

Joining the Scholarly Conversation

The Basics of Writing
an Academic Book Review



Maarit Jaakkola

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1. Introduction

This guidebook is written for anyone who is new to the genre and practice of book reviewing in academia. My own impression is that you are quite many! Even the most experienced scholars at the professor level may have never reviewed others' books in public, or they omit book reviews from their list of publications. Typically, when you mention "reviewing" in academia, people think of peer reviewing, which is a completely different thing than academic book reviewing.

Book reviewing receives little appreciation in academia, which is something that has not gone unnoticed by those discussing the specific genre (East, 2011; Diani, 2009; Di Leo, 2009). Many journal publishers are reluctant to publish book reviews, partly as a cost-saving measure, partly referring to the impossibility of keeping up to date

in the contemporary publishing landscape where books are released at an accelerating tempo. Essays discussing the topic typically adopt a pessimistic tone, questioning the utility of book reviewing, as time is scarce and remuneration and recognition non-existent (see, e.g., Worsham, 2012; Toor, 2012). As a result, the academic book review presents a low-rank genre or, as East (2011) puts it, an "academic Cinderella" – similar to its journalistic counterpart that has been described as a "plight" with "faint praise" (Pool, 2007), being forced to defend its right to exist or being in a state of constant crisis (see, e.g., Ciabattari, 2011).

In NordMedia Network, a digital media researcher community managed by Nordicom, we thus identified a need for informing and encouraging especially young scholars to try out book reviewing (Jaakkola & Clay, 2021). As part of the digital community, we launched a community page called Academic Book Review Support Community (see <https://nordmedianetwork.org/book-review-community/>). We collected online resources on the topic and organised a series of webinars discussing the aims, functions, and practices of book reviewing. As part of that initiative, we are now launching this concise guidebook and hope that it can clarify the basics of book reviewing for those who are interested. Our hope is that this guidebook will also help book review editors in their task of supporting aspiring book reviewers.

With this guidebook, we aim to deliver the basics of writing an academic book review: a stand-alone public evaluation of a scholarly publication published in a scholarly channel, such as a journal or book review community blog. Book reviews are also written for ge-



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neral-audience platforms such as magazines, newspapers, and websites, or published in social networking and reviewing sites, but this guidebook primarily focuses on writing for peers – other academics – which requires a distinct skill and understanding of the genre and is typically considered the most meriting.

This guidebook has the following structure and outline: In chapter 2, we address the question of why reviewing matters and why one should get engaged – what does it take, what does it give, and is it worth it, from an individual researcher’s perspective? Thereafter, we discuss the definition and basic character of the genre in chapter 3 and the typical production process in chapter 4. Chapter 5 deals with the writing process, addressing the writing and structural components of a review text, and chapter 6 gives advice concerning the post-publication measures, mainly promotion. The guidebook concludes by collecting some sources for inspiration and further development. The Appendix provides a reading list for you who are interested in studies on academic book reviews and reviewing.

2. Why Does Book Reviewing Matter?

2.1 Why should you review books?

Our time that emphasises effectiveness and concurrence may make writing book reviews appear as a waste of time for strategic academics. Indeed, many researchers keep asking themselves whether it is worth a try to write a book review. When requests of different texts that are of highest relevance for one’s research work, such as manuscripts and their revisions, tend to pile up on the desk, book reviews easily seem of less importance, as they don’t merit an academic in the same way that peer-reviewed publications do. Whether book reviews bring about scholarly recognition is still more or less an open question, and models for their systematic study are only emerging (Hayashi, 2020). Furthermore, academic book reviews are not systematically covered in doctoral study programmes, and young scholars may not be encouraged to write book reviews. With this lack of role models and incentives, book reviewing

may receive a lower priority among researchers’ interests and preferences.

Different disciplines also show varying interest in book reviews. Liu and colleagues (2017) found in their analysis that book reviews were very common in arts and the humanities, common in social sciences, but rare in natural sciences (see also East, 2011). This may also have contributed to the book reviews’ low recognition, as the biblio- and altmetrics informing academic publishing are largely driven by natural sciences. Liu and colleagues (2017) also found that book reviews are mainly written by authors from developed economies, such as the US and the UK, while, for example, Asian or African scholars are unlikely to contribute to book reviews in international peer-reviewed journals. In addition, Larrègue and colleagues (2019) found that book reviewing is a local activity, in the sense that reviewers in the major English-speaking countries were mostly interested in literature published in their own country, and the circulation of ideas between countries was rather scarce. It is thus obvious that voices from small nations, more peripheral regions, and minorities must be strengthened to make the critical academic metadiscourse more diverse.

