

For Early Career Scholars

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(4) Writing a Book Review

Book review may not be as prestigious as an article in a learning journal. It does not count for purposes like REF exercises, and establish scholars do not normally put them on their CV – although in early career there is no harm in indicating that you do this kind of work. If you are not already a published writer, a review can boost one's confidence in the knowledge that it is possible to break into print. Above all, you get a free book for your services!

Although some readers like to know what a “famous name” thinks of a new book, I have usually found that, on balance, postgraduates tend to write inherently better reviews. You don't have to wait to be discovered as a potential reviewer. Reviews editors like me often get desperate to find competent reviewers in various areas, and then only too pleased if someone gets in touch, either to indicate generally that they are potential reviewer, or to identify a new book that might be relevant to the journal. It is best to negotiate the review in advance. Although *Fieldwork in Religion* states that it might accept unsolicited reviews, it is important to check that another reviewer is not already on the same job.

A good review takes account of what the reviewing process is for, and guides the reader accordingly. Book reviews are there to indicate to readers what books are on the market, and not ground cover. Since we can't read everything that publishers put out, a good review performs the important service of providing a concise summary and evaluation of a new book. A competent review serves to give good writers credit for their achievement, and shoddy authors should be discouraged in the knowledge that they have to face challenging reviewers.

When reviewing a book, I always look at the front matter – the parts that the average reader probably skips over – so that I can ascertain the author's intentions, and the intended scope and limitations of the work. I would then try to assess the extent to which an author has fulfilled such intentions. How one evaluates an introductory undergraduate text is very different from the assessment one might give from an academic monograph that is intended to be ground-breaking. Does the book achieve its aims, and is it appropriate for the intended readership?

If you have been asked to write a review, the reviews editor has given you a vote of confidence that you are an expert in the field, and are able to comment on how the book relates to other extant writing in the area. It is therefore appropriate to compare the review book with other works in the field. Does it break fresh ground, going beyond existing material? Or is it a précis of existing material, that might help a struggling student to understand difficult subject matter? How does it compare with other works in the area?

We all have our hobbyhorses and preconceptions of what a book in our area of expertise should be like. However, if the author has his or her distinctive contribution to make, and it is important not to impose our own preconceptions of the issues that a book on the designated theme should address. When my *Christianity Today* was published, one reviewer complained that I had not mentioned Christian spirituality. Dead right! The reviewer

was a retired Cathedral Dean, and in my own experience I have found it very difficult to get to the church press to understand what academic authors seek to achieve. My book was not about how to pray or meditate better, but was written to the publisher's formula for the series, and aimed to explain what the majority of Christians did in practice. On checking this reviewer's credentials, nearly all of his published work had been on spirituality, and I thought it was unreasonable for him to expect all other authors to address this issue.

Equally, some reviewers take exception to the subject matter itself, rather than the book. I have seen reviews that attack the religious organisations themselves, rather than address the more salient issue of how the author has dealt with them. If you want to attack Buddhists, Jehovah's Witnesses, or whoever, then it's best to find an evangelical Christian publisher and produce your own rant!

Above all, a reviews editor needs to send in a batch of reviews periodically. An efficient reviews editor should provide a deadline, and if he or she does not, the reviewer should ask. Most reviews editors are humane enough to realise that there can be extenuating circumstances, for which they can make allowances. Let them know if you have found yourself behind schedule. However, I have to admit that I have a zero tolerance for "reviewers" who simply do not deliver. Unlike other academic services, like teaching or examining, reviewers receive their remuneration – the book – in advance, and it is unfair to make off with the prize, without providing the services. Publishers are in the business of selling, and don't just give away free books. Sorry to sound menacing, but anyone who does this to me is not invited to review again!

Top tips:

- **Offer your services as a reviewer – don't wait to be asked.**
- **Summarise what the book is about.**
- **Consider the author's aims and the extent to which they are achieved.**
- **Keep your own preoccupations and hobby horses under control!**
- **Be reliable!**