

The Death of the "Book Review"?
Stephen T. Casper, Clarkson University

Reprinted with the author's permission from *The Neuro Times*
www.dictionaryofneurology.com/2013/05/the-death-of-book-review.html
15 May 2013

The book review has died. It lives. But it is dead. It is an anachronistic zombie. Let me explain.

Perhaps some of you are employed in universities that use Digital Measures? I'm sure you are at least savvy enough to imagine precisely the aims of this wondrous digital panopticon. If you have not yet discovered Digital Measures, then rest assured someone, somewhere, is plotting to bring it your university soon enough. In any case, it is software that promises to measure and value everything you do. And should you have dared to publish a book review, then it will measure it in a way that values it least of all.

Originally when Digital Measures was introduced at my university, it did not even possess a capacity to enter "Book Review" as "work" into one of the literally hundreds of drop-down menus for measuring academic labor. When the issue was raised, there was complete confusion. "What is a book review?" was a serious question. Some thought we meant "peer-review" and couldn't understand how they could be published.

Suspicion festered. Everywhere people suspected that some of us were trying to get credit for something twice.

But then it began to dawn on people that were still some odd academics who published weird antiquarian objects of yore, and thus those were probably peer-reviewed in manuscript form and perhaps this was what was meant by "book review". We then had to explain by invoking reviews of books in *The New Yorker*, the *New York Review of Books*, and the *Times Literary Supplement*. We showed them reprints from journals, whereby some evinced surprise that journals looked like books, and they confessed that they had not heard of the publications or thought their activities mere journalism.

Thus, success! Eventually a drop-down menu item was added to the "Professional Service" menu. "Published Book Review" was, however, a bit at sea in the world of "Professional Service," where there were such serious menu items as "Committees." For one thing, the book review was published while and everything else was not. That made its location an odd choice. So eventually a compromise was adopted. Published "book reviews" would be entered into the area called "intellectual contributions". But in the final output of measure, book reviews would not appear anywhere near other publications. And thus it was, at least in Digital Measures, that the genre of "book review" passed into memory. It died, even as it lived.

1. Who murdered the "Book Review"?

How might we explain the death of the academic book review? Firstly, academics killed it — not administrators. I know this is a harsh truth, but for those of us who loved the genre (reading them and writing them) we had heard too-often from our fellow academics that they didn't count and that the time spent on them would be better dedicated to other more productive ends — productive ends being measured of course in the rhetoric of market pantheism.

Partly academics in the sciences were to blame. Remember when you first heard someone working in the sciences say to you glibly "no one reads books anymore"? I do. I was fifteen. Please respect my later bewilderment when as a graduate student a senior colleague looked at me severely and asked why I was reading a thick volume from 1905 and stated flatly "no one read books then".

A cynic might suggest that academia in the last three decades had become deprofessionalized in such a way that a serious suspicion of people who loved books had begun to blossom. Academics began to feel that they had to apologize for reading-qualaboring — this despite the fact that the only means of knowing anything was to engage in a serious effort of study (which often included books).

But then there were so many bad books too. And there were such horrible conventions about being polite and nice and disinterested when reviewing the bad books. So it was hard to imagine that the art of writing a lively book review that stated in a clear way "consign this book to the fire" would be much applauded in circles where the art of taking criticism had already declined in any case.

Of course, I am speaking here in generational terms and exaggerating for effect. The death of the book review will come as a surprise to many, not least those who persist in reading book and publishing reviews of them. Like me. But the reality is that they have become non-measurable units. If anything, they suggest in managerial culture that you were 'reading on the job' —and no one had better being doing that! They are factually to academia as zombies are to the census.

2. An Obituary for a Living Genre

It is not clear to me when the "book review" emerged. I'm sure that histories of the literary and philosophical societies of the long-eighteenth century, histories of the book or library practices, and perhaps even early histories of the spread of literacy would have explored the emergence of this practice. It is, however, obvious that forms of fakery, commentary, gossip, and innuendo trace back at least as far as Cervantes. Boswell had more than a few things to say on the topic as well, and so, too, did Rousseau in his Confessions. Admittedly those authors judged critics in the harshest of possible terms, but, nevertheless, the vitriol that they aimed at their glib commentators suggests the work of idealism in literary culture was always dialectical.

In any case, most historians would probably agree that the great age of the book review came after 1789 and with the advent of widespread literacy and the industrialist discovery of an appetite for words among all the classes. Indeed the sheer desire for "news" and "stories" described by the likes of Richard Dana or Mark Twain among sailors or crews on riverboats is astounding. So, too, is the proliferation of social resistance through book-reading and criticism among socialists, unionists, anarcho-syndicalists until the 1950s. Or, from another ideological window, the conservative love affair with the essays of Arnold, Chesterton, and Lippmann were often deep social commentaries in the form of reviews.