From an individual perspective, reviewing books can be fun, educative, and refreshing – it is often well worth the investment. Here are some benefits of book reviewing pointed out by those who have been active in book reviewing:

- Reviewing newly published literature is a great way to monitor new research; it keeps you updated and on track in terms of what is being published in a specific field of study.
- By reviewing, you get the review copy for free, so making an evaluative contribution to the academic community is a kind of payment for the book.
- Reviewing books gives you an incentive to read the entire book in a systematic way and to generate a deeper understanding and memory of it.
- Reading, coupled with reviewing, can be a (self-)reflective and (self-)educative process that helps you learn about things in unprecedented ways.
- The review genre provides you with opportunities to develop your expression and style, as

it may differ from the standard English used in research articles and is more similar to essays and opinion articles.

- Reviewing provides you the possibility to develop a scholarly voice, profile, and positioning, as you are expected to take a stand on the study at hand.
- Reviewing can provide you with some diversion from conventional academic writing, while still contributing to knowledge production in academia.
- As a junior academic who hasn’t published a lot yet, book reviews can work as a way to build and diversify your list of publications.

Reasons for reviewing can be pragmatic, social, cultural, economic, or personal and private,

“Reviewing provides you with the possibility to develop a scholarly voice.”

and they can range from career-building to sheer curiosity and interest, and from altruism (contributing to the common academic good) to advancing self-interest. Reviewing can be a systematic activity, or you can do it every now and then. A regular activity helps you build a profile and reputation as an academic book reviewer, similar to non-academic professional book reviewers in cultural journalism or in the digital review sphere (see Jaakkola, 2022). Even occasional contributions to reviewing may be valuable from both personal and common perspectives: Reviewing may give you the possibility to gain an expert position within a discipline and to be more acknowledged in that position.

2.2 When not to review a book?

The next relevant question to ask is who qualifies as a book reviewer. What makes a good book reviewer, and, inversely, when should you not review a book? Making a public argument of another’s work is a task filled with high responsibility, as public assessments have the potential to affect the author’s reputation, career, and future possibilities. Compared to journalistic book reviewing in newspapers and magazines, academic book re-

viewing is, however, less harsh. Academics are assessed within the academic community on a regular basis and in a number of different ways. Book reviews are only one of these ways of assessment, while in the general public sphere (as opposed to the academic public sphere), book reviews may be the only way of exposing the author to the general audience.

As in all academic writing, researchers should adhere to the ethical standards of academic conduct, including compliance with the law, when writing book reviews. In addition, book reviewing must be conducted upon ethical principles that are sustainable and accountable. The book reviewer’s task implies responsibility. Above all, a book reviewer needs to be honest and transparent. Being honest means reviewing a piece of work in a professional role and as a real person, instead of being positioned as “any other reader” or a fictional or potential reader. As a book reviewer, you are not hiding behind a nickname – rather, you are a colleague of the book’s author. You thus need to be able to stand for your opinions and arguments that you present in the book review.

Being transparent means that the review must make explicit all those background factors that may potentially cause a bias in reviewing. The person who takes the duty of reviewing another person’s work should thus not have a hidden agenda. The reviewer is also expected to motivate all the arguments they put forward in their text, to provide the reader the means to assess the grounds of the arguments.

You should not review a book if you are a close colleague, collaborator, or friend of any of the authors who have contributed to the book. If someone suggests that you review a book, your first task – regardless of how well the topic fits your interests – is to see if you can consider yourself as being sufficiently distanced from the author. In small countries and language areas, as well as in small disciplines and subdisciplines, it may be difficult to avoid some contacts between the author and the reviewer. Very often, you know the author of the book at least by name, and you may have talked to them. However, the reviewer should not have collaborated with the author in the same project during the past few years when embarking on a review. The choice

of whether to review or not to review doesn't have to be made by the reviewer only; if you are unsure, you can discuss the matter with the book review editor and make the decision together.

Book reviewing should never be misused for profit or vengeance. It should not contain any incorrect or insubstantial claims. Potentially, a negative book review could be an optimal weapon to damage a competitor's reputation or avenge something you felt damaged your own reputation previously. These kinds of misuses must be avoided by ensuring that you do not have any such relationship to the author of the book that might potentially cause harm to any of the persons involved. Book reviews should neither be written by *besserwissers* – or *know-it-alls* – who claim to know how the book should have been written, extolling the reviewer's ideas to the exclusion of the content of the book; rather, book reviewers should approach the existing book with humbleness.

2.3 What do you learn by reviewing?

Many junior researchers may regard themselves as too inexperienced to review a book, and the task of making a public statement may feel too overwhelming. Even if book reviewing is a genre where the author must position themselves as an expert, it does not mean that junior scholars, including postgraduate students, should be excluded. In this respect, it may be appropriate to highlight the aspects of reflection and learning related to book reviewing.

