

On Book Reviewing¹

Evelina Orteza y Miranda
University of Calgary

It is often thought that the primary, if not the sole, task of a Book Review Editor of a journal is to see to it that new books are ordered and received, that reviewers are contacted to review these books, that these books are reviewed, and, eventually, that the reviews are published. And the Book Review section merely informs its readers of what new, and perhaps, exciting books there are in different areas of study. Usually it consists of an array of books, dealing with different issues of different subject matters, showing no relatedness to one another. What, for example, has *The Next Canadian Economy* (by D. Cohen and K. Shannon, Montreal, Quebec: Eden Press, 1984) to do with *Biological Foundations of Language* (by Eric H. Lenneberg, Malabar, Florida: Robert F. Kreiger Publishing Co., 1984) if they figured in a Review section? If a Book Review section, in the example given above, is indicative of what a Book Review Editor does, one could conclude that there is not much thought required of the task. One only has to secure enough reviews for any issue of the journal.

A corollary view to the above is a view that a book review is not an original piece of writing. Even if it is imaginative and engages the reader in critical thinking, still, it is parasitic on the work being reviewed. It is, in some ways, confined to the frame of thinking of the work being reviewed. And given the restriction on number of pages allowed of a reviewer, a conclusion that could be drawn is that there is not much significance to book review activities. It does not count towards one's prestige or merit increment. Consequently, it is not always easy to secure the services of a critical book reviewer.

In this essay, I argue that this current view of book reviewing activities be discarded. In its place I propose the idea that the Book Review section of journals functions as a change agent, creating a critical climate of opinion, as it presents books with new constructions of knowledge in the different areas of study that encourage possibilities for a renewal of thought and a renewed sense of commitment to our tasks. But, first, a brief historical description of

how our current view of book reviewing came to be may be instructive at this point.

Historical Background

Reviewing books started in Athens about 140 B.C. But the first periodical given to reviewing them was the *Journal des Scavans*, which started its operations in Paris in 1665. Consisting entirely of summaries of scholarly or scientific works, the reviews' function was "to give readers (and scholars) an universal account of the state of learning." The reviews were primarily chronicles of progress in *all* fields at a given time. They were conceived of as instalments of a continuous encyclopaedia to be carried on until the end of time (Roper, 1978).²

Although profitable and instructive, discussion on private opinions and exchange of ideas regarding controversial issues was not part of a review because they were not considered settled knowledge or part of the development of its progress. This practice, expressed explicitly in the *Analytical Review* (1796) by Thomas Christie, continued throughout the 1700s:

The true design of a Journal is, in our opinion, to give such an account of new publications, as may enable the reader to judge of them for himself. Whether the writers ought to add to this their own judgments, is with us a doubtful point. If their account be sufficiently accurate and full, it seems to supersede the necessity of any addition of their own. (Roper, 1978, p. 44)

Indeed, the *Monthly Epitome* (1797), another journal, has for its subtitle, *Readers Their Own Reviewers*. To give an accurate account of an author's work which is being reviewed was the proper business of a journal. Reviews had a conservative function, namely, to record publication and to inform scholars and the reading public.

Since all advance of knowledge (all new publications) had to be recorded, comprehensive reviewing was the order of the day. With so many books, trivial and significant alike, to review, the reviewers, with so little time and so much to do, could conceivably end up writing poor quality reviews – to the chagrin of publishers who paid them. Consider the following quotation:

Most of the critical journals of the time were either what amounted to publishers' organs, written by hacks who sneered or rhapsodized at their employers' bidding, or unscrupulous instruments of party politics,

battering or slashing up a book in accordance with its author's political affiliations. (Roper, 1978, p. 43)

Reviewers were said to be "a set of obscure Hackney Writers, accidentally enlisted in the Service of an undistinguishing Bookseller" and "subservient to the most sordid View of Avarice and Interest" (Johnson, cited in Roper, 1978, p. 28). Other times, reviewers were labelled "drudges and penny-a-liners." But, according to Derek Roper (1978) on the basis of some facts and on performance of some reviewers at that time, these allegations were not altogether true. Even so, the legend that book reviewing is the arena of hacksters and penny-a-liners dies hard.

