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Chapter 1

Introduction

OUR PHONE CALL IS CLOSE TO ENDING. It was a great get for the project: an interview-based study exploring how fiction reviewers do the work of evaluating worth.

Not only does the speaker on the other end of the line boast a review career that spans decades, but she has also reviewed for the most important and influential newspapers in North America—and is one of the few people to have once held anything resembling a full-time reviewing gig in today’s newspaper landscape. This is someone that, as a social scientist studying evaluation, you want to interview.

Imagine my surprise, then, when this critic casually mentions: “When you say you think of me as a tastemaker—that just makes me kind of laugh.” She continues, “It would be lots of fun if I could say, ‘Get away from me! I’m a tastemaker!’” like a person of royalty issuing edicts. But this is a far cry from how she sees herself.

And she was not alone.

Book reviewers are examples of market intermediaries: third parties who mediate between producers (writers and publishers) and audiences (readers), and whose interventions shape how the objects under scrutiny (books) subsequently come to be valued.¹

And book reviews matter. Getting a review in a high-status publication like the *New York Times Book Review*—regardless of whether the review is positive or negative—increases the odds that a writer will go on to publish future books.² Furthermore, gaining the attention of reviewers is a first and necessary step to becoming a high-status novelist.³ Yet, the relevance of book reviewing has been openly questioned.

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The health of arts and culture reviewing has long been connected with the fortunes of traditional newspaper media, which have experienced significant decline over the past few decades including dwindling circulation numbers, decreasing advertising revenues, and job cuts. While I was conducting interviews for this project, for instance, the *Los Angeles Times* laid off all nonstaff book reviewers and culled their full-time review staff to only four.⁴ Two years later, as I analyzed the interview data, the *Chicago Sun-Times* eliminated its regular book pages.⁵ And most recently, as I was pulling together the full draft of this manuscript, the *New York Times*—the last remaining newspaper in North America with a freestanding book review section—announced that the guiding question for their book journalism was shifting from “Does this book merit a *review*?” to “Does this book merit *coverage*?”⁶ with the latter suggesting an openness to alternative means of reporting on books. Such changes signal how the function and future of traditional book reviews is being questioned not only in the wider context of news media, but also within book pages themselves.

Accompanying changes within traditional book review sections, the growing visibility of amateur reviewers has spurred interest in the potential declining influence of traditional reviewers. Amateur reviewers are sometimes called “reader-reviewers” to emphasize that their reviews and evaluations are not offered in the context of professional practice, but by private consumers—by readers, for readers.⁷ In particular, as blogs, social networking sites (e.g., Goodreads), and online marketplaces (e.g., Amazon.com) enable readers to learn about new books through alternative means, an increasing number of observers are asking: Why should we pay attention to what professional critics have to say when we can get information about books in myriad other spaces? If readers can go to Amazon.com and read fifty layperson reviews of a new book, what need do they have for professional book reviews? And pushed to an extreme position: Why should we care about what anyone else has to say about books if reading preference is just a matter of idiosyncratic taste?

The purpose of this book is not to take sides on debates about whether we should sound the death knell for traditional reviewing, if some people’s aesthetic judgments should matter more than others, or whether amateur reviewers are ruining book culture. Instead, I treat such fundamental questions as an intrinsic part of the broader *context of uncertainty* in which critics operate. Critics are acutely aware of the critiques and challenges facing reviewing. My objective

is to understand how this context concretely affects the way critics understand and do the work of reviewing.

Rather than as full existential or moral panic, I find that critics' sensitivity to the multiple debates about the competence and relevance of contemporary reviews manifested in more quotidian ways. This included people's lack of certainty about whether they were the "right" people for me to interview for the book project when they didn't hold a full-time reviewing position (few people do). It also manifested in the way respondents described their review process: the doubt, moral quandaries, professional anxieties, and yes, fears for the future of book culture, which constrained how they inhabited the role of reviewer.

I offer a detailed portrait of book reviewing from the perspective of reviewers, including how they cope with the uncertainties peculiar to the practice of literary evaluation. Far from an image of powerful tastemakers issuing edicts, the critics I interviewed experience a great deal of vulnerability while performing the work of reviewing. And by focusing on how critics respond to the broader context of uncertainty surrounding their practices, what becomes evident are the wide range of influences shaping how critics produce reviews—extending well beyond the pages of the books they read.