To address the teaching of information literacy in higher education, the competency standards of the association of library and information sciences (ACRL, 2016)

provide an articulated idea of “embedded librarianship” that is referred to as “scholarship as conversation” and in which book reviews play a role (Shields, 2017; Rowland et al., 2019). To enhance their academic information literacy

skills, students are expected to master some knowledge practices that they can learn – according to some library science scholars – in interaction with librarians and information specialists by jointly writing book reviews. Academic knowledge practices that a book review can teach students include the ability to

- cite the contributing work of others in their own information production;
- contribute to scholarly conversation at an appropriate level, such as local online community, guided discussion, undergraduate research journal, conference presentation, or poster session;
- identify barriers to entering scholarly conversation via various venues;
- critically evaluate contributions made by others in participatory information environments;
- identify the contribution that particular articles, books, and other scholarly pieces make to disciplinary knowledge;
- summarise the changes in scholarly perspective over time on a particular topic within a specific discipline;
- and recognise that a given scholarly work may not represent the only – or even the majority – perspective on the issue. (ACRL, 2016: 8; Rowland et al., 2019: 21.)

For someone who decides to review a book, the role of a book reviewer is a contingent one. Academics can, in other words, be engaged in reviewing as part of their discursive, reflective, and engaging scholarship, but not identify as or call themselves reviewers, or build up a reviewer profile, as is the case in reviewing beyond academia. This is also good news for those with less experience with reviewing: An academic may take on the role of a book reviewer at any time.

3. What Is a Book Review?

A book review, or an academic book review, is a stand-alone public presentation of a newly released publication where the writer – the reviewer – presents and critically evaluates the content of the book. Reviews are typically written about books –

which can be monographs, anthologies, or reports – and not about journal articles or other published materials. The purpose of the review is to present, analyse, and evaluate the book in question. Evaluation is traditionally held as the distinctive feature of the review: The ultimate aim of reviewing is to arrive – through description and analysis of

“Book reviews are historical acts: they represent the first public reading of a work.”

the material – at a certain conclusion that assesses the contribution the new work makes to the field. This way, book reviews differ from mere book presentations and literary essays, of which the first focuses on describing the content of the book without assessing its value, and the latter is a contextualisation and more general discussion of the book, which can depart from the piece of work and regard it only as a starting point.

To put it boldly, book reviews are historical acts: In the historical timeline, they represent the first public reading and reception of newly published works and can be read as documentation of contemporary history. Reviewers are gatekeepers and sensemakers of something that has just come into being and whose place is not yet established, so they exert influence in initially positioning the new pieces of work. Academic book reviewers pursue the scientific value of new works, try to identify the fresh and genuinely new contributions to previous discussions, and attempt to see whether these contributions are valuable. According to Blank (2007), who wrote the first comprehensive sociology of review, reviews in general tend to answer two fundamental questions: Is this good? Is it worth reading? In newspaper and magazine reviews, the question manifests itself more in the form of the worth of purchasing a product or service – investing money or time in the new product on the market – but the academic book review is more detached from the economic dynamics of the market and set to evaluate worth in the scientific world of ideas. Moreover, newspaper and magazine reviewers also operate on their accumulated and refined taste, while academic reviewers lean on their accumulated scientific knowledge, including the knowledge about previously publis-

hed academic literature and related discussions and the standard principles of producing scientific knowledge.

The target audience of academic book reviews is the academic community, often defined in more limited terms as a group of researchers within a certain (sub)discipline. The target audience often coincides with the target audience of the journal where the book review is published. In this respect, it is important to acknowledge that the selection of the journal where the review is to be published is crucial. Different journals publish reviews of the same book, but the aim and scope, and the pertinent focus on some aspects of a topic or discipline, set the context and create the audience for the review.

Lee and colleagues (2010: 57) suggest that the scholarly book review serves to “describe and critically evaluate the content, quality, meaning, and significance of a book” and has the potential to be an influential literary form. In general, reviews should contain three basic components: presentation, analysis and interpretation, as well as evaluation of the work. In practice, reviews contain many analytic procedures that contribute to these three basic aims, such as contextualisation, classification, criticism and questioning, elucidation, concretisation, application, and development of the work. According to Orlik (2016), the functions of criticism include “guiding the audiences” (making them acquainted with new cultural objects), “building bridges” (opening up lines of communication and understanding between creator and audiences), “suggesting new directions” (providing the audience with new interpretations), “proposing system-cognizant change” (providing the audience with more macro-sociological analysis), “serving as a proxy or watchdog” (discovering the concerns of audiences and defining what they need to know), and “entertaining” (expressing ideas in a manner that captures the audience's attention).

