

A Change for the Times: Rethinking Book Review Writing

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In this exposition, Melodie Cook, the incoming Book Reviews Editor, outlines how book reviews have been evaluated and written in the past and how *JALT Journal* is currently making an effort to provide reviewers a platform through which to exercise their critical skills, as well as provide a more interactive experience for readers to engage with book reviews. At the end of the exposition, she provides guidelines for future book reviews to consider when writing book reviews for *JALT Journal* as we move forward.

この解説で著者は、書評の歴史を簡単に説明し、なぜ書評がこれまでそれほど真剣に受け止められてこなかったのか、そして書評を知的対話の場としてどのように活用できるのかを述べている。書評をより批評的で双方向的なものにするための根拠を示した後、*JALT Journal*における今後の書評のガイドラインを提示している。

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In a piece called “Confessions of a Book Reviewer” (1946), George Orwell wrote of the trials and tribulations, in his early career, writing short reviews, under shorter deadlines, for books the contents of most of which he had little or no familiarity with. He opined that his work did questionable service to authors; and that other book reviewers were in the same boat as he. Orwell advocated for closer and better reading and reviewing of fewer books with longer word-counts and that books about specific topics be read by experts.

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In 1980 the second issue of *JALT Journal* was published, and it included its first book review written by Kevin Gregg (1980). Since then, book reviews have been an essential feature of *JALT Journal*, providing valuable insight into new publications for its readership. Generally, book reviews have been useful in not only giving authors and publishers a space for readers to learn about a publication but have also been helpful for providing new researchers an outlet to begin their academic-publishing journeys. In light of these purposes, the JALT Publications Board wants to provide guidance on the future of book reviews in *JALT Journal* as a space for presenting a rigorous discussion informed by new conceptual and empirical developments in the literature of our field and provides readers with a grounded understanding and balanced interpretation of a given work. In this *Expositions* article, the incoming Book Reviews Editor, Melodie Cook, writes about how book reviews have come to be, how they are presently viewed, and how they might be critically expanded. In doing so, she, as well as all involved in JALT, hope that a new vision of book reviews will emerge and that book reviews can continue to be seen as an essential and worthwhile part of *JALT Journal*.

A Brief History of Book Reviews

Book reviews have been a part of journals since the *Journal des Scavans* began publishing them in Paris in 1665 (Orteza y Miranda, 1996). Book reviews covered all fields of knowledge at that time and were not expected to include the reviewer's opinions nor any discussion of the content of books. In short, book reviews "had a conservative function, namely, to record publication and to inform scholars and the reading public" (p. 192). Because the scope of book reviews was so broad and all new books needed to be recorded, reviewers were generally inundated and, at times, reviews were of questionable quality. I was reminded of Lady Carbury in Trollope's *The Way We Live Now*; a sloppy researcher who wrote what were deemed to be bad biographies, but nevertheless sent letters to various male newspaper editors begging them to give her favorable reviews. Although Trollope was writing about newspaper book reviews, I felt the same was applicable when I read the following quotation (Roper, 1978, as cited in Orteza y Miranda, 1996):

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

This manner of “comprehensive reviewing” (Orteza y Miranda, 1996) changed with the publication of *The Edinburgh* in 1802; the editors began to show more selectivity and agreed that quality, not quantity, should be the main concern of book reviews. In addition, the function of reviews began to be more seriously considered – in the past, reviewers simply made observations on the books, and perhaps quoted from them at length. Now, reviewers were required to show knowledge of the subject and be able to provide useful critiques and analyses.

The audience for book reviews, 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” (Orteza y Miranda, 1996, p. 193), but as more people received a formal education, thus increasing literacy rates, more books needed to be published. This resulted in pressure on publishers to produce more books and which generated a need for authors of fiction and academics to publish more works. Orteza y Miranda notes that the judges of such reviewers became “a new breed of professionals” (p. 194). Reviewers often struggled with the following questions:

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 reviews for? (Orteza y Miranda, 1996, p. 194).

According to Orteza y Miranda (1996), book reviews are often written using a descriptive style of writing that can be characterized as a “simple enumeration of ... contents and a description of how these are laid out chapter by chapter” (p. 194). Although a few criticisms may have been leveled at a book under review, the reviews also may have been quite slight, likely because of strict word limits.

Book Reviews: Not Getting the Respect They Deserve

In the field of language learning, teaching, and research, Sealey (2015) explains why book reviews have generally not enjoyed the status they truly deserve. Citing Lindholm-Romantschuk's (1998) work, she lists the following reasons why journals' book reviews may be taken less seriously than the articles they accompany: they are shorter, because of a lack of space for developing arguments; they are largely subjective due to a lack of standardization; they are derivative in nature, because they are deemed to be "not a form of original scholarship" (p. 478); and, they tend to lack enough academic contextualization, as shown by the few citations used in a book review. Book reviews, too, tend to be counted for less than monographs; they are not awarded as many "points" by academic institutions or databases and are often not considered by tenure and promotion committees. Furthermore, with the rise of citation metrics, fewer academics want to spend their time writing them as book reviews tend to be cited less often than research studies, for example. In the end, some researchers have characterized book reviews in a very unfavorable light, such as Hoge and West (1979, as cited in East, 2011) in saying that they are "frequently brief, impressionistic, formulaic, bland, badly written or... nothing more than sales pitches" (p. 35).

