CRL

Guest Editorial

Our View of Reviewing

At present, book reviewing does not work very well in academic librarianship. Published reviews should be a significant part of the process of critique and counter-critique by which serious scholarship proceeds. When book reviews work, they serve a variety of important functions in a profession or discipline. Beyond indicating whether a book is worth reading or buying, they function as a current awareness service, alerting readers to what is new in a field. By summarizing the content of a book, a review can serve as a kind of proxy for reading the book itself. It can place a new book in the context of previous contributions on the same topic and often can become a highly condensed overview or survey of the literature. A well executed review can take a seemingly narrowly conceived book and place it in a context that argues for a much wider significance. When they fulfill their potential, reviews may provoke responses that can develop into extended correspondence and debates among readers. In all these ways, book reviews enter the collective thinking of a profession and help constitute its public sphere of discourse.

Having worked now for more than two years as book review editors for *College & Research Libraries*, we offer the following propositions:

- More librarians with experience, expertise, and clout need to be willing to review and to take reviewing seriously. Book reviewing should not be regarded as an activity solely for unpracticed writers to cut their teeth on.

- Readers should be more willing to respond to reviews. A review, after all, is itself a response, and it needn't (and shouldn't) be the last word.

- Much of what publishers of books in librarianship are producing is weak, and they need to hear it. Reviews of bad or dull books are harder to write than one might think. We are loath to devote scarce space to such books, and it is often difficult to find reviewers willing to take them on. But there needs to be better exercise of quality control over the books published for librarians, and serious, critical reviews would help raise publishing standards.

- None of the journals in academic librarianship includes more than the occasional review of a foreign book. This phenomenon is easy to explain but difficult to justify. We need to be less provincial.

- There should be much more reviewing of books relevant to academic librarians but published outside the field. We grapple on a day-to-day basis with complex issues of technological change, the economics of the information market, the politics and demographics of higher education, and the changing nature of scholarly research and communication. We need to assimilate the research and thinking being done on these subjects wherever they are published, identifying and reviewing a wide range of materials in a way that orients and supports our daily work and deepens our understanding of the issues confronting us. In *College & Research Libraries* we have been reviewing books such as Jaroslav Pelikan's *Idea of*

the University, Julie Thompson Klein's *Interdisciplinarity: History, Theory, and Practice*, and Tony Becher's *Academic Tribes and Territories*. The other journals in academic librarianship also carry a small number of reviews of this type. We need to be doing many more.

We would like to see a library journal that comprehensively and critically reviews books of interest and importance to academic librarians. One need only consider journals such as *American Historical Review*, *Contemporary Sociology*, *Contemporary Psychology* or *Notes*—all published by professional associations—to see how book reviews can help articulate and shape the best thinking in a discipline. A two-tiered reviewing structure—in general outline not unlike what is currently being done in the *Journal of Academic Librarianship*—would allow detailed, analytical reviews for those books whose subject and significance warrant such attention and effort, and shorter, more descriptive reviews for the rest.

Given current budgets and constraints on journal space, it is difficult to imagine any existing library journal that would take on something so ambitious. Perhaps our concept of a review journal is more feasible in an electronic environment. Since, at present, publishing on the Internet avoids many of the direct production and distribution costs of conventional journals, book reviews would seem to be prime candidates for an online journal. Certainly the timeliness of publication would be improved and the opportunities for a richer public dialogue would be significantly enhanced. The lively and rigorously edited *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* is an encouraging example of the intellectual vitality an online review journal can offer.

But the needed improvements in book reviewing in librarianship will not be solved by a technological fix. Online as well as on paper, the success of the enterprise will depend primarily on the quality of the involvement of practicing librarians, both as writers and as readers. To lament the state of research and publishing in librarianship is, we realize, to sing an old song, but the need for clear and farsighted thinking about libraries has never been greater. Book reviewing is only a corner of the world of academic librarianship, but its problems are symptomatic of a larger failure. Why not start here?

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