The Study of Critics

Why study critics at all? After all, research has shown that the more ratings books receive from reader-reviewers in places like Goodreads or Amazon, the greater the odds that it will appear on the *New York Times* best-seller list—while the amount of attention a book received in newspapers has little effect⁸. If the *impact* of book reviews is reducible to sales, such studies could be used to suggest that traditional book reviews no longer matter.

Yet, it is not necessarily the case that the commercial success of a book should be the most salient indicator of a critic's impact or significance. The cultural field has been described as the "economic world reversed" in the sense that economic success is secondary—if not anathema—to concerns of artistic legitimacy (e.g., winning prestigious literary prizes).⁹ Indeed, there is evidence that the idea that book reviews should be used for marketing or selling books is at odds with the professional ideology of arts journalists, especially book critics.¹⁰ Critics' sense of professional value, then, and our own estimation of their worth need not be anchored in book sales. Book

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reviews are about more than just recommending or not recommending commodities for purchase. They are also about conferring artistic legitimacy.

Adjacent to the tastemaker idea, scholars conceptualize reviewers as cultural *consecrators*,¹¹ whose reviews effectively demarcate which books are worth knowing about—and which are not. Consecration, a religious metaphor, was extended to the cultural field by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu to refer to the process and practices by which social entities are demarcated as belonging to the sacred or to the profane.¹² As cultural consecrators, critics have traditionally been imbued with the authority to demarcate art from non-art, or legitimate from illegitimate cultural offerings. And the religious metaphor is also fitting given that assessing aesthetic value seems a rather mysterious process, involving the generation and maintenance of belief systems, as opposed to simply measuring objective underlying quality differences. It is how valuation occurs in spite of lack of consensus on the appropriate standards that makes literary evaluation—and literary evaluators—a rich case study for examination

Book Reviewers as Producers of Literary Value

The literary consecration process involves books moving through multiple forms of literary criticism. Literary criticism as an institution can be understood as comprising three distinct yet related branches of professional literary discourse, which collectively and successively contribute to the goal of consecrating high-quality literature.¹³

The first type of critic in the chain of consecration is *journalistic* reviewers, which is the focus of this book. Journalistic critics traditionally write reviews for daily or weekly publications (i.e., newspapers) and have the widest mandate of the three forms of criticism: to review newly published fiction. In practice, of course, journalistic reviewers are able to report on only a fraction of the hundreds of newly published books that come out each week. *Essayistic* criticism is published in more selective or specialized journals, such as monthly or quarterly literary reviews, and targets readers who have a specific interest in literature and some literary background. Rather than selecting from the entire pool of newly published works, these essayists typically select a small number of titles from those that have already received some attention from journalistic reviewers since this attention in itself conveys something about the quality or value of the

novels. And finally, there is *academic* criticism. Academic criticism is reserved for scholarly publications, with primarily scholarly audiences. Focusing on specialized literary readings, academic criticism draws from an even more select group of books.

Note that I use the terms “reviewer” and “critic” interchangeably. While some may find this unpalatable, all unqualified references to reviewers and critics should be understood as referring to *journalistic reviewers* in particular. And references to other types of reviewing will be qualified with identifiers such as *academic* or *essayistic* reviewing. As one moves through these forms of criticism—from newspaper reviews, to literary essays, and finally to academic criticism—the pool of critics, the range of books discussed, and the intended audience become more specialized. And perhaps even more importantly, the artistic legitimacy of the works discussed also increases: academic criticism is conventionally seen as a pinnacle of the institution of reviewing since this level of attention has historically been associated with the canonization of authors in university syllabi and in anthologies.¹⁴

Missing from studies that reduce the value of book reviews to their economic consequences is the symbolic impact that reviews command. Studies sensitive to this symbolic capital that critics demand focus instead on how, for instance, reviewers construct the meaning of the books they read; that is, reading and reviewing as an act of cultural *reception*. An exemplar of this work is given by Wendy Griswold who looked at how literary critics from three separate nations had different readings of the same set of books by Barbadian writer George Lamming.^{15,16} And relatedly, Corse and colleagues demonstrated how the meaning attributed to Kate Chopin’s novella *The Awakening* and Zora Neale Hurston’s novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* have transformed across time. Specifically, Corse and Westervelt detail how Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* was reframed from regional tale of little importance to a uniquely American investigation of individualism.¹⁷ Indeed, during what the authors identify as the book’s period of canonization there were urgings to read the book as more than “just” feminist literature. Similarly, when Corse and Griffin studied the ascendancy of Zora Neale Hurston’s novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, they found that the criteria used to discuss the work evolved as it became more important: initially it was poorly received and framed as a piece of regional folklore; now current framings focus on the story as a struggle for personhood.¹⁸