However, with the publication of a new journal, *The Edinburgh* (1802), the practice of comprehensive reviewing was discarded. Instead *The Edinburgh* aimed to be identified by and distinguished for its selection, not number, of books reviewed. This brought about questions of criteria of selection, among them, for example, what books ought always to be reviewed or not to be reviewed and what works of unknown authors should be considered for review.

A second change was in the function of a review. There were complaints that reviews did not go beyond *mere observations*, quoting long and substantive extracts from the work being reviewed, giving rise to such comments as "'tis very easy to be a Reviewer" or "the ... Reviewers ... have been content to be mere Transcribers" (Knapp, cited in Roper, 1978, p. 28). *The Edinburgh*, from the start, embodied new conceptions of reviewing, the most important feature of which was the reviewer's "opinion, usually aggressively and often voluminously stated, and sometimes only slenderly connected with the work in hand" (Roper, 1978, p. 45). Length of these reviews ranged from 15-20 pages. Allowing, indeed, requiring critical comments from reviewers is now a common practice. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* titles its Book Review Section "Critical Notice."

Reviewing books, in the past, was for a restricted and limited audience of educated people, presumed to be capable of making their own judgments regarding quality of books. The establishment and growth of formal public education, however, brought about an expansion of a reading public, necessitating the publishing of more books. Competition among publishers regarding number of books to be published, what books would bring a profit, and so on, consequently ensued. In addition, the current pressure on faculty members of universities to publish has increased publication activities. Who will be the judge of the quality of these books? For news magazines and newspapers, a new breed of professionals, the reviewers, as we now know them, came into being. Academic journals, however, do not have professional

reviewers under contract. Nevertheless, for reviewers, whether paid or not, performing their tasks well means contending with some questions, for example: How partial or impartial could I or should I be to the author's work? Will I use the author's work as an opportunity to advance my views regarding the author's subject disregarding the latter's intents and purposes? Does the fact that the author of a work being reviewed is alive or is a close associate of mine, make a difference to me? In short, the question is: how ought I to conduct the review observing intellectual honesty, fairness, and objectivity? Who, in any way, is supposed to benefit from book reviews? What are book reviews for?

Critical Book Reviewing

One of the most common styles of reviewing a book is simple enumeration of its contents and a description of how these are laid out chapter by chapter. It follows closely the contents of the book and its surface value is accepted. This may be called a descriptive book review, a landscaping style. It is quite placid, almost pastoral, no sharp shooting techniques and fireworks. The one or two criticisms made are too brief and general to be useful. They are muted. This type of review is a general assessment of a book, overly sympathetic, and not critical in tone. Without being unkind, it could be said that book reviewing of this kind, if it could qualify as one, is boring.

But a book review is not a descriptive finding but an *evaluation* of the academic quality and integrity of the book, leading either to a reviewer's judgment that the book has a unique and original contribution to a given field, or it discloses hitherto important but undetected and untreated problems in a study, or an admonition that the book should not have been published.

In one's review, a reviewer is guided by the question whether or not, or how far, the author has succeeded in putting forth one's arguments clearly, convincingly, and compellingly regarding his or her thesis, therefore, also fulfilling the author's intentions behind the book. It concentrates on the basic arguments employed by the author and on presence or absence of compelling reasons and evidence to support the thesis. It attempts to capture the essence of an author's work, his or her intentions by examining the way he or she goes about marshalling arguments to support the thesis. It is not always negative. And the critical comments are appropriately academic in tone, for example, the author tried too much, the thesis was too ambitious to be achieved, and so on. Each part is examined for veracity of content and soundness of argumentation and to find out whether each part supports each other and all parts support the main thesis of the book. Logical coherence and flow are matters observed in a book review.

