

# In defence of writing book reviews

*In this feature essay, David Beer argues that reviewing allows us to put collective knowledge ahead of individualised contributions.*

*This piece was [originally published](#) on the Times Higher Education blog.*



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I recently read Benoît Peeters' fantastic [biography of Jacques Derrida](#). Looking back upon the working practices of Derrida and his contemporaries, one thing is particularly striking: the prominent role of the book review. Reviewing books was not a marginal activity for these heavy-hitting figures; it was not something that was done on the rare occasion that a gap in the schedule might permit such an indulgence. Rather, the book review was central to the practice of knowledge formation, dissemination and debate. This, of course, is not a revelation, but reading this biography acts as a reminder of the potential power and importance of the book review.

This power is something that we might well be coming to neglect amid the unremitting pace of academic life today. For Derrida and his milieu, the book review was the mechanism by which they could respond and react, it was the means by which they pushed and prodded at the limits of knowledge, where debates were forged and where books were unpicked for their explicit or even latent properties and values. Reviews were also the origins of new ideas and new thinking. In some instances these reviews may well have spilled over into one-upmanship, point scoring or even pointless squabbling. But, nevertheless, the book review was seen to be a space in which new knowledge could emerge from these dialectic exchanges and from the cut and thrust of debate. The review was never simply *just* a review; it was also a site of contestation that could be used to provoke new insights or to identify questions that were yet to be addressed. In short, the book review was a cherished and nurtured means of debate.

The problem we have today is that book reviews have, largely, become a much more marginal and perhaps underappreciated activity. Rather than being at the centre of disciplines, they are seen to be something of a luxury: an indulgent misuse of time spent reading, cover to cover, and then writing something that does not have any measurable value. As a result, the practice of writing a book review is often, and understandably, seen as an indulgence too far; a waste of precious time; a distraction from the proper activity of making original contributions to knowledge; an inefficiency perhaps. This seems a shame for two reasons. First, book reviews create dialogue between researchers. They offer reflection; they push questions; they challenge ideas; and they inform readers, authors and even the reviewers themselves. They force us to read attentively, to see the detail and then to communicate that to others. Book reviews are an innately collaborative and community based activity, in which we think and share our reactions to the important books of the day. Second, writing a book review can be part of the groundwork from which original knowledge and insights might flourish. So they are important in their own right, and removing them from the research agenda may also erode or limit the possibilities for the formation of our own thoughts and ideas.



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Of course, it is understandable that people frequently choose not to write book reviews. The pressure is on for us to be doing the stuff that counts, to be focusing our limited time and energy on the things that are seen to be most worthwhile. I spent a couple of years as a book reviews editor for a journal: the responses I received to the commission emails often put these pressures on display. People often wanted to review, but didn't feel that they were able to fit it in. I always understood, especially as I've had to turn down such requests myself, and for the same types of reasons. We have to be pragmatic; we have to be sensible about what we can fit into our working time. Book reviews go against the logic of the systems governing research. It is hard to find space for them in the relentless flows of academic life. We only have so much time, and we all feel that we can't afford to waste a minute of it.

This is a story that is now familiar. We all know what it is like: we all know the pressures that come with the expectations surrounding research assessment and evaluation regimes. I don't need to dwell on that here. But I do want to suggest that, if these pressures mean that we abandon the book review, then we might well be damaging the foundations from which knowledge emerges and the community building properties of the debate that they afford. By defending the book review we are defending debate and dialogue and resisting our disciplines turning into spaces of monologic cacophony and speaking without response.

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This is not a nostalgic yearning for some perfect or golden era of academic life. Rather it is to say that the writing of book reviews needs to be actively defended if it is not to slip away and become a forgotten artefact of a certain art of thinking. Book reviews can play a part in what has been described by a recent conference as the '[accelerated academy](#)', but only if we collectively decide that they are of value and that we need to try to find space to do them. The way to do this is probably, reflecting on the recent [Times Higher Education article on managing workloads](#), to integrate them into research plans and to be clear to ourselves about their ongoing value.

In a piece for a collection on [The Craft of Knowledge](#), Les Back has recently suggested that reading is 'companionship in thought'. The book review is one expression of that companionship, while also being an expression of our companionship with our fellow thinkers. For this reason, along with the others I've suggested here, I think we need to actively defend the writing of book reviews. Perhaps we should approach book reviews as a very minor form of resistance: a space in which we declare our interest in the value of knowledge, debate and dialogue; a space that we use to put a notion of collective knowledge ahead of the pressure for individualised contributions. The book review presents us with an opportunity to show that we value the things that might otherwise be lost in the logic of the systems that govern our research. We may even find that by defending the book review, the other aspects of our work might be enriched anyway.

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*Note: This feature essay gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics and Political Science.*

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