These studies are important as they demonstrate that critics do not just report on books, but also actively participate in constructing

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their meaning—with implications for how they subsequently are valued by readers. This occurs not only through an explicit evaluation of books, but also through the specific ways critics frame the book's topic, cultural significance, merits, and faults.¹⁹

The benefits of these studies notwithstanding, in this book I focus on reviewers as cultural *producers* in their own right. That is, I pay attention to the concrete steps and various considerations that go into producing a book review as it is described from the perspective of reviewers. Understanding how critics interpret and otherwise receive the meaning of books is a key part of this process, of course. But much of the extant research on reviewing is constrained to analyzing easily accessible and ready-made data in the form of published reviews. For example, empirical analyses revealing the interpretive frames and criteria reviewers employ to justify their evaluations.²⁰ Despite the rich insights that emerge from these data, such analyses are limited in what they can teach us about the process of reviewing, including the various decisions and considerations that shape what critics put in their reviews—and perhaps just as importantly—what they leave out.

The relative lack of scholarly attention to the *process* by which critics go about writing reviews can be understood as a result of the idea that aesthetic evaluation is (i) subjective and (ii) strategic. First, the belief that aesthetic valuation is subjective—as in random or chaotic rather than reasoned—suggests that there is little to empirically document.²¹ Yet this alone does not preclude valuation from proceeding.²² Scholars examining phenomena ranging from pricing in art galleries²³ to judging physical beauty in the modeling industry²⁴ have demonstrated that aesthetic valuation is not random but socially patterned—and thus amenable to study. Second, the strategic view of art and culture, owing much to the influence of Bourdieu,^{25,26} suggests that aesthetic valuation is simply a tool for people to use in reproducing their own status and interests, by advancing a self-serving vision of “good literature,” for example.²⁵ And if critics simply use reviews as an opportunity to advance their own agendas (consciously or not), then analyzing the contents of reviews is sufficient. I argue that the world of reviewing has more nuanced lessons in store for our understanding of aesthetic valuation. But excavating these insights requires us to look at work that comes before the final review is produced.

A focus on the process of reviewing enables me to attend to how reviews, including their contents and the process by which reviews come to be produced through the decision making of reviewers, bear

imprints of the broader values and arrangements in which they are produced. I find that book reviews are neither simply recordings of critics' thoughts about a specific book, nor reflections of critics' self-interests; instead, reviews also include critics' general beliefs about good books, good literary citizenship, and the proper place of art in contemporary society.

My goal is to provide a phenomenological portrait of reviewing that details how critics experience and understand the process and work of being a reviewer. And by asking reviewers to reflect on the meaning and motivations behind their own evaluative practices, I am able to provide a richer account of the host of factors that affect critics' final evaluations that cannot be gleaned from published texts (reviews) alone.

In this way, this work engages the growing field of the sociology of evaluation, which interrogates how people determine the value or worth of social entities (i.e., evaluative practices), and the process by which entities acquire worth or value. A central premise of research in the sociology of evaluation and worth is that evaluation is a social practice: value is not given to us naturally, nor is it inherent in a given social entity; it is something that is mediated through social processes and the activities of social actors.^{26,27} This is true of forms of valuation that appear straightforward, such as the economic pricing of goods, as well as seemingly nebulous cases of valuation, such as the evaluation of aesthetic worth.

Evaluation as a Response to Quality Uncertainty

Uncertainty has a central place in the study of evaluation. In its most general form, uncertainty is present in situations where social actors can predict neither possible future outcomes, nor the likelihood of their occurrences. *Quality* uncertainty—the challenges social actors have in determining the quality (value or worth) of a social entity—is of particular interest when studying evaluation. Indeed, one can think of the study of evaluation as the study of how individuals and institutions respond to quality uncertainty.