The review sets the piece of work in a larger, broader context, either in its disciplinary base or in relation to previously published works in related areas. A good review, in other words, does not solely inform readers of a particular book, dealing with it as though it were the *only* book in an area of study. But rather, it enables the readers to know a book and the judgment of the reviewer of it in relation to other books in the same area and to similar topics treated in them. For example, in an unpublished version of Professor Patricia T. Rooke's review³ of Barbara Miller Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women: A History of Women and Higher Education in America* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985), she compares it to Thomas Woody's *A History of Women's Education in the USA* (1929) and Mabel Newcomer's *A Century of Higher Education for American Women* (1959). She judges Solomon's work to be an "ambitious study" and having "superceded, in many ways," these previous works. She also connects Solomon's formulation of career choice problems ("Should women who wanted families be denied careers?" instead of the usual and common question: "Should a woman have both family and career?") with recent feminist scholarship, such as, for example, Lee Virginia Chambers-Schiller, *Liberty a Better Husband* (1984), Sheila Jeffries, *The Spinsters and Her Enemies* (1985), Patricia T. Rooke and R. L. Schnell, *No Bleeding Heart: Charlotte Whitton, A Feminist on the Right* (1987). On coeducation, she judges Solomon's approach rather timid compared with that of Florence Howe, *Myths of Co-Education* (1984), who exposed "the anomalies of male dominated structures which never intended women's education to change anything." Many other publications are cited and brought to bear on the discussion of Solomon's text.

Professor Rooke's review brings the reader into the arena of the debate. Different voices are heard, generally accepted ideas are disturbed and found disturbing, and some myths are exploded. The reader is virtually in the midst of an intellectually exciting activity, as the reviewer explores and shows various strands of other authors' work connecting or disagreeing with Solomon. Doing it in this way, Professor Rooke is also able to identify Solomon's particular strengths and weaknesses relative to what other scholars have argued about the same topic or problem. When she judges it to be a very important book, "an invaluable resource for women's studies courses and as an essential text for the history of higher education," she is making the judgment relative to other publications in the same area of research. This judgment cannot be made, seriously, if a reviewer concentrates solely on the contents of a book treating it independently of other similar works, which most reviewers are wont to do.

A review of this kind establishes, more importantly, the point that in our quest for knowledge, in researching and publishing, we are members of a scholarly community, the standards of which we are expected to uphold. To these standards we are accountable and must answer if we claim that we are doing our work in the name of *scholarship*. Authors and reviewers, alike, are both accountable to their scholarly community. For a reviewer, surely, this means that he or she reviews a book, is competent in doing so because she or he is an active participant in and contributor to the book's particular area of research.

Additionally, a critical book review is one that is forceful, vigorous, forthright, nonevasive, and altogether discerning but not necessarily destructive (vicious sense) of the entire book. Try as the reviewer does to figure out how to salvage the book, even if only in a minimal way, he or she cannot find any redeeming features. The ones that come close to being such features do not amount to very much. The review is of no help to the author and instead raises the question "Why was this book written and published?" This is honest book reviewing, urging readers and writers to reflect, once more, on the motivations behind writing of articles, and publishing of books.

In short, a book review may be called a "guided tour," with the reviewer leading the reader into the contents of the book, into the reasoning employed and conclusions reached by the author. The reader is enticed to join the reviewer in the *discussion* that she or he is carrying on with the author and in her or his attempts to expose the author's intentions, or fantasies that may have operated as the work was being done. Serious reviewers, like serious readers, seek out the author's intentions which may not be obvious in the literal value or givenness of words.

Intended Audience of a Book Review

At once it may be said that the primary audience of a book review is the author of a work being reviewed and its readers. But the reviewer does not have one and the same task for both. To the author, the reviewer shows whether he or she has or has not succeeded in fulfilling his or her intentions and fulfilled them well. The author's ability to make "knowledge festive" is being judged. However, no matter how damaging and critical the review is of one's work, an author may or may not accept the reviewer's judgments. Authors tend to feel that reviewers (like some news reporters) do not always understand, they tend to misunderstand, what authors say. A reviewer, on the other hand, who wants to celebrate the life of a book, and to say only good things about it, also tends to conclude "This is a good book, but not good enough," even if one may not be clear of what counts as "good enough."