Nowhere were book reviews livelier than in the worlds of science. To aver that the world now would be a little less rich but for the snarky reviews of the members of the Athenaeum Club is to state the obvious. Evidently there was a Victorian culture of nastiness that might lend that period a properly rosy moniker as the "Age of Admirable Honesty." And at those times when the anti-Semitic, misogynist, and racist slipped through as subtext, they helped future generations detect as well the arrogance of the many-sided "Age of Chauvinisms".

But beyond that, it is easy to see that a significant source for the many material achievements of science in that period derived as much from outbursts of energy directed at "stupid critics" as from great "genius" or serendipity. It is hard to imagine, for example, that Thomas Huxley would have bull-dogged quite as as ferociously without the fillip of his nastiest critics. And the reciprocal must be true as well.

However, it may well have been the process of abstracting literature and producing digests that marked the decline of the review, and I suspect that it was in the sciences and in medicine that the life of the review began to show its age. Perhaps there was a transformation of professional culture too — a Taylorisation of professional time, work, and labor that began in the Progressive Era. And, perhaps, a civilizational assumption about the progress of knowledge that made accessing knowledge a utilitarian enterprise out of necessity.

Whatever the case, the book review in the academy by 2012 had no value in those systems of measurement that people in positions of power took seriously. Strive as we might to dismiss the ends of academia's many arbiters, their power has determined that reading and commenting on a book is not knowledge-making.

What then is to be most regretted in the passing of the book review? Fascinating as it would be to trace, for example, how Marx's or Hayek's ideas came to America and were received by readers-cum-authors of reviews in either the interwar or cold war eras and to compare their reception, no one could seriously propose that a genre should last purely for the needs of historians. But there is something that will be lost: the immediacy of, for instance, Lippmann reading Terman, Said reading Foucault, or (less pretentiously) you reading me. The loss is thus of a particular form of intellectual culture, a form that was arguably the Enlightenment Project at its best.

3. The Zombie Lives

There can be little doubt that undergraduates will continue to write 650-word appraisals and responses to the authors we force them to read. Words like "unique" or "aspect" or "bias" will persist in inelegant fashion. A few of them will not be tone-deaf to the polemic; most will spot rhetoric; and almost all of them will recognize the value of the content. Reading in these circumstances will become mainly an exercise in information reconnaissance and recapitulation. The Age of Information need not be an Age of Readers, still less an Age of Writers, and increasingly these essays will all appear little more than paraphrases of the *SparkNotes* commentaries.

Reviews will persist as marketing devices for books (as they will for all entertainment). They will be 'sponsored content', the package of advertising-things meant to tempt would-be consumers with a 'preview'. The irony in the postmodern age may likely be that publishers will increasingly require that authors of new books ghostwrite five or six different reviews to be released after publication.

Information management moreover in the big publishing houses will mean forging an ever-more suspect relationship with newspapers and online traffic juggernauts, which by the close of the millennium were already beginning to show evidence of efforts to manipulate the consensus about proper academic subjects. Opinion columnists and news reports will splash discussions of new cutting-edge topics in the human sciences and humanities. Appearing in hallowed venues like the 'Grey Lady' and mainstream education literature, these sundry devices for marketing particular memes will become omnipresent and be accorded a reverence in universities akin to the shiny subjects of the funding moment in science.

The academic review will also persist, albeit in elite public culture. And here their persistence will actually become great evidence of their Zombie status. For it will always be the orthodoxy that will find column space there; one can imagine the irony in postmodernity of a column called "Dissent" written perhaps by some eastern-European or South American radical who will provide the elite with a smug sense of their own balanced openness and beneficence.

4. Can the Intellectual Culture of the Book Review Survive?

There is no use pretending that this essay is overwrought. At this point, it is naïve altruism to write book reviews if you are a junior scholar. We live in jaded times — even if we need not be jaded. The act of writing the review provides people with your free, uncredited labor so that they can avoid keeping up on the latest trends in scholarship.

Writing dozens of amazing book reviews won't get you a job. Writing dozens of them won't get you promoted. Nobody will give you a grant to be a book reviewer. While it is true that there is a pleasure in the labor itself, it is categorically wrong that the same pleasure cannot be found in similar activities for which measurable reward is also provided. At this point, the free book is insufficient.

I don't practice what I'm preaching here. Chances are you don't either. I love reading books, and I love writing about the books I've read. I love excoriating crap books. I love lauding terrific ones. But the point is that the book review simply isn't a recognized tool for this activity anymore. Putting it differently, the labor of thinking, arguing, debating, deliberating, and ruminating is as important now as it has ever been. Because of that fact, we need to begin to devise a replacement for the book review that retains the intellectual vibrancy reviews agitated in the past.

In postmodernity resistance begins by subverting the ends of others to our own ends. Arguments, ideas, and facts still matter. Rather than fearing the excoriation of our work and ideas, we should fear silence, apathy, and nihilism at the appearance of our ideas. If we love ideas, then it behooves us to love even those ideas that are wholly in error. And it behooves us as well to seek out those who would deign to show us the error of our ways. In an open world where ideas reign, love of ideas will become its own politics.

Contact details: scasper@clarkson.edu