and will be able to assimilate the text and write about it in an engaging, perhaps even exciting manner. Their review also needs to be timely—sitting on a book for review for 18 months is bad. These conscientious readers are the reviewers who will become ‘regulars’ [3].

Almost from the start of their tenure, book review editors will compile a mental blacklist of poor reviewers. They are the ones who happily agree to write a review; so, in your innocence, you mail the book to them, and then: silence. You send a querying e-mail and receive a positive, if platitudinous, response. Three months on and you repeat your query. At some stage, the (so-called) reviewer starts to ignore your e-mails, forever. Two formerly good friends of mine are in this category. Rather than admit that the review is beyond their capabilities, they just drop out of sight. Truly, a sad development in many ways.

A book review editor must have the ability to read a book and write a review at short notice. I am an avid reader, but only rarely have I had to write a review in such circumstances. The most likely scenario is that reviewers have ‘sat’ on a book for months and now say that they cannot write the review, for whatever reason. Have the book returned to you and then write a review as a matter of urgency. Hopefully, with your prompt action, the review will still be timely when published.

A radical question is why use external reviewers at all? Using a panel of book reviewers means that a number of reviews are potentially in preparation at any given time. However, these reviews are all out of the control of the book review editor until they are submitted. Control is maintained if the majority of books submitted to a journal are reviewed by the editor. It can be argued that five different reviewers will write their reviews in five different styles (and viva diversity). Yet, the book review editor must be a strong candidate to review any book relevant to their broad expertise. There are strong arguments both for and against, but, at the very least, the book review editor should review a proportion of the books received. If a book review editor is not their own best book reviewer, then who is?

Additionally, how does one obtain books for review? Simply, ask for them. I would watch publishers’ catalogues and announcements and, when something that I wanted to see was advertised, I wrote and asked for a copy. I estimate that this approach was 50% successful, which was not a bad success rate. Some publishers got used to my requests and sent relevant texts as a matter of course. At major conferences, I would haunt the stands of major and minor publishers, exchange business cards, and request books for review. Sometimes I was even given a copy, there and then.

Authors rarely review a book without a request from the editor. I think I may have received only two unsolicited reviews out of the blue in all my years as a review editor. Few academics read a book and are so excited that they write a review spontaneously, for the fun of it. I do so and, indeed, it can be a lot of fun. I have written many such unsolicited reviews for research journals over the years, and they were all accepted and published. Yet, many moons ago, at least one requested review was never published. Who knows what goes on in some editorial offices?

A book review editor needs a good understanding with the editor-in-chief and publisher. Once the former realises that the book reviews are reaching him/her in a clean state, already edited, they will welcome your copy with open arms. It is a rare journal in hard copy that does not have an occasional blank page that might be filled by a book review.

3. Discussion

The above ‘rules’ are taken as read. These ideas and observations can be used to guide the editing of book reviews in the future. I truly hope that they will be of some use and relevance, particularly to the nascent book review editor. However, in the recent past, many journals dropped the book review section because they were perceived to take up valuable space needed for research papers. Such arguments are spurious in the age of the online publication. Book reviews are short and take up little space; they can be used as fillers for blank space at the end of research papers in hard copy. Furthermore, because they are short, they will likely be read; regularly, long technical papers must be published, but may remain largely unread. In such circumstances, the book review editor should be a key member of any editorial board.

Online publication could lead to a resurgence of the book review, assuming that editors are sufficiently motivated to encourage them. The argument that book reviews take up space that should be devoted to research papers no longer applies. Electronic journals are not constrained by page and printing costs, and can expand to include all the copy that is accepted—reviews, research papers, or whatever. An energetic book review editor can keep the journal supplied with well-written copy.

In conclusion, no editor-in-chief can ignore their book review editor. Additionally, book reviews for online publication can be of a length determined by the reviewer, not constrained by the page limits of a printed journal. The future promises to be bright for book review editors and their reviewers.

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