

BOOK REVIEWS — BEHIND THE SCENES

David Wells.



Andrea Hanke.



Professor Gary Gorman.



Book reviews are part of publishing, yet the reviewing process is often overlooked, particularly from the perspective of reviews editors. Doreen Sullivan talked to three reviews editors about their roles and their best advice for aspiring book review writers.

David Wells, reviews editor for the *Australian Academic & Research Libraries Journal* (AARL), gives an overview of what a reviews editor does. David says he 'maintains awareness of new publications in the field' and a 'list of potential reviewers and their particular interests and expertise'. This includes 'inviting reviewers to contribute reviews – either by asking them personally if a particular reviewer seems especially appropriate for a particular book, or by a general invitation to the reviewers list'.

David also copy-edits the review, which he says 'may involve clarifying the meaning with the author'. 'With inexperienced reviewers this may be more of a mentoring process, suggesting questions that might be asked about the book, ensuring there is a proper focus to make sure the review is useful to readers,' he says.

THE BEST THING A REVIEWER CAN DO IS WRITE A CLEAR AND THOUGHTFUL REVIEW THAT APPROACHES THE BOOK FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ITS IDEAL READER.

Then there are the tasks of grouping similar themed reviews together, chasing up overdue reviews, letting 'the journal editors know the subjects of the reviews in case they want to refer to them in an editorial', and sending copies of published reviews to the publishers of the books.

For David, the ideal reviewer will 'deliver an elegantly written review which follows the journal's style guide exactly, and gives an overview of the book's content, situates it in the context of other work in the area and includes a brief personal evaluation, and do this within the word limit and before the deadline'.

The worst kind of reviewer will 'accept the book, but then fail to deliver the review and not provide any explanation and not respond to emails. This does happen, but I would not be likely to ask a reviewer who did this ever to write another review,' he says. Another hypothetically bad approach is 'to use the review as a platform for the reviewer's own opinions without noticeable reference to the book or the context in which it was written'.

Professor Gary Gorman, reviews editor for *Australian Library Journal* (ALJ), jokes that the 'perception is that books review editors don't do anything'. He has a similar remit to David Wells and points out 'There are two sides to the coin. I deal with: one, publishers, and two, reviewers. It is extremely important to develop the links with publishers. Publishers

know that 99% of the time *ALJ* publishes the review so they're happy to provide books.'

As an editor, Gary says 'it's a joy when I only need to do minimal copy-editing'. Sometimes a 'more rigorous edit' is needed. He too guides inexperienced reviewers through the process via draft reviews and revisions.

He's found that, 'despite the embrace of technology within the library profession, almost all reviewers prefer hard copy. This is very probably because the quality of an online book – often a simple PDF, but sometimes a web document – is not on offer to reviewers. Not searchable, not user friendly. Yet publishers are pushing very hard for reviewers to receive the electronic format. In fact, a couple of publishers have backed away from providing *ALJ* with review copies as not enough reviewers will accept electronic copies.'

For Gary, the best thing a reviewer can do is to 'write a descriptive and evaluative review in beautiful English that arrives on time'. Aside from no review at all, the worst type of review is one that is a 'long, purely descriptive review' like a *précis*.

For those reluctant to offer a considered opinion, sometimes he wonders 'if the lack of confidence in some reviewers lies with the lack of confidence, or neutral stance, within the profession'. He stresses that 'reviews need to be evaluative'.

Andrea Hanke is the editor-in-chief of *Books+Publishing Magazine*. This magazine differs from the two ALIA journals

because it reviews fiction, memoir, general nonfiction and children's titles, whereas the journals review industry-specific nonfiction titles.

'As a reviews editor,' Andrea says, 'my job is to choose a selection of books from those submitted by publishers and match them up with their best possible reviewer. I usually do this over the phone, pitching several titles that I think will appeal to each reviewer.'

'Our publication is unique in that it runs reviews of books several months prior to publication, so it's often the first place a local author (we only review Australian and New Zealand-originated titles) will be reviewed. These pre-publication reviews help booksellers, librarians and teachers decide which books to order in.'

'This means that publishers need to send us copies of books several months before they go to print. In many cases these books will be sent as A4 manuscripts that may not have received a final proof (we just ignore the typos).'

'The best thing a reviewer can do is write a clear and thoughtful review that approaches the book from the perspective of its ideal reader. The worst thing a reviewer can do (aside from failing to submit their review) is to make the review all about themselves!'

DOREEN SULLIVAN
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