Stilwell (2003, as cited in Obeng-Odoom, 2014) refers to academic capitalism as a potential reason for the relatively poor public perception of book reviews. Book reviews may not be perceived as a legitimate part of academia because they generate nothing for institutions, such as a grant for authors to write a book review. One result of these realities is book reviewing is put into the hands of budding academics, such as graduate students; who are often encouraged to write book reviews as a first post-graduate academic endeavour. I, too, was encouraged to do so after receiving my freshly-minted PhD and my first book review was published in *Linguist List* (Cook, 2011) (by the way, I don't believe I ever even thought to list it on my curriculum vitae – I am referencing it for the first time in this *Exposition*).

On the other hand, some academics are more positive, and see the potential for book reviews to become another space for strengthening and furthering academic rigor. Obeng-Odoom (2014) argues that book reviews "... are evaluative commentaries in which reviewers demonstrate their knowledge of the books, where they stand in the scholarly literature, and what contribution they make" (p. 79). He lists several journals in which stated aims for book reviews are clear: *International Sociology Reviews*, which presents book reviews as a "vehicle for considering, examining, appraising, assessing, and evaluating books by sociologists all over the world" (p. 80) and *The*

Journal of Political Economy which combines book notes and book reviews; the former provides summaries of books, and the latter provides evaluation. Thus, it appears that academic journals are already reimagining traditional notions of book reviews and giving them the space, attention, and respect they are due.

The Benefits of Book Reviews

For book reviewers, having to critically read a whole book and evaluate it is an excellent exercise in itself. Obeng-Odoom (2014) shares his own experiences of being able to get more out of a book by reviewing it; he creates, for himself, “documentation of the salient points raised in the book” which is “useful for future study and reference” (p. 81). Not only this, he can judge the quality of the writing which enhances his own research. In short, Obeng-Odoom claims that “[b]ook reviews can help sharpen our own writing and develop our ideas” (p. 81). He also mentions that the skill of evaluating “substantial amounts of research” (p. 81) can be developed. This is a transferable skill that can be useful to not only PhD students embarking on their academic journeys, but also to seasoned researchers keeping them abreast of the state of the art in their fields. Another benefit of writing reviews, according to Obeng-Odoom, is that the reviewer becomes known as a specialist in the field. “The benefits of being known as an expert are numerous; they give one visibility, impact and attention, among other things” (p. 81). Finally, reviewers, if given good feedback from review editors, help them get ideas. Obeng-Odoom lists several journals which have a dialogic form of feedback between reviewers and book review editors: *Review of Radical Political Economics, Agriculture and Human Values, and African Review of Economics and Finance*.

By bringing a publication to the attention of an academic community, book reviewers can help authors spread knowledge of their work, which in turn can help academics with their careers. On the other hand, book reviewers can warn readers about books that should not have been published in the first place; this forces academics to work more rigorously and keep standards in the field high. Another benefit, as we well know, is that text-book reviews can help teachers choose course materials.

Book reviews are also beneficial for the academic community. They can become a forum for professional discussions. In that sense they can offer readers an intermediary space between authors and reviewers and open up room for dialogue between the author, the reviewer, and the reader (Sealey, 2015). Because technology allows readers to locate and peruse books

themselves from online catalogs and form their own opinions about them, book reviews need to provide something that readers can't simply get from a search engine. Sealey (2015), herself a former Book Reviews Editor for *Applied Linguistics*, recommends that a critical book review should include answers to the following questions:

- What are the main themes and issues covered by this book?
- What approach do(es) the author(s) take to their material?
- Where does the book sit in relation to other books in its field and sub-field? What new contribution does it make – or perhaps fail to make?
- Who is the audience for this book and is it written in a way that suggests it is appropriate for that audience?
- Is anything distinctive about the way the book is produced that would be helpful for readers to know (e.g., layout, design, images, tables, index)? (p. 482).

Although she also suggests that the “informed critical commentary” (p. 482) might more easily be provided by established researchers who not only have current knowledge of the subject, but also that appropriate and extensive historical knowledge of the subject should bring a wider perspective to the review beyond what is afforded by the questions listed above. She also recommends that postgraduate students, who may be “immersed in the literature about their topic more thoroughly than full-time faculty are able to be” (p. 484) are also valuable and knowledgeable book-review writers. A very well-researched and articulated book review could reveal several skills held by the author: the ability to summarize, the ability to write well, and the ability to problematize. Also, it can represent a thorough understanding of a given field.