In practice, many book reviews focus on presenting the content of the book, and a proportionally limited part of the text is dedicated to analysis, such as contextualisation and further development of ideas, let alone the pronounced evaluation of the book as an entity. Reviewers

Figure 1. The typical pre-production process for book reviews



may also struggle with making positive or negative statements about a colleague's – and a potential future collaborator's – work, which may result in polished politeness and self-centred academic performance more focused on the reviewer rather than the ideas, let alone the value, of the book. Moreover, as academic book reviews count more as expert statements than entries into the discussion for an audience not familiar with the topic, there is basically no need to arouse strong reactions or draw someone's attention like in reviews related to the

“The reviewer seeks to understand the author's arguments instead of departing from one's own conceptions.”

as expert statements they can be ideally inspiring and thought-provoking.

Book reviewing must be distinguished from other academic practices of assessment and evaluation, especially peer reviewing. Peer reviewing is the part of the publishing process in which fellow academics evaluate an unpublished work, often anonymously. Peer-review reports are written to the editor and author only, without the intention of presenting the book to a third-party audience. Additionally, academic book reviews are neither the same as literature reviews, which can take the form of a literature review integral to an article or study, or review articles. Literature reviews are included in basically every research, as part of anchoring the present study in the field and previous academic literature related to the study topic. Review

articles are research articles, typically peer reviewed, that have the aim of creating an evaluative overview of research conducted on a topic or in a specific field over a longer period of time.

The mainstream-audience counterpart of the niche-audience academic book review is the journalistic review, but it clearly distinguishes itself from the academic book review in terms of the target audience and hence in its aims, style, and address, as discussed above.

Academic book reviews are used by other scholars, colleagues, students, educators, and research stakeholders, ranging from practitioners to policy-makers, to monitor research. They are also of high importance to the field of publishing, not only for the publisher of the book, but also other publishers who are following the field. Like in the film and television industry, and in literary publishing, positive reviews may be used for marketing a book. Authors may also themselves benefit from positive public assessments and gain legitimacy as experts in a specific field. Academic book reviews may influence the ways in which new strains of research are received and positioned, and they may be part of shaping the academic and public discourse on new research topics.

Finally, it's appropriate to ask what a book review is not. As mentioned, it should not be a mere presentation of a book, but it could be considered a possible recommendation, yet backed up with informed analysis, to highlight the function of evaluation. As discussed, book reviews should not have any instrumental purposes, such as paying back a favour or taking retaliation on a colleague or publisher. Book reviews should neither be self-aggrandising performances of the reviewer, but they should be born out of a genuine interest in the book and its content and, accordingly, focus on the book instead of, for example, the reviewer's own research. The reviewer should, according to

their best ability, seek to understand the book author's arguments, instead of departing from one's own conceptions. Even if you may have contradicting ideas of the content, these should be explicitly addressed and systematically elaborated in the review text by creating a dialectical discourse of two contradictory ideas instead of having a hidden agenda.

4. Production Process

Many journals mention on their website whether they include book reviews in their issues and include the basic information on the genre in their instructions for authors, but they seldom explicitly describe what the process looks like. When you want to review a book, how do you proceed? The process may look different depending on which channel you are writing for, but the typical process for scientific journals is shown in Figure 1. Everything begins by recognising your interest in reviewing a specific book. You might take a look at scientific publishers' seasonal catalogues, receive a suggestion from a colleague or the book review editor, identify a title among a journal's suggestions, or just happen to stumble upon a book that piques your interest. It is important that you contact the book review editor at this point. Sometimes people believe that they need to write the review before contacting an editor and submitting the review, as in the case of research articles, but for book reviews, it is essential to seek contact with the book review editor as early as possible.

Book review editors have the responsibility of choosing which books are reviewed in the journal, and they know what books are in the pipeline; unfortunately, very few journals give updated information about the books chosen for review on their website. To avoid overlapping work or work in vain, it is important to get the book review editor's consent. The book review editor also plays a central role because they must request a review copy from the publisher. Less and less publishers send unsolicited review copies to reviewers. Publishers thus want the book review editor to place the request, or at least they want the reviewer to have the journal's consent when asking for a review copy. How this is done depends on the publisher, and it is recommended to contact the book review

editor, who knows how to proceed. If the journal does not have a specific book review editor, you can contact the editor-in-chief or subeditor.

