

EDITORS' LETTER

The academic value of book reviews

Although they are not sufficiently appreciated by most researchers, book reviews have long been a fundamental resource for information and dissemination among specialists, as well as for reaffirming ties between these individuals and stimulating debate among historians (Sarton, 1950). The author of a review is a mediator between a recently published book and a community of specialists who have not read the book but wish to know what novelties it contains. The review helps them decide whether they should read it or not. In this Editors' Letter of *História, Ciências, Saúde – Manguinhos* we wish to share some reflections we consider relevant about drafting and adding value to book reviews.

Before writing a book review, authors of this type of text should read other reviews and carefully examine the suggestions or instructions from the journal where they intend to publish it. Before anything else, we must call attention to an ethical topic: although reviews can be written by people mentioned in the acknowledgments of the book, they should not be written by close relatives, personal friends, advisors, reviewers at the publisher, or authors of the prologue (simply because all these cases can involve conflicts of interest). And offering or agreeing to review the same text for two different journals should always be avoided.

Writing a book review is a way to practice writing a smaller text (the limit is generally around 1,000 words in academic journals) and offers early-career researchers a chance to polish their own voices and reflections. It is also an accessible route to publication, since editors of Brazilian journals generally do not receive enough reviews or have difficulty finding authors available to write them. Unless the journal's instructions for authors state otherwise, it is common for potential authors to write to the editors of a historical journal volunteering to review a certain text. Most editors will accept this offer, as long as the authors agree to do so in a professional manner, providing the complete bibliographical information for the book (such as author, complete title, publisher, city of publication, year, and number of pages, according to its cataloging data). It is true that by volunteering, authors lose the chance to get a free book to review (some journals often offer a hard or electronic copy), but it is an opportunity for them to read texts in detail that may be relevant for their own research. Reviews may also be published at the invitation of journal editors, responding to requests from the authors of the book or the publisher (which usually provides a review copy), since it is in their interest to publicize the text among potential readers.

Still, the numbers of spontaneously submitted or invited reviews have dropped in recent years (Caldeira, Silveira, 2019). One reason may be that traditionally (and unfortunately)

commentary on books has little repercussion in terms of academic prestige for those who write these reviews. More recently, another explanation could be limited access to hard copies of texts resulting from the unpredictable nature of the postal service during the covid-19 pandemic. Some funding institutions also unfairly disregard book reviews as intellectual and scientific production. We maintain that book reviews can be an exercise in critical and reflective writing, which is essential for researchers as they construct their intellectual repertoires.

In many journals, such as *História, Ciências, Saúde – Manguinhos*, book reviews are assigned a digital object identifier (DOI) and can be incorporated into the author's professional publications. Writing a book review does not imply that its author is an authority in the field; certainly, writing one will be easier for individuals familiar with the topic, but all researchers hold legitimate opinions. One common and valid tactic for early-career scientists who are not specialized in the historiography contained in the book is to focus the analysis on the aspects intrinsic to the text such as clear style and coherence, accessibility, and consistency of interpretations and arguments, and to not focus too much on the historiographic content.

A good book review requires careful reading, contextualization, and summary of the text's main arguments (Moreira, 2021). Those who write reviews must take notes while reading and record comments that could be useful later. This effort ideally also involves familiarity with the authors and their trajectory in order to determine whether they specialize in the subject matter or if the book addresses a new topic compared to previous work. Book reviews (especially for collections featuring work by various authors) should not report on the entire contents. Although book reviews are not required to follow any established sequence or organizational scheme, they generally contain two main features. Half of the text should be dedicated to a brief description of the central argument and the methodology of the book. Among other aspects, this initial section describes delineation in terms of time, region, or problem analyzed, as well as how the chapters are organized and whether the text is part of a published series. If the book is a collection featuring various authors, the review should focus on the introduction by the editor(s) and one or two notable chapters. The second half of the review should present critical but balanced commentary, and should avoid aggressive, sarcastic, or negative expressions or implied superiority. Even if the book is considered poor quality, the strong and weak points of the topic can almost always be assessed, particularly if the text was published by a prestigious academic publisher and underwent peer review. Meanwhile, exaggerated praise indicates that the reviewer may lack credibility.

Topics that can be addressed in the critique section of a book review include mentioning the book's potential contributions to the existing historiography, appreciation of the relevant and original ideas in terms of contemporary debates in the area, comments on whether the secondary references are up to date, and the balance between description and analysis, highlighting the existence of relevant collections or archives that may not have been consulted, or praise for groundbreaking materials presented in the book that will be useful to other historians. Above all, the critique section should discuss whether the evidence used in the text can prove its arguments, and should cite examples where the data and argument agree or diverge.

Finally, reviews tend to conclude with recommendations about which audiences may be most interested in the book. The reviewer may suggest the book to lay readers (in the case of scientific dissemination), students, early-career researchers, specialists in the area, period, or region addressed in the book, or any combination of these groups.

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