Economic sociologists have theorized about the different sources of quality uncertainty that confront actors. One source, the problem of *asymmetric information*,²⁸ broadly consists of the quality uncertainty that results from incomplete information about the object of evaluation (for instance, incomplete knowledge of the history of

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a used car). Another source of quality uncertainty derives from people's inability to cognitively process all the relevant information available.²⁹ In both situations, while the quality of goods is *knowable*, various barriers prevent individuals from accessing perfect information about the products in question.

Yet another source of quality uncertainty derives from situations where the quality of an object is *radical*. In such cases, the uncertainty surrounding an entity's quality is not due to incomplete information (as with a used car); rather, the unique properties of the entity make its quality fundamentally *not knowable* in any final sense. Karpik describes such objects as singularities. Aesthetic goods, including books, wine, art, and the like, are paradigmatic examples of singular goods.³⁰

Aesthetic goods are social entities that are valued in part for their symbolic qualities rather than for any objective underlying quality differences.^{31,32,33,34} Symbolic here refers to the goods' associations with particular cultural values, aesthetics, morals, and status. When it comes to assessing social entities that feature radical quality uncertainty, the question then becomes: How do we assess what is good or not in the absence of objective underlying quality differences? And how do people cope in circumstances of evaluating objects that are characterized by radical quality uncertainty?

This book provides a sociological analysis of an occupation (book reviewing) and the specific skills and practices critics employ to deal with the uncertainty of aesthetic judgment. The focus is on book reviewers' categories of experience, how they confront uncertainty in the course of their work, and the narratives they impose on explaining how they navigate uncertainty. Grounding my study of uncertainty in the lived experiences of agents of evaluation results in a phenomenologically accurate portrait of evaluating work, as well as a richer appreciation of how uncertainty and its related contingencies structure action. I speak to critics to ask them what they think they are doing, why they think they are qualified to do it, and how they make sense of their practices all at a time when the cultural ground has shifted below their feet.³⁵

The empirical aim of this book is thus to specify the types of uncertainty identified by reviewers, and how these various forms of uncertainty manifest and subsequently inform how reviewers do the work of evaluation. These contextual uncertainties form the immediate context in which evaluators make sense of their actions. The focus on these different types of uncertainty also feeds into the theoretical contribution of the book. I suggest that these types of uncertainty not

only structure how fiction reviewers operate, but also shape evaluation processes in other artistic and non-artistic fields as well. Therefore, these types of uncertainties can form the basis of a comparative framework for studying evaluation.

Epistemological Uncertainty

The first contextual dimension of uncertainty is epistemological. Matters of epistemology are fundamentally concerned with actions and practices aimed at understanding, processing, and producing information—including producing information about the value or worth of a social entity. The epistemological uncertainty faced in evaluative situations can be understood as operating on a spectrum ranging from low to high.

When quality uncertainty is low, we are dealing with entities whose quality is uncertain—perhaps because of the different amounts of information that buyers and sellers have—but is ultimately knowable. When quality uncertainty is high, we are dealing with entities characterized by radical quality uncertainty when value is unknowable.³⁶ In the case of literary works, we would say that the epistemological uncertainty faced by critics is high, as aesthetic quality is difficult to ascertain in a determinative way; such judgments often remain open ended and vulnerable to contestation. The distinction between low and high epistemic uncertainty³⁷ broadly relates to the distinction drawn between quality uncertainty and *radical* quality uncertainty, respectively, as discussed above.³⁸ Yet to fully appreciate the implications that epistemic uncertainty has for shaping evaluative practices, we need to include consideration of the technologies and procedures used to *adapt* to this uncertainty and determine quality.

What are the “appropriate” ways for coping with challenges of quality uncertainty? Answering this question involves defining what Lamont describes as “evaluative cultures,” referring to the utility of identifying constraints faced by evaluators including “method of comparison, criteria, conventions (or customary rules), self-concepts, and other types of nonhuman supports” that constrain evaluation.³⁹ For instance, Blank contrasts two methods for producing reviews, including those based on connoisseurship and those based on repeated formal testing of products.⁴⁰ According to this scheme, the credibility of fiction reviews, and arts reviews more generally, relies on critics’ connoisseurship: “the skills, knowledge, talents, or experience of a

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single reviewer who gives an expert opinion” based on that reviewer’s “unusual talents, experience, or training.”⁴¹ Connoisseurship is an affective or experiential basis for producing valuation, unlike the evaluation of objects that appear to have more epistemic certainty, such as mechanical objects that undergo routine procedures to determine whether they do or do not work.⁴² When the procedures for assessing quality are not well defined or are contested, then this can also contribute to the epistemic uncertainty perceived by evaluators.