Publishers offer e-copies and printed copies, and during the past years, it has become a common practice to offer e-copies only. Sometimes, e-copies are offered if printed copies are not available. You may have a preference, but at the end of the day, one must adhere to the publisher's practice. Many scholars prefer reading a printed copy,

as it feels more comfortable, you can underline and make notes on the pages, and the work

“The e-copy is a more environmentally friendly alternative.”

of writing a book review results in a physical artefact in your bookshelf. However, the e-copy is a more environmentally friendly alternative, and it is often sent to the reviewer quicker than the physical book, which may take weeks or even months to arrive. Not seldom are there problems with the delivery, and it takes a long period of time before the reviewer even gets access to the book.

To overcome potential delivery issues, it is advisable to request the book be delivered to your home address, as books sometimes get stuck somewhere when delivered to a university address. The most recommendable solution is, however, to receive an e-copy. In practice, this means that you will get a PDF version of the book sent to your e-mail, or you may receive access to an online system where the file can be downloaded in an electronic format of preference. There are annotation and markup tools available that enable the reader to attach notes and markings while reading, ranging from Adobe Acrobat to special programmes such as Foxit, Notability, or Xodo.

When the book has arrived, it is good to make the book review editor aware of it and confirm the review and its production timetable. Many journals have specific instructions for book review authors, indicating the maximal length and referencing technique.

Book reviews are not peer reviewed, but they are either accepted or rejected by the book re-

view editor. Submitted review texts may also be edited, or edits may be suggested, by the book review or journal editor. Most journals expect the review text to be proofread before submission and do not offer in-house proofreading of English for those who are not native speakers. Since many journal issues are published in print only once or twice a year and journal policies do not typically include online publishing of book reviews on a regular basis, it may sometimes take up to a year or even longer for the review to be published.

Publishers often wish to receive a copy of the review once it is published, in order to share published reviews with book authors and add blurbs to the product pages of their online bookstores. If the review is published in an Open Access journal, it has the first right of publishing, but after that the review can be re-published according to the license conditions.

Parallel publishing or self-archiving, if allowed by the journal, is a good way of increasing the review's visibility in case the book reviews are published with limited access, for example, behind the paywall or in a printed journal issue.

5. Writing Process

Writing reviews typically implies a shorter process than, for example, writing research articles. However, many authors tend to underestimate the time the entire process may take, from receiving the book to submitting the review to the journal.

Reading a book for the purposes of reviewing often benefits from a systematic method of notetaking and writing down reflections along the reading process. Even if this part of the work is dependent on personal characteristics, routines, and preferences, there are some pieces of advice and recommendations that may help the writer compile the review in an effective and structured way.

5.1 Reading and writing

The precondition of writing a book review is that the reviewer has read the entire book, to arrive at a balanced view of the work as a whole. Even if the review may focus on selected parts of the book,

the reviewer, as a public reader, must be familiar with the complete material available, to avoid drawing hasty or uninformed conclusions.

Reading a book with the intention to review it differs from reading for pleasure or scholarship, and reading for reviewing thus requires a systematic reading method. Chenail (2010) suggests that reviewing readers may benefit from employing methods and techniques drawing from qualitative research. It may be good to make notes while reading, similar to conducting field notes or a reading diary. Sometimes, it may be useful to record your first impressions and write down your reading experience, which can be of relevance, for example, if the initial expectations turn out differently during the reading process. The processual nature of reading may also otherwise be of interest and be reported on in the review. Chenail (2010) distinguishes between "read only notes" (RON) and "random access notes" (RAN). RON refers to writing down passages that make a difference in your understanding of the author's message. RAN means reactions to these passages, jotting down

"Reading for reviewing requires a systematic method."

what these words mean to you or freely noting what ideas come to your mind, and recording what questions the text inspires in you.

Notetaking does not necessarily mean writing comments in the margins or on a separate piece of paper, but in the digital world, markings in the text and one's own comments can easily be collected and reorganised in a way that benefits writing. A reviewer may also consider recording their comments orally, keeping a reading journal, or even tweeting about the entire process. RON and RAN materials produced during the reading can be grouped, classified, and analysed like in qualitative research methods grounded in the empirical material. Nevertheless, it is typical that when ideas start taking shape, you can shift your compositional style from notetaking to paragraphing. Chenail's (2010) advice for book reviewers is that you can never start writing too early. The writing process can thus occur in parallel with the reading process and does not have to be started after the reading process is completed. However, as your

Table 1. The basic structure of the book review and its alternatives

Structure	Alternative measures	Questions to address
1. Introduction ("introduce")	Presentation of the book and its background	Who wrote the book and why?
	Selection of an idea included in the book to introduce the topic	What is the book about? What does the book consist of?
2. Analysis ("outline and highlight")	Chronological outline of the entire book	What are the main ideas, concepts, and frameworks presented in the book?
	Elaboration (and questioning) of an argument central to the book	What is the main argument of the book?
	Focus on certain (sub)topics or concepts of the book	In which context can the main ideas be interpreted?
	Reflection on implications and consequences of the book's content	What are the implications of the ideas?
3. Conclusion ("evaluate")	Assessment of the book as a whole	Is the book timely, relevant?
	Assessment of your own reading experience	Does the book match the objectives put by the author?
	Suggestions of alternative ways of addressing the questions in the book or improvements	Does the book live up your own expectations?

ideas and arguments can only be completed after you have finished the reading, you need to keep the early versions in a state of "floating" until you really know what your final opinion will be.

