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PRELUDE

PREVIEWING REVIEWING

Who Needs This Book?

You've come to the right place if you're looking for a guide that will help you understand the genre of the scholarly book review and learn how to write engaging reviews yourself. You are likely aligned with the humanities or narrative social sciences: the "book" disciplines, where monographs, either single-authored or coauthored, are key vehicles for disseminating scholarly ideas. You know that scholarly reviews of published books, when done well, can apprise you of such ideas, guiding you to books that you should read or steering you away from books that do not complement your intellectual or professional needs. You are also likely a graduate student or someone with an advanced degree who wishes to address, in some small way, the ongoing conversation in your academic field. Perfect! I've written this book with you in mind. Even if you're more advanced in your career or have written a review or two already, I trust you'll still find some useful perspectives and ideas herein.

I wrote this guide, in part, because I've read a lot of unengaging, unhelpful reviews—those that are more akin to summaries or book reports. Perhaps you've seen such reviews in scholarly journals yourself: They tend to march through a book serially, chapter by chapter, and offer little to no analysis beyond a concluding assessment, often cliché, with minimal justification. "This book is a welcome addition to the literature," or "Everyone should read this book." Right. The limited message such reviews send is that

the reviewer can read, sure. And the reviewer can follow a (boring) template to produce a text that minimally qualifies as a review. But did the reviewer engage with the ideas presented in the book being described? Did the reviewer sufficiently honor the labors of the author and publishing team by taking the act of reviewing seriously instead of superficially, mechanically, peremptorily? And did the reviewer imagine you, the reader of the review, and try to anticipate your curiosities and needs, one of which is generating and maintaining your interest in the material being presented?

Yes, some books are, by virtue of their subject matter or author, “must reads” for you or for me. But most, by far, are not. Perhaps I’ll glean everything I need (or think I want) to learn about a book from reading an especially insightful review. When a reviewer teaches me something about a book I otherwise might not have picked up, though, I am often liberated from the norm, from the known. In short, my horizons expand. The books that have most transformed me as a thinker, as a writer, and as a human being are those that I otherwise might not have encountered, save for a helpful nudge from a helpful reviewer. If you care about your field, you should aspire to be that reviewer yourself.

Have no regrets if you’ve already written an “unengaging” review yourself. The first book review I wrote, more than two decades ago, in fact takes a chapter-by-chapter approach. I’ll have more to say about it later. We all must learn through doing. And we can all continually be improving our craft. Read on, consider my advice, and your next review will surely engage.

As you’ll see throughout these pages, I propose that the scholarly book review can make an intellectual contribution of its own. This idea is not new, but it seems to have been forgot-

ten, at least in some circles. Certain evaluative contexts, too, especially those that encourage—or require—individuals to focus on publications of a certain type, usually journal articles in “approved” outlets, have also diminished the value of the scholarly book review. By offering a contextualized summary, clear analysis, and cogent assessment, the scholarly book review embodies a type of creative work that taps into the reviewer’s intellectual and associative capabilities. I avow that the scholarly book review can come closer to the literary book review in the way it accomplishes its primary goals. (What is a “literary” book review? Think of what you would encounter in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, the *New Yorker*, or the *Times Literary Supplement*, if you’re familiar with these venues. Such reviews are also known as “critical” reviews.) Beyond the fact that literary book reviews may address works of fiction, a primary difference between a scholarly book review and a literary book review is the presumption that the literary book review should be enjoyable to read. Why shouldn’t the scholarly book review be enjoyable, as well? This book offers ideas and suggestions for making it so.

The genre of the scholarly book review is evaluative yet is itself not commonly evaluated: With few exceptions, nobody regularly reviews the reviewers. Scholarly journals occasionally acknowledge stellar peer reviewers of submitted manuscripts, but if any journals award prizes to their book reviewers, that’s news to me. The National Book Critics Circle, a professional organization, annually awards the Nona Balakian Citation for Excellence in Reviewing to one of its members. (The 2023 recipient was Becca Rothfeld, nonfiction book critic for the *Washington Post*.) And in journalism, where literary book reviews fall, Pulitzer Prizes in Criticism were first awarded in 1970. (The 2024 recipient was

Justin Chang, film critic of the *Los Angeles Times*, now of the *New Yorker*.) Categorically, criticism encompasses a much broader field than scholarly book reviewing. Yet scholarly book reviewing is fundamentally a form of criticism that crosses into the terrain of scholarly service.

In the general absence of such accolades in the scholarly realm, how can you tell what makes a scholarly book review “effective” or “successful”? One goal of this book is to describe the values, aims, and purposes of scholarly book reviews to help reviewers cultivate a certain connoisseurship—and to push the concept into territory where the review takes on greater meaning as a creative, intellectual product. Some of my ideas for scholarly book reviews may seem aspirational, but I offer them because I see promise and potential in the genre. Of course, different fields have different expectations. If, in my presentation, I fail to touch on a point that is fundamental to scholarship in your field, be sure to consider that point in your evaluation. I expect you to be the disciplinary expert. This book does not teach *how* to assess the intellectual content or contributions of scholarly books. (That is a task of upper-level undergraduate coursework and, fundamentally, graduate school.) But this book does point out *what*, in general, you should be considering while you read and formulate your opinions about scholarly books in your field. And it offers strategies for presenting your reviews in a thoughtful, engaging manner.

