

# Why, When and How? 10 Tips for Academic Book Reviewers

**Professor Fleur Johns** offers 10 rules of thumb that have guided her own reviewing efforts and may prove helpful to others working on book reviews, or thinking of doing so, in the course of their academic lives.



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A recent experience prompted me to reflect on the role of academic book reviews and about when, why and how to write them. I wrote a [review](#) several months ago of a book that has received widespread and overwhelmingly laudatory attention. While acknowledging the importance and value of the book's contribution, I took issue with it in no uncertain terms and questioned its attainment of one of its major goals. Several respondents on social media reacted with verbal frowns. One wondered if I had contacted the author prior to the review's publication (I had not). Another bristled at what they interpreted as audacity on my part, remarking that it was 'easier' to write a book review than 'a book of significance' (it is). I worried a bit too. Had I been disrespectful, ungenerous? Should I have cushioned my remarks in a fuller recitation of the book's strengths?

Reflection on this experience led me to formulate, more explicitly than I had previously, some rules of thumb for my own reviewing efforts. I reproduce these here in case they might be helpful to others working on book reviews, or thinking of doing so, in the course of their academic lives. It goes without saying – but let me say it anyway – that these are conditioned by my own unduly privileged circumstances and that I still have much to learn, as a reviewer and otherwise. I have thought and [written about lists](#) in the past, and have an affection for them, so I present these as 10 suggestions:

1. Reviewing books maintains one's sense of being part of a larger, longer, scholarly conversation. It should be as much of a regular responsibility of academic life as peer reviewing (relative to opportunity). And like peer reviewing, it needs to be approached with greater care than it is sometimes afforded.

**2.** Everyone should write book reviews, at all academic career stages. It's not just a practice recommended for graduate students needing free books. It keeps one in the habit of close, critical, cover-to-cover reading. And what of the probable response: that contemporary academic work is structured in ways that make the continued cultivation of this habit unachievable? That may be so for many of us at many times. If we concede that across the board, however, then we acquiesce to the very transformation of universities that we often lament.

**3.** Conflicts of interest, actual or perceived, are best avoided. Book reviewers should disclose anything that could be viewed as such. I have reviewed friends' books before, to try to lend support to and foster engagement with colleagues' and collaborators' work. Upon reflection though, I should not have done so because of the possible perception that I might benefit professionally from advances in my co-authors' and collaborators' careers, and that my judgment might be coloured accordingly. I might instead have facilitated reviews of these books by someone at a greater distance from their authors. Of particular importance among conflicts is the following: think very carefully before reviewing a book in which your own work features prominently. If there is any reference to your work in the book you're reviewing, let it pass. Use of the first-person voice can be refreshing, but a book review ought not to revolve predominantly around the reviewer. Professor [Leslie Green's 2020 review](#) of a section of Professor Joanne Conaghan's 2013 book (to which Conaghan offered a [patient response](#)) is illustrative of the kinds of perils that can be associated with dwelling, as a reviewer, on the treatment of one's own work in the book under review.

**4.** Attend to power imbalances. If you are an established academic, don't review a first book or a book of an early career researcher with which you fervently disagree. Ordinarily, disagreement can make for engaging writing and productive argument (more on this below). However, in the context of a power imbalance favouring the reviewer, discord may be misread and could do unintended damage.



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**5.** Foreground the criticism. Keep summary to a minimum. Be sure to make an argument – about the book, but also by reflecting critically on the intervention that it makes in the field, and what it suggests about the state of that field. Be fair, respectful and try to meet the book on its own terms, but don't shy away from critical engagement. It is a mark of respect for the seriousness of the author's endeavour.

**6.** Some say one should only review books that one loves. I disagree. My version would be the following: only review books by which you feel provoked, and that seem significant to you. This position counsels against reading books that hold you in their thrall. If you are utterly in awe of a book or its author, that might be a good reason not to review it (gushy reviews can be a tad nauseating). At the same time, it militates against reviewing books that you think are good, but which don't really excite you either positively or negatively. Critique can carry a degree of risk (recall the [extraordinary tribulations](#) through which journal editor Professor Joseph Weiler was put by one disgruntled author). Nonetheless, a fence-sitting, anodyne review wastes the writer's, editor's and reader's energies and does the author concerned no service at all. Reviewing books that frustrate you, but that you still regard as important and worthy of attention – this can really help move scholarly argument along.

**7.** Don't just review 'up' or focus on renowned and established authors. Seek out lesser-known works to spotlight. If you are bilingual or multilingual, seek out books in a range of languages to pitch to book review editors to help disturb the [dominance of English](#) in scholarly publication.

**8.** Don't send the review to the author, at least not prior to publication. Don't imagine yourself in direct conversation with the author so much as with the book and its other readers. This does not, of course, override the imperative of being fair.

**9.** Explore the genre, including the (often undervalued) review essay. Read widely in it. Approach the genre on its own terms, inspired by those book reviews that you have found most arresting and illuminating as a reader. The [Los Angeles Review of Books](#), the [New York Review of Books](#), the [London Review of Books](#), [Biblio](#), the [Paris Review](#), the [Singapore Review of Books](#), [The New Yorker](#), [The Nation](#) and the [Latin American Research Review](#) all publish excellent book reviews, as do many other online and print publications.

**10.** There are awards for book reviewing: in the US, [the Nona Balakian Citation for Excellence in Reviewing](#), for example. One might learn from taking a look at the work of those lauded for reviewing and trying to unpick what they do well. Accolades for book reviewing are, however, very few. If you are a member of an editorial board or scholarly association, you might consider introducing such an award. Or maybe that suggestion misses part of the point of book reviewing. The poet Philip Larkin's letters may have presented him as a '[habitual racist and full-time misogynist](#)'. Yet he was on to something, I think, when he ruefully celebrated the unheralded reading and writing of '[book-drunk freak\[s\]](#)' for precisely that – its ingloriousness. Perhaps, when one can, there is some small grace in doing difficult work in honour of reading and readers, with little or no expectation of recognition.

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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.*

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