It is worth emphasising that the reading process can be an enjoyable ride in itself and not only a prerequisite for writing a review. Reading may inspire the reviewer in ways that are not visible in the final product of the review itself. It may also be fruitful to discuss observations with some colleagues before writing one's own viewpoints in the review, to check whether one's conceptions are relevant and take all necessary aspects into account and see that you, as a reviewer, have not missed anything when constructing a viewpoint. A good but scarcely used opportunity would be to organise academic book clubs, where participants write individual reviews for different channels after common discussions. In that case, every reviewer should still ensure that they are not influenced too much by others, but can take an independent path

and preserve one's integrity as a reviewer.

Admittedly, academic reviewing is in its most typical form an individual endeavour, based on a monologue of an individual researcher, but during the past years, there has been some experimentation and development around the idea, mostly from a pedagogical perspective in higher education. Collaborative writing methods, addressed in section 5.3, make the process more dialogical and reciprocal between researchers, but the mutual organisation, management, and communication requires more time and commitment from co-reviewers to find a common method that suits everyone involved.

5.2 Structure and outline of the book review

A review typically consists of the three components of presentation, analysis and interpretation, and evaluation. These components do not have

to be distinguishable from each other, that is, structural sections in the text. Nevertheless, a typical book review begins with an introduction of the book, goes through the content in chronological order, and arrives at a final conclusion. This typical structure has become so established in the academic book review genre that it is rarely questioned. However, it is worth remembering that unlike the traditional research paper, the structure of a review is not strictly regulated. There are thus many ways of structuring a book review, and the reviewer is normally given much freedom in doing so.

The review can be considered a parasite genre, meaning it would not live without the original work that constitutes its starting point – the book selected for review. Therefore, a book review must clearly focus on the book and take its evaluation as its main task, not presenting any more general overviews of research or proceeding to more general academic reflections.

Once the primary principle is fulfilled – the book is placed as the starting point and lies at the core of the review text – the reviewer can choose how to approach it. Here are some alternative ways of approaching the reviewing function:

- comparing the aims set by the author with the final output
- focusing on the main argument put forward by the author in the book
- focusing on one specific concept that is central to the book and its aims
- reading the book from a specific perspective that may not be same as the perspective set by the author or editor of the book
- contextualising the content of the book by putting it into a historical, geographical, cultural, or practical context or – especially if the book's author is renowned and with a long career – into the context of the author's entire production

Reviewing can be said to have two fundamental dimensions: a vertical and a horizontal one. The vertical dimension of reviewing means that it can be conducted at different levels, ranging from the entire book to a more detailed level of semantics. The vertical assessment re-

mains within the pre-set constraints of the given book, and the reviewer attempts to understand the book with regard to how the author (and, potentially, the editor or the publisher) have succeeded in fulfilling the aims set for the book. This requires obtaining information about the intentions and background of the publication. The horizontal level refers to the breadth through which the content of a single work can be extended to put it into a framework of components that are not found in the original work but with which the original work can be better understood. The horizontal assessment widens the horizon of the given book by inserting it into a new context or adding something new to the publication.

“A book review consists of an introduction, analysis and a conclusion.”

Structurally, a book review consists of an introduction, analysis, and a conclusion. This structure is often referred to as the introduce-outline-highlight-evaluate formula, as put forth by Hartley (2010): The reviewer should first introduce the topic, author, readership, and field of the book; second, outline its structure and chapters; third, highlight and interpret some of its key concepts or contributions; and, last but not least, evaluate the book as a whole. The structure has been found to vary relatively little among disciplines (Spink et al., 1998; Motta-Roth, 1995), and it is even characterised as “somewhat Procrustean” by Sturm (2022). The structure may thus feel formulaic and coercive for the writer, and it may feel difficult to deviate from it, when in fact the book review structure is rarely strictly regulated, for example, in author guidelines, so each author in principle has the freedom to structure their review differently – but it is just seldom done.