Another reason I wrote this guide is because, after more than two decades of book reviewing, I have refined a practice that makes reviewing—dare I say it?—a generally enjoyable activity. Engaged reviewers are more likely to write engaging reviews. When I encounter a promising new title, I am excited about the possibilities that lie between the covers, since I believe every

scholarly book has something to teach me. *First*: Who is this author, and what message does this book intend? *Then*: How is the book structured, substantiated, presented? *Finally*: Is the book successful in accomplishing its stated goals? How has my worldview shifted by engaging with the contents? And how could your worldview be similarly enlarged, if you were to pick up and read this book yourself? Scholarly books offer readers this tacit promise: In return for your time, you will be rewarded with new knowledge, new perspectives, new insights for applying to your work and your world. Scholarly books—and their reviews—are a serious business.

I presently serve as book review editor of the *Journal of Scholarly Publishing*, so one additional reason I wrote this book is to be able to have something to share with potential reviewers who reach out for guidance. Self-serving? Perhaps. But my eagerness to solicit, receive, develop, and publish engaging reviews cannot be extraordinary.

The least enjoyable reviews to write are those for books where the contents or the delivery does not live up to my initial excitement. (Contemporary American slang has the perfect term for being underwhelmed: Those books are “mid.”) If I feel disappointed upon finishing a book, I usually want to cut my losses and move on to something more promising. But I will address how to write challenging reviews—those that tend to be more critical—in a way that is fair to the authors and helpful to their fields. Sometimes the better choice is just not to review a particularly problematic book, of course. This book, though, presupposes that your intended goal will be to write a review: positive, mixed, or “mid.”

Despite the rumors that have been circulating for years, books are not going away anytime soon. As long as scholarly books are

being published, disciplines will need scholarly book reviews. Together we can strive to improve the value of scholarly book reviews for readers, for reviewers, for book authors, for publishers, for academic communities—for all parties involved.

What Does This Book Offer?

Authors can structure and organize their ideas to signal their themes and theses. This book progresses linearly, to a point. I begin, in chapter 1, by introducing the genre of the scholarly book review, explaining why you should write (and read) reviews, and helping you identify publication outlets and titles for review. The remainder of the book will prove most useful once you have a book in hand that you are planning to review and a venue that has expressed interest in your review. Still, you are certainly welcome to read through the entire book to give yourself a sense of what to expect before embarking on your first scholarly review. I make this point later, yet it's worth mentioning here: Because you want to tailor your review to a specific audience and want to know that a specific venue would welcome your review, you shouldn't write a scholarly book review on speculation. Always line up a venue for a review before you begin writing.

This book emphasizes writing, but a core and often overlooked element of reviewing is the real work of reading. Yes, work. Chapter 2 explains how your goals as a reviewer translate into the elements of attentiveness and inquisitiveness as a reader. The secret to enjoyable book reviewing, if there is one, lies in how effectively you read and take notes. Then, chapter 3 describes how to convert your valuable reading notes into a framework for a contextualized, clear, and cogent review. You'll

find ideas, strategies, and suggestions throughout. For examples, however, I expect you to turn to published reviews in your discipline.

Not all scholarly books worthy of review are monographs. In chapter 4, I introduce strategies for reviewing edited volumes, writing review essays (of multiple, complementary titles), and coauthoring reviews. And because one of my broader pedagogical goals is to convince you of the benefits of honing your scholarly voice as a reviewer, the final chapter offers additional ideas for increasing your engagement with reviewing and enhancing the enjoyment factor of your reviews. You will see in chapter 5 that I also revisit, by way of reinforcing the importance of reflective practice, some of the principles introduced in chapter 1. My aspirational goal with chapter 5 is that you may find some material that will transfer to your writing projects beyond reviews.

Between each chapter you'll find an interlude that serves as a pause for reflection or action and as a bridge to the following chapter. A postlude offers ideas for teaching scholarly book reviewing in the college or university classroom—to counter the contemporary “book malaise” apparently afflicting undergraduates worldwide. And the appendix provides a list of key questions to consider addressing as you prepare a scholarly book review. My approach throughout *How to Review Scholarly Books* is to present both how-to material and why-to material. I want you to develop an orientation and a skill set that will help reinvigorate, reposition, and revalue scholarly book reviews in your field.

Scholarship is creative work, and reviewing any creative work involves judgment, a foundational element of critique. Judgment involves trust, knowledge, standards, ideals, aesthetics. If the

aesthetic I project is not to your liking, remember: There's no one right way to review a scholarly book. But the core components of a review—contextualized summary, clear analysis, and cogent assessment—are nonnegotiable. The key to an engaging scholarly review ultimately lies in how you, the reviewer, invoke those elements. Both the act and the product can be relished. Ready? Let's get reviewing.

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