The reader may not necessarily benefit from what the reviewer has to say to the author of a book, unless the reader is also an author and writing in the same area of interest. Readers as an audience however, are difficult to pinpoint. Depending upon their interests and needs, readers seem to pick and choose books for a variety of different reasons. But whatever their reasons, they have the right to expect reviewers to inform them of their judgment on the academic or disciplinary integrity of the book.

The reviewer also takes into account the subject-area into which the book fits and addresses specialists in the field. These are the potential joiners and rejoinders in debates between authors and reviewers. Some books may be shown to be potential sources of new insights into a field of study or breakthroughs, opening new lines of thought and disclosing previously discarded areas to be sources of information regarding certain problems.

The one audience of a reviewer who is most interested in a work being reviewed is, for obvious reasons, its publisher. But the ultimate responsibility of reviewers and the review assessment process is to scholarship. "It is not to scholars as individuals; it is to their manuscripts as scholarly endeavour" (Halpenny, 1993, p. 227). Reviewers review books because of their commitment to scholarship.

From the discussion above, I am suggesting that a Book Review Section of a journal is a significant, if not a necessary instrument for creating a psychological climate for examination, investigation, correction, modification, creation, and invention of ideas and theoretical constructs regarding current theoretical problems, professional practice, and policy statements. In it one reads of old, though still dominant and dominating, views and presuppositions being shown to be inadequate to the intellectual and social demands of the times. In their places, one reads of emerging issues, of new and exciting paradigms being created to solve seemingly enduring problems, and of change, or even, perhaps, of transformation, in the direction of thinking about some intractable problems, raising new kinds of questions. It is, in other words, the knowledge creating/knowledge examining domain of the journal. If one wants to be abreast of developments in different disciplines and of the times, one must simply read the Book Review section.

To question its legitimacy and necessary presence in a journal, given rising publication costs and budget cuts, is to say that we know all there is to know about the knowledge creating process. This could suggest, in turn, that book reviewing is without academic merit, lacking or completely without a disciplinary substance, not requiring of specialized skills, and, largely, indistinguishable from journalistic writings found in dailies and news magazines. Critical writers of substance do not usually review books. Those

who cannot and do not write books review them. Book reviewers are parasitic writers. If they were abolished, no one would miss them.

How then should book reviews be carried out in order to correct such misunderstandings about it? What different Book Review formats commensurate to its function and purpose may be encouraged?

Book Review Formats

A common Book Review Section usually consists of a collection of books, dealing with different issues of different subject matters, showing no relatedness to one another. This set-up could indicate that not much thought is required to maintaining a Book Review Section. As previously stated, this idea should be rejected.

Integrated Book Review format, in contrast, provides its own theme, for example, women's issues, historical issues of school reform, and so on. The Book Review section is a separate set of integrated readings. For example, a review article could highlight certain commonalities in a set of books being reviewed, perhaps, also noting certain emerging influences regarding, such things as education and its direction and creating some possibilities for change. The increased popularity of ethnographic research methodology, evident in the following published works, could be a Book Review theme:

Michael McTear, *Children's Conversation*. London: Basil Blackwell, 1985.

Robert Hull, *The Language Gap*. London: Methuen, 1985.

Marilyn Cochran-Smith, *The Making of a Reader*. Norwood, New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1984.

Ken Macrone, *20 Teachers*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1984.

Another book review format is one that attempts to broaden the disciplinary significance of a book and bring about the multidisciplinary nature of problems and tasks. This is especially desirable in educational matters. For example, the review by sociologist, Professor Samuel Mitchell (1986) of David John Hogan's *Class and Reform: School and Society in Chicago, 1880-1930*, could have been accompanied by a review of a historian, political scientist, and an educational administrator. Taken together, these reviews could address educational problems in their totality, hopefully increasing our understanding of them.

When a journal publishes a Special Issue, a Book Review section could complement the theme of the issue. The books reviewed enlarge on the discussion of the journal's theme, both by supplementing and complementing

on it. See, for example, "The Education of the Gifted Child in Canada," *Special Issue, Canadian Journal of Education*, Vol. 14, No. 1, 1989; "Education in Canada and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms," *Special Issue, Canadian Journal of Education*, Vol. 11, No. 3, 1986.