Table 1 presents some possible solutions for structuring a review. The introduction should deliver the basic information of the book reviewed, but the reviewer can let the reader enter the book's world in many ways, for example, by introducing an idea, argument, or possibly a quote. The analysis and interpretation imply the clarification and contextualisation of selected content of the book. The conclusion should give an overall assessment of the book, perhaps by weighing pros and cons

against each other, and if the final assessment includes criticism, it may be appropriate to present some ideas for improvement.

Based on what has been said, everything in a single work can be reviewed: the research questions, the research design, the style and expression, separate chapters, the outcomes, the expected impact of the work, the layout and graphics, the packaging and physical form of the book, the publishing strategy and timing. However, it is not wise to try to cover everything within a single review, but rather choose an angle from which you approach the work. With a selected main argument, some aspects become relevant while reviewing and others may not seem equally important. Like in qualitative research reports and essays, you should have a main argument you want to make about the book and its content, and you should try to formulate that core argument carefully, developing your assessment around that main point. Reviews developed around such personal argumentation are more enjoyable to read than book reviews where the author mechanically goes through the book and answers the basic question, “is this good?”

When discussing book reviews, many questions lead to the question of the quality standards, norms, and ideals defined for the academic book review genre. It may even be difficult to keep questions about the definition and quality of reviews separate. However, all academics are surely able to write a book review, but how do we assess their activities and know when they have succeeded? What makes a good book review, after all? It is easy to assert that a good book review sticks to the legal and ethical standards and shows professional conduct in the final product, being well structured, clear and correct in expression, and academic in style. A good book review is delivered on time and follows the procedures of professional conduct. But a good review is also a product of individual reflection and idea development, and the reviewer's individual path can be visible in the review product. Lee and colleagues (2010: 64), based on an analysis of literature in medicine, collect some desirable characters of academic book reviews:

- Written in a professional and constructive manner
- Incisive pinpointing of the strengths and

weaknesses of the book

- Comprehensive, yet succinct
- Provides a good critique of theory in the field and the place of the book within it
- Criticism is substantiated and constructive
- Goes beyond criticisms to draw conclusions of much broader importance
- Judgment of the book against its competitors
- Addresses the potential book readers' needs and uses of the book
- Indicates how the reviewer's views changed as a result of reading the text
- Includes declaration of conflict of interest statement
- Follows journal's guide/house style/requirements

5.3 Alternatives and experiments in reviewing

The book review format has to a great extent remained the same during decades of academic publishing. Digital environments have, however, brought up new opportunities for enhancing and experimenting the genre.

To contest the soloist mode of reviewing, there have been experiments with collaborative methods. Rowland and colleagues (2019) identified book reviews as a strategic means of creating collaboration between academic staff with undergraduate students in library and information sciences. In the same fashion, reviews may be a good means of mediating so-called tacit knowledge from an academic senior to an academic junior, and collaborative reviewing efforts might thus be a fruitful opportunity for discussing some essential aspects of research, or a certain topic or discipline. Indeed, it has been discovered as a pedagogical means for learning collaborative writing between students (see, e.g., Tulley & Blair, 2009).

Reviews are also easy to extend into essays, dialogues, and feature-like articles with a broader scope. As another kind of collaborative effort, three scholars – Roxanne Samer, Alexandrina Algoro, and Laurie Ann Carlson (2013) – compiled a review of Donna Haraway's production during a one-hour video call and reported it in the form of a dialogue, published in

the journal *ADA: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*. In a multidisciplinary format (see, e.g., Biley, 2005), where scholars come from different disciplines and discuss a book from different perspectives, the collaboration can create a multi-vocal account of the content. The education scholars Amanda O. Latz and Jennifer L. Murray (2012) used the processes of joint reading, note-taking, conversing, sharing, and negotiating to co-author a dialogic review

“Collaborative writing of reviews contradicts the soloist monologue that the genre typically implies.”

they called the duoethnographic book review. The collaborative writing of book reviews strongly contradicts the soloist monologue act that the genre typically implies, and thus sows seeds for its renewal.

A review may also cover a number of different books, possibly with similar profiles and on the same topic, comparing them. The multiple-book format is typically called an “omnibus review” or a “review essay”. One format is to give voices to both the review and the author, either within the same format – putting these perspectives into a dialogue – or juxtaposing the review and an author’s feedback or commentary to the review.

Book reviews may show a new kind of potential if collected from different sources and juxtaposed for the benefit of the readers. Review databases have been created, but they have typically not been long-term projects. The aggregation and curation of reviews written by scholars from different disciplines and regions may, however, cast new interesting light on reviews and reviewing.

6. Post-Publication Process

Promoting a book review is an important step towards letting relevant communities know about new research, so besides being an extension of a publishing act, it can also be regarded as part of the university’s third assignment that aims at collaboration between

academia and society.

