

GETTING STARTED IN BOOK REVIEWING

Talk by Libby K. White at AJL Convention, Scottsdale, AZ

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Description: This session will look at how to write book reviews and how librarians can use the reviews to help with acquisitions.

Libby K. White is director of the Joseph Meyerhoff Library of Baltimore Hebrew University. She has worked as a reference librarian, a synagogue librarian, a Jewish vocational services librarian, and a children's and YA librarian. She holds an MLS and an MS in liberal studies, and is a doctoral candidate in Judaic studies. She reviews widely and contributes to encyclopedias and other works of Jewish interest. Libby is a past chair of the Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee, and is now editor of the *AJL Newsletter*. She was recently honored with the Fannie Goldstein Merit Award.

In a recent essay "Faint Praise: The Plight of Book Reviewing in America," Gail Pool of the University of Missouri offers some perceptive quotations on the writing of reviews. She quotes Harry Hansen, literary editor of the legendary *New York*

World. Hansen wrote, "It is a common device to let an author down easy when he (or she) writes a mediocre book by telling the story and avoiding comment. But this has never won the respect of author, reader or publisher. All through life we are giving our opinions...on the morning's coffee, on a new picture, on a sunset. The basis of our opinion may be emotional or intuitive or due to actual mental reflection. In no case does it take into account the actual labor involved in producing the object that arouses our comment. Reviewing cannot be based on pity; it may be considerate and dignified, but it is not a plea for supporting the author's family."

In the *Times Literary Supplement* of London of March 1988, Peter Conrad defines reviewing as "the conduct of war by other means." American journalist Murray Kempton observes that a critic is "someone who enters the battlefield after the war is over and shoots the wounded." Recently, author-critic Christopher Hitchens reminded his audience at a New York Book Expo session about the negative aspect of book reviewing. Hitchens

quoted a biblical passage, Job 31:35, which he translated as “Oh, that mine enemy would write a book.” Not exactly the JPS translation, but he has the general idea. F.F.Beirne, Book Page Editor of *The Baltimore Evening Sun*, points out, ‘Experience has shown that rules laid down for one reviewer do not apply at all to another. Just when we imagine we have a workable formula, along comes somebody with a review that is unmistakably good and which at the same time violates every clause in the formula.’”

Somewhere in the quicksand of these philosophic statements lies the successful book review. Of course, I use the term “book review” in a generic way—I mean reviews of videos, DVD’s, films, electronic resources, and graphic novels, too.

Reviewing is an utterly serious topic with much at stake. Librarians often find themselves in the role of reviewers intentionally or not, informally or formally. To tell the truth, we live and die by reviews! We use reviews for selection, collection development, comparison, reader’s advisory, program planning, keeping up with literary trends, and developing technical and writing skills. In this session I shall confine myself to a discussion of reviews such as appear in *Library Journal*, *School Library Journal*, *Jewish Book World*, the *AJL Newsletter*, JCC, school and synagogue bulletins, and local newspapers. I will refer mainly to adult materials. This is the reviewing world I know. It’s my hope that you will like the books you are assigned to review. Journals rarely pay for reviews, but the books they send usually become yours.

Reviewers are often recruited by journals which run ads in their pages. Sometimes, a list of titles is offered to the membership of an organization sponsoring a journal. In other

instances, an editor approaches an individual known for expertise in a specialized field to request a review. If you find the content, level, and style, and yes, slant of a journal's review section appealing and useful, you may have found a place to begin. You are a part of that journal's audience and probably speak the language of the journal's reviewers already. Contact the editor. As in all writing, the old adage is wise; write about what you know. *Elements for Basic Reviews*, an American Library Association document developed by the Reference and Users Services Committee (RUSA), which included AJL members Donald Altschuler and Barbara Bibel, states, "Reviewers should be qualified to judge the reliability and validity of facts presented in materials that they evaluate, to compare such materials to similar works, and to determine whether such materials provide a greater understanding of a specific subject. Consequently, reviewers should have a solid academic background and/or strong personal or professional interest in the subject of the materials examined. Fiction reviewers should have an extensive background and/or a keen interest in literature." In dealing with a new reviewer, an editor will usually request a resume and a sample review. Respond promptly and in a professional manner.

If an editor agrees to bring you on board, you will receive a book and a set of directions. **READ THE DIRECTIONS CAREFULLY AND KEEP THEM ON HAND.** Every journal has its own character, format, and idiosyncracies. The required presentation of bibliographic information differs among journals. Note the deadline for submission of your review! Publishing is a business; even publishing the *AJL Newsletter* is a little business. We are not pulling our hair out and staying up late to bring the product out just for fun. We expect to meet our commitments. We expect

journal contributors, including book reviewers, to do the same. If you are unable to submit the review on time, let the editor know. The editor should not be forced to guess or to remind you of a passed deadline. Such lack of attention by a reviewer indicates carelessness, disorganization, or a non-serious attitude. Such qualities are poor recommendations for a long-term relationship. Resist the theory of “More is better.” I realize that cutting a review down to size-hacking at those precious words-is an awful discipline, which no decent person deserves. However, this is the reviewer’s job. Terrible things can happen when the editor assigns a 250-word review and receives an 800-word review. I can assure you that this has happened to AJL editors. In one case, the review was of a children’s book with minimal text. I will spare you further details.