Social Uncertainty

Social uncertainty refers to critics’ inability to predict how relevant others will respond or react to their evaluations. Theoretically, social uncertainty builds on the idea of copresence: how “the presence of other actors shapes individual behavior,”⁴³ particularly with regard to whether we imagine others would be approving or disapproving of our behavior. Social uncertainty, as it is conceptualized here, focuses not only on how individuals imagine others will react to their evaluations, but also on what *future*⁴⁴ consequences such reactions may have for the evaluators themselves.

Social uncertainty draws our attention to how social ties inform the actual or perceived risks and opportunities for different courses of action. High or low social uncertainty is connected to the degree to which the anticipated consequences are knowable or not. When uncertainty is low, the actor has a sense of how other people will respond and thus is able to make calculable decisions about how to behave in the present.⁴⁵ When social uncertainty is high, however, there is a large range of possibilities for relevant others’ to responses. This range of response is more open ended. What enables the future to be more open or closed ended is the social organization and dynamics and culture animating the reward structure evaluators themselves inhabit.

The concept of social uncertainty sensitizes us to the fact that the practice of evaluation is often done in particular contexts and for particular purposes and that the perceived or imagined reactions of others to the valence or contents of a particular evaluation may have consequences for evaluators and affect what they do in the present. The degree of social uncertainty is coupled with the nature of the reward structure in which an evaluator is operating. Specifically, evaluation may be conducted in the context of a reward structure

wherein social actors may “bite back” (as we see in the case of book reviewers).

*Rewards structures*⁴⁶ are the social machinery by which rewards and valued resources are distributed. Reward structures vary in terms of the types of rewards distributed (such as material or symbolic), the criteria used for determining deservingness of rewards, and who gets to make these decisions.⁴⁷ How actors are concretely embedded or positioned in a field can affect their opportunities or their ability to positively or negatively respond to evaluation with their own distribution of resources. Particularly germane for our purposes is attention to the rules that motivate people to behave or constrain people from behaving in ways that will cause reward or retaliation for particular evaluations. In the case of book reviewers, book reviewing can be described as a *switch-role reward structure*, wherein authors are invited by the editors of book review pages to temporarily *switch* from their roles as *producers of books* to perform the role of *reviewer of books*—and then switch back again. (This role switching has direct implications for how critics craft their reviews, as we see in chapters 4 and 5.)

Institutional Uncertainty

Institutional uncertainty, another distinct category of uncertainty, concerns the degree of clarity and consensus regarding rules and procedures for behavior and the broader significance or meaning of the work involved in reviewing. To speak about institutional uncertainty we need to grapple with what is meant by institutions. Practically speaking, institutions are social structures, such as taken-for-granted rules, that constrain how we think and act.⁴⁸ Therefore, when referring to uncertainty of institutions we are focusing on the more or less formalized and explicit consensus about the routines, norms, organizational forms, and meanings that anchor and give coherence to reviewing as an activity.

The idea of institutional uncertainty ties into what Swidler refers to as unsettled times to describe moments of historical change when cultural schemas are in flux and therefore highly visible.⁵⁰ And things can be unsettled for many reasons, whether they be endogenous or exogenous shocks to the status quo. Book reviewing can be described as going through “unsettled times,” or as experiencing high institutional uncertainty. By this I mean that as a profession and an

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institution, book reviewing is undergoing transformation; and routines, meanings, and values that would ordinarily guide the practice and consumption of reviewing are currently unstable and insecure.

In unsettled times, cultural meaning and ideologies are foregrounded as their existence is not taken for granted but becomes a matter for debate and negotiation. The meaning, resources, and understandings surrounding the practice of reviewing are “up for grabs” as is the very idea of what a review is and what the goals of reviews are. These types of debates or definitions are always constructed, but their fragility and negotiability are made more evident during unsettled times or during moments of high institutional uncertainty, as there are competing ideologies and cultural models to answer questions about how people should behave or what values are important. How the concept of institutional uncertainty adds to the notion of unsettled times, however, is that in the case of reviewing as we will see, questions regarding the meaning and significance of reviewing as a professional activity are also intrinsic to the way reviewing is organized rather than this uncertainty being simply a temporally bounded state.