When the review has been published, it is advisable to consider how you could draw the attention of relevant persons and organisations to it. You can try to identify relevant groups of interest by thinking of possible stakeholders, which might be the following:

- publisher of the book reviewed
- author of the book reviewed
- researchers in the discipline
- other academic colleagues, especially those who are relevant to yourself (close colleagues, supervisors, mentors)
- journalists monitoring the field
- students who might benefit from knowing about the book reviewed

Publishers typically tell reviewers when letting them receive an e-copy free of charge that they wish to receive a copy of the book review once it has been published. Even if this sounds like a pre-condition of getting the book, publishers do not normally contact the recipients of review copies afterwards. This is why book reviewers may often forget about the initial agreement of letting the publishers know about their review.

By promoting your review, you also promote the author, publisher, and journal where your review was published. Because of these multiple connections, making people aware of your review can also tighten your connection to a discipline – and to the author, publisher, and journal – in diverse ways. Promotion can thus serve to strengthen your expert position through multidirected communication.

The post-publication routine may differ among researchers, depending on how they have adopted general promotional practices and to which extent they use social networking platforms. Promotion can include, for example, the following activities:

- e-mailing relevant people and making them aware of the review (e.g., the publisher, author, or editor of the book, and colleagues who might be interested in the book)
- adding the book review to your website
- including a mention of the book review in your e-mail signature
- creating an update about the book review

in your personal profile on a social networking site (e.g., Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Instagram), possibly pinging the author or editor as well as the book publisher and journal to maximise attention

- posting a description of the book review in relevant digital communities and groups on social networking sites (e.g., Facebook and LinkedIn groups where there are thematic multistakeholder groups, networks, conference research divisions and associations’ sections, etc., collecting audiences for your review)

One thing that should not be forgotten is including the book review in your list of publications. In standard templates, book reviews are typically mentioned as a separate section after non-peer-reviewed publications under the heading, “Academic book reviews”. Many literature databases categorise literature reviews as an identifiable and searchable genre that is distinguished from original research.

7. Conclusion

Writing a book review is a good way of being part of the public academic discussion. This guidebook was written with a special focus on young scholars, but book reviewing is compatible with all career stages. There is no optimal time to start, so when you discover a book that interests you, just start – it is never too early or too late.

More broadly, as reflexive responses to another’s work, book reviews entail a great potential for reflection, development of ideas, and learning (see Jaakkola, forthcoming). They could be used more frequently and systematically as part of doctoral study programmes and researcher training. Likewise, they work well as a means of self-directed learning and self-development in informal learning settings. Book reviews present an important momentum for ideas put forward in research to be received, elaborated, and critically questioned. If scholars would engage more in book reviewing, reviews could be a fruitful space for academic exchange and the development of ideas.

Although the academic peer citation counts more, even broader journalistic and reader feed-

back in social media may be something that should not be forgotten when talking about the public reception of academic literature (see Jaakkola, 2022; Kousha et al., 2017). Academic books are reviewed – even if somewhat more selectively and with a focus on non-fiction literature – in general-interest newspapers and cultural or literary magazines, and on book reviewing communities such as Goodreads and Bookstagram. These reviews may arouse even wider interest and have more impact than traditional academic book reviews.

The future of academic book reviews may, nevertheless, be difficult to predict, as digitalisation of scholarly publishing may have effects that point in different directions. Many scientific journals are giving up on publishing book reviews, as there is no clear evidence that reviews increase subscriptions or affect journal metrics otherwise. Recent studies show that book reviews are decreasing in importance in all disciplines (e.g., Larrègue et al., 2019). On the other hand, digital publishing allows more space and augmented opportunities for expression, as texts can adopt multimodal and transmedia formats. Because of better findability and shareability, book reviews in the digital sphere may also potentially find new audiences and reach out to stakeholders in a more effective way than as part of printed journal issues. Together with reviewing scholars, journals may come up with new solutions that pave the way for new future development of the genre.

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Appendix

Studies on Reviewing

This list of readings provides suggestions of academic literature discussing the academic book review from different perspectives. The readings are categorised under the following themes: 1) Genre, functions, motivations, 2) Historical perspectives, 3) Comparative studies, 4) Practical advice, 5) Language, discourse, and rhetorics, 6) Ethics, 7) Personal reflections and experiences, 8) Rethinking reviewing. The original list was compiled by Maarit Jaakkola and Kristin Clay in 2021. An updated online version of the list is available online at <https://nordmedianetwork.org/content/uploads/2021/04/academic-book-reviewing-literature-list.pdf>.

Genre, Functions, Motivations

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