The 2007 New York Book Expo featured an overflow crowd for a session on the ethics of review writing. For just about everyone, objectivity in review writing is the desired goal. Analysts agree that reviewers should avoid materials that they themselves, colleagues, and friends have written. Nor should individuals with a financial investment review materials related to that investment. It’s not difficult to come up against an ethical problem in this area. In fact, it happened to me while preparing this talk. ALA guidelines state that a review should be submitted to only one publication. I recently completed a review of a book on the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, a subject which I have studied and on which I have written. I spent a great of time writing and revising the review. I planned to use it during this session to show how I improved the review progressively to meet the guidelines enunciated by the journal to which I would submit it.

I thought about this at length and concluded that I could not use this review today. I submitted the review in late May, but it has not yet been published. I was uncertain about my rights in presenting portions of the review to an audience other than the readers of the journal. Instead, I found other examples of poor and successful reviewing.

Once you have the book in your hands, **READ THE BOOK**. Do not imagine that you can “fake it,” serving up warmed-over publisher’s promotional material from the book’s covers and back. Take careful notes. Take down a few significant quotations. However, do not quote extensively in your review. After all, whose review is it? The authors? Yours? On the other hand, keep in mind that it’s not all about you and your life adventures. Every review will certainly reflect the reviewer’s personality. However, “The author’s trek across the Negev brought back memories of my trip on camel in North Africa with my beloved deceased aunt Bette in 1986. Boy, did we need a real vacation after that!” is not appropriate for inclusion in a professional review.

The most basic rule of all review writing is attention to spelling and grammar. Avoid dangling participles and run-on sentences with careless punctuation. Avoid strings of “blah” adjectives, such as good, interesting, fascinating. These adjectives are analogies to what food advertisers used to brand empty calories. Avoid cutesy and condescending expressions. Avoid repeated use of the same words and phrases. Another trap is the use of highly negative or highly positive language which risks leaving the reader with the impression of bias. Do not comment on editing or format unless these features are unusual or poor.

Begin to write the review by setting down the bibliographic information in the form requested by the editor. Write a strong opening sentence to encourage further interest. Editors prefer that reviewers stick to the active and avoid the passive voice in their writing. In the active voice, one writes, “The librarian wrote the review.” In the passive voice, one writes, “The review was written by the librarian.”

Do not provide extensive background on the author or the subject, unless relevant to the work being reviewed. Too much data can lead reviewers into the never-never land of digression from which there is rarely the possibility of a respectable return. Examples of relevant data are: “Dr. Kozlovski, a non-Jewish professor of History at Warsaw University, describes his efforts to establish a Yiddish theater company” and “the author, the adopted Vietnamese daughter of American Jews, returned to her ancestral village.” Absolutely unnecessary in the review of a book about the beliefs of a Hasidic rebbe is “Reb Moshe, leader of this Hasidic sect, was married three times, to sisters who were red-haired. He had eleven children, most of whom did not survive infancy.”

Reviewers are warned against “too much description and not enough evaluation” in their work. I have already mentioned that excessive description is one response to a mediocre book on which the reviewer is reluctant to comment. A laundry list or table of contents of descriptions do not inspire the confidence of editor or reader. In dealing with nonfiction, indicate the author’s intent and ask yourself whether he or she presents a convincing argument. An important standard for nonfiction evaluation is the presence or absence of authority and/or expertise. Many things can be. Perhaps a retired sports reporter can document the history of nuclear medicine. However, a long-time researcher

in the field is a more dependable source! In fiction, look for focus, a cohesive plot, and character development. If possible, compare the title being reviewed with others. Suggest other choices if the book in hand is rejected.

In its conclusion, a review should recommend, label marginal, or reject material. A review should recommend an appropriate type of library and an appropriate audience for the work, such as undergraduates in an academic library, Young Adults in a public library. It is utterly meaningless to recommend a book on the Holocaust for “readers interested in the Holocaust.” The reviewer’s conclusion should not come as a shock. The final conclusion should flow from what has come before. Obviously, a book which is full of errors and awkward in style should not be recommended for any type of library. A final conclusion should never be a mere re-statement of the opening sentence. I will always recall the review of a historical fiction title which began, “This is the story of a Jewish woman and her two daughters in the pioneer Northwest.” The final line of the review read, “The author writes about a Jewish woman and her two daughters in the pioneer Northwest.” I do not recall anything in between. I did not purchase the book for my library. Talk about empty calories!

At the beginning of my talk, I cautioned prospective reviewers against expecting a sizeable financial return for their work. However, I can promise that you will learn a great deal about your profession and your own capacity to grow. Writing is a wonderfully effective technique for learning. There is no more Jewish activity than learning. There is no greater mitzvah than sharing and spreading learning.