JALT Journal, as the flagship research publication of JALT, is now seeking to increase its significance to readers partly by publishing book reviews which not only describe new publications, but also provide critical reviews of them. Such evaluations can help readers determine whether the new publication is of high academic quality and integrity, offers something new to the field, “discloses hitherto important but undetected and untreated problems in a study” (Orteza y Miranda, 1996, p. 194), or argues that the book should not have been published at all (e.g., Gregg, 1980). The following is a summary of Orteza y Miranda's recommendations for a critical book review:

- Determining whether or not, or how far the author has succeeded in putting forth their arguments clearly, convincingly and compellingly.

- Capturing the essence of the author's work by examining how arguments are made to support the main thesis.
- Providing critical comments in an academic tone.
- Determining that the author's expression shows logical coherence and flow.
- Setting the book in its broader disciplinary base or in relation to other works of the same genre.
- Writing in a forceful, vigorous, forthright, non-evasive and discerning manner without being unnecessarily savage.
- Engaging the reader of the review in a discussion about the author's intentions for writing the book.

To this end, and based on the opinions and suggestions of the incoming Book Review Editor enumerated in this *Expositions* article, we suggest new guidelines for *JALT Journal* book reviewers to follow along with more detailed questions that will help academics new to this genre understand exactly what is being asked of them. We hope that future reviewers will join us on this journey and help our book reviews evolve.

Who Should Write Reviews?

In the past, book reviews were written by solo authors, often graduate students, embarking on their academic careers. We would like to continue this tradition but would also like to offer the task of reviewing books to experts in their fields, their graduate students, perhaps both writing together. Although the expert researcher brings a seasoned and well-grounded view to the task, the graduate student, who is likely well-versed in state-of-the-art research, can bring a contemporary perspective. We would also like to invite pairs of researchers to co-author reviews of the same book. This would bring an active, dialogic perspective and offer an in-depth discussion of a book from multiple perspectives.

What Should Reviews Include?

Of course, presenting the fundamental information about authors, publishers, prices, and the main contents of books to readers remains an important aspect of book reviews. However, following the advice of Zabin (2003) we recommend that book summaries comprise no more than one-third of the total review. The remainder of the review should contain an evaluation of the book. According to Monash University's (2007) recommendations,

such an evaluation, among other things, should at least attempt to answer the following questions:

- Is the question the text tries to answer relevant, interesting, new, and useful?
- Who will find the text useful?
- Does the text give new answers to an old question?
- Is the text detailed or brief? Simple or complex?
- Is evidence presented to support the answer extensive? Strong? Weak? Contradictory?
- Are the conclusions reached final or preliminary?

How Long Should Book Reviews Be?

In order to help book-review authors be more evaluative and critical, we have decided to extend our original 1000-word limit to 2000 words. This will make it easier for reviewers to provide more comprehensive reviews than previously.

Guidance for Reviewers

The following section contains a sample guideline for prospective book reviewers to consider while writing their reviews. Of course, not all questions may be applicable, but we hope this outline provides a useful guideline for authors when structuring their book reviews and helps them provide a thorough evaluation of the book. As the guidelines show, most questions which we hope reviewers will answer can be found in the “Critique” category.

Proposed Guidelines for a *JALT Journal* Critical Review

Introduction:

- Give general information about the book’s title, author(s), publisher, date of publication, number of pages, and cost in yen.
- Specify the type of book, outline the theme, and target audience.

Summary (about 650-700 words for a 2000-word review):

- What does the book promise to cover or argue?

- How is the book organized?
- What are the main points of each section of the book?

Critique:

- How is the writing style? Is it academic? Can a novice to the topic understand it or is expert knowledge of the subject needed?
- Did the author identify an audience for the work, and, if so, how well do they address that audience? If not, who do you think will get the most out of the book?
- Is the material factually accurate and contemporary?
- Does the author show an in-depth knowledge of the topic and situate the book among others of its kind?
- How well does the book fulfill its stated aims? How effective is the methodology if empirical research was conducted? Is the argument persuasive? Why or why not?
- How well does the author describe and use the presented evidence?
- How do you relate to the author's arguments? Do you agree or disagree with them and why?
- What possibilities does the book suggest or leave out? Explain, in detail, why this is a strength or weakness of the book.
- How does the book contribute to the field? What new or valuable information is given?

Conclusion:

- Provide a summary comment on the book that ties together the issues raised in the review.
- Make recommendations to readers – who would benefit from reading/purchasing the book?

Conclusion

We at *JALT Journal* are hoping to publish book reviews that provide not only summaries of new publications, but also more rigorous critical discussions which help situate each book within our field. We hope ultimately to publish book reviews which can be deemed as insightful, balanced, original, interesting, well-written, and informative. We are looking forward to your (solo or pair) contributions!

Melodie Cook is a Professor at the University of Niigata Prefecture. She has worked in a number of roles for JALT: Membership Chair, Program Chair, Chapter President, Associate Editor for *JALT Journal*, Editor for *JALT Journal*, and most recently on the Board of Directors as Director of Membership. She is happy to continue her service to JALT as *JALT Journal* Book Reviews Editor.

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