A Book Review format that is most challenging to reviewers and authors of books being reviewed is when both reviewers and authors are given the opportunity to discuss the book in the same issue of the journal (for example, *Studies in Philosophy and Education*). If a spirited debate ensues between them, then one of the main purposes of a review is fulfilled, namely, encouragement of dialogue and further free inquiry. The dialogue between the author and reviewer could also correct a common assumption that authors know their production better than anybody else. This may not be necessarily so. The dialogue also broadens readers' understanding and interpretation of the knowledge creating process as they join in the lively spirit of the debates. Exchanges in ideas, responses and rejoinders, arguments and counter-arguments give witness to the fact that ideas are not always and necessarily inert. This format creates an aura of intellectual vehemence and serious reflection, serving the interests of the author, the reviewer, and the readers. Published books or print should not be taken as indicative of settled knowledge. The common format of reviewing books does not afford the author to reply to the review. Readers, in turn, could simply assume that the review was to the point when this may not be so, unless the author or someone who has read the book volunteers to comment on the review. (See, for example, Romulo Magsino, 1982, "The Domain of Moral Education and Mr. Parlett: A Response.")

The Special Issue book review, review essays, rejoinders to book reviews, integrated set of book reviews, and the multi-disciplinary book review all attempt to highlight some distinctive qualities and skills of critical book reviewers. Isolating these qualities and skills means that book reviewing is a genre of its own. It is not necessarily parasitic on the work being reviewed. Book reviewing is also an original piece of writing. The same rigorous discipline is demanded of it as it is in the writing of articles and publishing of books.

Whatever review formats are available, book reviewers must contend with some ethical matters, namely, fairness, honesty, impartiality, and respect for the author. In the author's attempts to achieve something worthy of contribution to one's field does the reviewer take her or him seriously or simply "hack away" a book review? Toward what end? For a reviewer to advance his or her views without due regard for the author's intentions is sheer opportunism. A serious reviewer attends to and is observant of what the

author says she or he is going to say and does not fault the author for not saying what the author said will not be said. The reviewer, in short, does not impose on the work being reviewed his or her external views. At all times, the reviewer attempts to do justice to the work of the author. The author's intentions are properly discerned. Honesty and impartiality characterize the review.

How much stress should a reviewer place on the adequacies and inadequacies of a book? If a book is authored by a junior academic, and it has some obvious flaws in it, a piece of advice is: "Be kind to beginners, but more severe on other established academics" (Belsey, 1995, p. 8). This is not to say that the reviewer will be dishonest in one's review but that in one's language one need not be so destructive as to wound and completely demoralize the junior academic. "There is more than one way of saying that a book is bad." (p. 8) How should one review the work of a senior colleague or one who enjoys a established reputation in his or her area? Presumably, such an author would welcome a review that decisively penetrates into the substance and quality of his or her thoughts. The author could also be expected to view the review, whether it is commending or critical and harsh, in an objective way, that is, to accept the review to be in accord with principles of scholarship. It is not intended to damage her or his reputation or personality. But, then, a senior colleague may react differently, forgetting momentarily that authors, whatever their status or reputation, always take risks when they put out their work in public and for its consumption. What should be observed, whether one is reviewing a junior or senior colleague's publication is a rule that says: "Respect for the *person* of the author is of paramount consideration."

If the author of a book would not know the reviewer of her or his book, how would the reviewer review the book? Will this influence one's conception of her or his task? In what ways?