The Study

The goal of the book is to understand how book reviewers undertake the task of reviewing and valuing fiction, and to understand the social factors that influence how reviewers do this work, including the epistemic, social, and institutional uncertainty they face. The analytical focus is on reviewers’ reported experiences of their roles as critics while they were inhabiting and fulfilling their duties as critics. Specifically, I trace critics’ subjective thoughts and feelings through the review process from assignment to publication. In this way I follow a pragmatist approach to understanding evaluation in that I follow how critics define the different problems and tensions at different phases of the review process and how they go about solving these issues. I also focus on critics’ statements of identity and expectations around appropriate or inappropriate practices associated with their role, how they go about solving some of these problems or tensions, and how these attitudes and behaviors inform what critics put in their final reviews.

To get at these ideas, I conducted in-depth interviews with forty fiction reviewers who had published a review in at least one of three

influential American review outlets.⁵¹ There is thus an elite bias in the sample of people with whom I spoke. This was intentional as I was interested in the experience of power and peril of evaluators, and how the shifting status and fortunes of traditional forms of reviewing inform how critics enact their duties. It was useful, then, to speak to reviewers and editors associated with the most traditionally significant publications in the Anglophone literary field, which have also seen some of the most precipitous losses in terms of status and resources. By doing so, I was able to capture the experiences of actors most affected by changes to the status order in reviewing. An alternative sampling strategy I could have taken would have been to include only high-status veteran reviewers for similar reasons. But I did not want to limit the study only to elite critics because this would yield only a small group of people and because I wanted to get the stories of occasional reviewers also—people who write only a few reviews every year—yet who are more representative of the field of reviewing, especially in response to the economic restructuring. A balance needed to be struck between the apparent elite-ness of my sample and how typical the stories and experiences were that I heard and report on in this study.

Yet the people I interviewed were also not entirely alike. In this group of forty, some had published reviews in the *New York Times*, the *Times Literary Supplement*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Boston Globe*, the *Guardian*, and the *Globe and Mail*. While the focus of this study is on critics who write for journalistic publications such as those listed above, approximately one-half of the reviewers with whom I spoke also published literary essays in magazines such as the *New Yorker*, the *Nation*, and the *Atlantic*. And all reviewers had written about books for more than one review outlet.

The vast majority of book reviewers are hired on a freelance or single-assignment basis. Of the forty people in my sample, approximately eleven could be described as having held, at some point in time, a full-time position related to book reviewing, whether as book section editors or as columnists. It was more common that respondents made a living through other professional activities and wrote reviews on a more or less occasional basis on the side. For instance, many critics reported some combination of work as freelance journalists, creative writing teachers, academics, and—of course—authors. Of the forty, fifteen respondents worked in colleges or universities as professors. And only five people had not authored their own books. The remaining thirty-five reviewers in my sample who were authors

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were responsible for publishing over 160 works of fiction and nonfiction between them.

My goal was to provide a phenomenological portrait of critics' review processes, including the various social considerations and constraints that structured their understandings of what was possible. To that end, the interviews were designed to get critics to tell me their thoughts about how and why they entered into book reviewing, how they understood their role and goals as book reviewers, and their beliefs about the ethics of reviewing. I also asked them to identify reviewers they admired or disliked and what they found meritorious or offensive about these reviewers' work. And I asked critics about what qualified someone to write reviews.

When probing their specific review practices, I asked critics to reflect on recent specific reviews they had written, both positive and negative. My strategy was to ask respondents about recent and memorable review assignments, and respondents' process of completing those reviews. This helped interviewees ground their responses in concrete experiences—including various types of dilemmas and personal or professional conflicts that arose. This had the benefit of moving respondents' answers from the realm of the "honorific"⁵² or highly principled self-presentation of their methods, to the realm of decision making and satisficing in the face of practical constraints. I have changed the names and work details of respondents to protect their anonymity as a condition of sharing their ideas and experiences.