The vacillation that renders most book reviews Laodicean may be due to the fact that most authors of books being reviewed are alive or are our colleagues (Woolfe, 1969). Any critical comment on their work, any exaggeration of their flaws, or even a slight distortion of a certain meaning of a word, could bring about a rebuttal on their part. And most reviewers, in my judgment, hesitate to bring this about, in part, because of our conception (or misconception) that a book review is a piece-meal operation, undertaken for a very limited period of time and from which nothing follows when completed. Book reviewing, it is said, is a hebdomadal⁴ exercise. It is not indicative of anything intellectually serious like the growth of one's mind. To pronounce unequivocal judgments on what is being reviewed which could bring about a response could mean one more task to be done in a limited

period of time! Consequently, most book reviews could be characterized as balancing acts, described by such expressions as "on the one hand," "and on the other hand," "some parts are well argued and some uneven," "on the whole," "in general," and so on. This is not to say that the review is necessarily dishonest. But that the book review, more like a palinode, is effete and the reader is left to judge the merits of a book on her or his own. Objectivity and impartiality may not necessarily be served. There are, of course, reviewers whose reviews are straightforward, pointed, and vigorous evincing a sense of self-assuredness of their judgments and of being in full control of their thinking. These reviews are delightful reading. (See, for example, Susan Haack's review (1991) of Lorraine Code, *Epistemic Responsibility* or G. Patrick O'Neill's (1987) review of John Haysom, *Inquiring into the Teaching Process: Toward Self-Evaluation and Professional Development*.)

Conclusion

From the above discussion it is obvious that reviewers are knowledgeable about the book they are reviewing because they themselves are researching, writing, and publishing in the same area. To review a book when one is a mere reader of its area and has a running acquaintance of it is to do a great disservice to the author, her or his work and area of study. Book reviews should not be viewed to be merely another item, rather easily accomplished by following a formula, to be reported in one's annual report for increment purposes.

Reviewing, conscientiously carried out, is an important means of entering an author's addition to knowledge into the scholarly stream of consciousness. The news value of reviews is thus significant for more than the possible attraction of purchasers, important as that is for publishers. Reviews secure entry for a book's contribution into an academic teacher's resource base; they bear information to help research in the present and future. They are not a frivolous assignment. (Halpenny, 1993, p. 223)

"Of making many books there is no end," so says the Preacher. From this, it does not follow that some books that are published should have been published at all! For this judgment to be made requires critical, insightful, decisive, ethical book reviewers. To procure their services and to entice them to review books we need to change our conception of book reviewing and of the tasks of a Book Review Editor from one that *merely informs* readers of what is newly published in the field to that of a change agent who creates

some possibilities for a new critical climate of opinion and evinces a commitment to scholarship.

NOTES

1. I wish to point out that this position paper is not a commentary on the current practice of Book Reviewing in the *Journal of Educational Thought*.
2. Most of the information regarding the history of book reviewing was taken from D. Roper (1978), *Reviewing before the Edinburgh: 1708-1802*. A succinct summary of earlier journals appear in R.P. McCutcheon (1922), *The Beginnings of Book-Reviewing in English Periodicals*, *PMLA*, 37, 691-706.
3. A different version of Patricia Rooke's (1990) book review of Barbara Miller Solomon's *In the Company of Educated Women: A History of Women and Higher Education in America* appeared in *The Canadian Journal of Education*, 15, 328-331.
4. For similar comments, see Virginia Woolfe (1969), *Reviewing*, where she limits her comments to literary works.

REFERENCES

- Belsey, A. (1995, May). On the ethics of writing academic book reviews. *Philosophy Today*, 19, 8.
- Halpenny, F.G. (1993, July). Responsibilities of scholarly publishers. *Scholarly Publishing*, 24(4), 223-231.
- Haack, S. (1991, March). Book review. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 21(1), 91-108.
- Magsino, R. (1982). The domain of moral education and Mr. Parlett: A response. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 7(1), 118-125.
- Mitchell, S. (1989). Book review. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 11(4), 594-598.
- O'Neill, G.P. (1987). Book review. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 12(1), 240-246.
- Roper, D. (1978). *Reviewing before the Edinburgh: 1788-1802*. London: Methuen.
- Woolf, V. (1969). *Reviewing*. Folcroft, PA: Folcroft Press.

Professor Dr. Evelina Orteza y Miranda secured her doctorate's degree from UCLA. She has taught courses in philosophy of education at the University of Regina and the University of Calgary. Her special interests are in moral philosophy and education and religious education. She is currently Book Review Editor of *Studies in Philosophy and Education*.