Plan of the Book

The chapters that follow take the reader through the review process told from the perspective and experiences of the critics themselves. We begin with critics' initial invitation to review and follow them through the reading of the book, the writing of the review, and critics' reflections on the broader value and impact of their reviews given the precarious status of reviewing and, some could argue, reading culture at large. The book focuses on book reviewing as a world rife with uncertainty. The chapters are organized around three distinct types of uncertainty—epistemological, social, and institutional—and how the character of these distinctively infuse the reviewing process. In this way, the chapters also loosely parallel the experience of critics as they engage in reviewing and confront these different types of uncertainty throughout the reviewing process.

The first two empirical chapters explore epistemic uncertainty and tackle the question of how aesthetic quality is recognized. Chapter 2 presents the nuts and bolts of how reviewing works, including which books get reviewed and which critic gets selected to write the review. Disabusing the reader of the idea that the “best” books get reviewed, the chapter emphasizes the practical constraints faced by editors when deciding which books deserve to be reviewed. It also addresses epistemic uncertainty surrounding who is *qualified* to review books in the absence of formal certification. But rather than answering this question philosophically, it is addressed through how reviewers come to be invited to write reviews and are paired with specific books for review.

Chapter 3 considers the challenges of evaluating books given the conventional understanding that “there is no accounting for taste.” To some degree, critics agree that reviewing is utterly subjective, however, this is not to say that reviewing is utterly unreasoned or idiosyncratic. The chapter explores the procedures critics employ to determine the quality of books, including consideration of the different criteria used when they evaluate books. And we are introduced to the value of reviews as highly contextualized judgments whose contribution is required for the formation of the more generalized wisdom of the *critical consensus*.

Social uncertainty, critics’ inability to predict how relevant others will respond or react to their evaluation or judgment action, is explored in the next two chapters. Specifically, in chapter 4 we see how critics confront the reality that what they put in their reviews has consequences not only for the book under review but also for the critics themselves. This is in part attributable to the switch-role reward structure, as many reviewers are themselves working writers reviewing other working writers. Throughout the chapter, I demonstrate that despite a temptation to write negative reviews of parties they may very well view as competition, critics are hesitant to be overtly negative in their reviews and choose instead to “play nice,” in part driven by a blend of both sympathy for and fear of reprisal from others in the literary field. The key here is that critics imagine various implications for what they write—especially when it comes to negative reviews—and the potential (uncertainty) for retribution or causing pain informs how they behave in the present. The *reason* they have for imagining the future in the particular ways that they do is anchored in the switch-role reward structure of the reviewing apparatus.

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Chapter 5 reveals how perceived *status* differences between evaluator and evaluatee condition the perceived *risks* associated with writing a negative review. Specifically, we are introduced to a double standard in the reviewing world, wherein any concerns about being openly negative in reviews disappear when the object of scrutiny is perceived as a famous or otherwise high-status novelist. This reversal of ethics is framed by reviewers as a way for correcting for perceived flaws in the way books are selected for review, especially at a time when there are fewer opportunities for books to be reviewed. By focusing on these issues, this chapter draws attention to how evaluation is driven, not only by the character of books, but also by internal logics or values within the community, including a reflexive frustration with the superstar market⁵³ in which critics operate.

The final two empirical chapters explore the high degree of institutional uncertainty that features in book reviewing. This refers to the lack of clarity and coherence regarding rules, procedures, and the broader meaning of book reviewing. Chapter 6 considers how the occupational structure of reviewing (increasingly a freelance activity) may be changing how reviewers understand the meaning of reviewing as a professional activity—and why critics continue to say “yes” to reviewing given all the uncertainty they encounter. It answers the question of what the place and significance of book reviewing is in the personal and professional lives of book critics as part of their professional self-concepts and projects.

In chapter 7, it is revealed how critics grapple with the question of the ongoing relevance of book reviewing given perceived tensions between its artistic and journalistic commitments. This chapter also examines how critics respond to challenges about what is distinctly valuable about journalistic reviews against the larger background of who makes up the reviewing field, including the rise of new amateur entrants and the tradition of academic criticism.

Chapter 8 concludes the book by tying together the empirical chapters to illustrate how these different types of uncertainty structure how fiction reviewers operate; here, we will consider what lessons book reviewing has for understanding the experience and enactment of power in other evaluative scenarios including other artistic fields, and non-artistic fields as well. Additionally, reflections are offered on what lessons can be taken from the multitude of stories shared by reviewers concerning how we think about the uncertain future of not only reviewing but what it means to be a reader.

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