

6-4-2015

The Academic Librarians' Guide to the Craft of Writing Book Reviews

Brian Flota

James Madison University, flotabc@jmu.edu

Michael Mungin

James Madison University, munginmj@jmu.edu

Genya O'Gara

James Madison University

David Vess

James Madison University, vessds@jmu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://commons.lib.jmu.edu/letfspubs>



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Flota, Brian, et al. The Academic Librarians' Guide to the Craft of Writing Book Reviews. Poster. State University of New York Librarian Association Conference. SUNY Purchase, Purchase, NY. 4 June 2015. Print.

This Poster is brought to you for free and open access by the Libraries & Educational Technologies at JMU Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Libraries by an authorized administrator of JMU Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact dc_admin@jmu.edu.

The Academic Librarians' Guide to the Craft of Writing Book Reviews

THE ART OF WRITING BOOK REVIEWS

- **Book Reviews Can Be an Effective Outlet for Creative, Analytic, and Editorial Expression Within the Profession**
- Concise review forums require maximum focus with minimal verbiage
- Long-form forums allow for a more thorough exploration of a text, but can require restraint
- Positive reviews: Is there a thin line between a glowing review and gushing, effusive praise?
- Negative reviews: At what point do harsh assessments become mean, petty, or hostile?
- Freedom of expression: How does one navigate between personal opinion, institutional representation, and professional decorum?
- Is there a place for witty remarks, wordplay, allusions, or cleverness in review-writing?
- Practice makes perfect ... or pretty good, at the very least



Brown, Lisa. Rev. of *Little Bee* by Chris Cleave. *Three Panel Book Review*. 2014. Web. <http://threepanelbookreview.tumblr.com/post/55774058302/little-bee-by-chris-leave>

COLLECTION MANAGEMENT



Long-form reviews, like this one, are more time-intensive but provide extra value to the audience:

HELPFUL TIPS FOR WRITING GREAT REVIEWS

- **KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE**
- **Closely follow your review publication's guidelines for word count and style**
- **Try to account for the material in the item being reviewed without summarizing too heavily**
- **Make sure your evaluation and opinion are clear**
- **Be honest: If you do not think the item under review is very good, do not be artificially positive**
- **KNOW YOUR VENUE (will it accept or permit harsh assessments, humor, scholarly or more broadly accessible prose, popular culture references, or political points of view)**
- **Have some fun – it's rare to get the chance to write professionally with such creativity**

WHY WRITE BOOK REVIEWS?

- Book reviews are an excellent collection development tool
- Provide free promotion and branding opportunities for your library
- In certain academic libraries, they can count as scholarship toward reaching tenure
- They keep you actively reading and writing
- They keep you up-to-date with the most recent trends and developments in the field
- It provides a way for a librarian to "give back" professionally
- Great tool for early career librarians
- One can learn how to publish without the anxiety of publishing "research"
- Begin to develop relationships with editors and other scholars in the field

LIBRARY JOURNAL

Library Journal's reviews are typically 200 words or less

when it was suspected that he had syphilis (which turned out to be a misdiagnosis). Not all of the inclusions are essential reading; two discussions praising French president François Mitterrand could have been reduced to one. **VERDICT** All in all, an essential book for Styrone fans, one that illuminates the man behind the fiction. Recommended for public and college collections. [See Prepub Alert, 11/24/14.]—*Marin Houston, New York City Coll. of Technology, Brooklyn*

PERFORMING ARTS

Gaye, Jan with David Ritz. *After the Dance: My Life with Marvin Gaye*. Amistad/HarperCollins, May 2015, 304p, ISBN 9780062135513, \$25.99; ebk, ISBN 9780062135537, music

Gaye's tell-all about her decade-long relationship with legendary R&B musician Marvin Gaye (1939–84) is a tragic story about an illicit romance that burned bright but flamed out in a tangled web of abuse. Her account begins with a tortured upbringing as one of bebop singer Slim Gaillard's neglected 17 children, raised in foster care until she was returned to her drug-addicted mother at 14. Jan's relationship with Marvin began shortly after her 17th birthday, and she became a mother to two children with the

singer while still a teenager. The narrative gets darker as Jan describes her and Marvin's addiction to freebase cocaine, his bouts of violence, his declining career fortunes, and their subsequent divorce. The author is an astute and generous critic of Marvin's music, despite the tumultuous nature of their relationship, providing insightful commentary on Gaye's most cherished recordings. The book is at its most powerful, though, when it describes a woman's attempts to escape from a sexually, physically, and psychologically abusive relationship. **VERDICT** This title will surely interest and disturb fans of Marvin Gaye. Jan's writing, with help from Ritz (*David's Soul*), is engaging, steamy, harrowing, and insightful. [See Prepub Alert, 11/10/14.]—*Brian Fiat, James Madison Univ., Harrisonburg, VA*

Mulgrew, Kate. *Born with Teeth*. Little, Brown, Apr. 2015, 320p, photo. ISBN 9780316234310, \$28; ebk, ISBN 9780316234303, **PERFORMING ARTS**

Actress Mulgrew's (*Star Trek: Voyager, Orange Is the New Black*) autobiography is an intriguing look at a very interesting life. She left her home in Iowa at 18 in the Seventies and studied with Stella Adler in New York, determined to become an

Flota, Brian. Rev. of *After the Dance: My Life with Marvin Gaye*, by Jan Gaye. *Library Journal* 15 Apr. 2015: 84. Print.

WHERE CAN I FIND VENUES TO WRITE BOOK REVIEWS?

- Check out the submissions policies for notable reviewing venues (*Library Journal*, *Choice*, and *Kirkus*, just to name a few) or scholarly journals
- **Library Writer's Blog – librarywriting.blogspot.com**
- Get solicited to write a review by a scholarly journal or magazine
- Join a group or a professional organization that publishes reviews on specific topics that are of interest to you

BEYOND BLOOMSBURY: HARNESSING MULTIDIMENSIONAL INDICATORS OF SCHOLARLY IMPACT. Edited by Blaise Cronin and Cassidy R. Sugimoto. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014, 480 pp., ISBN: 978-0-262-02551-0, \$35.00.

"Ideas do not leave good tracks," writes Jason Piem in his clear-eyed synthesis of the rising importance of altmetrics. This phrase could easily be the subtitle for many of the papers in this timely and thoughtful examination of the rapidly expanding field of bibliometrics. And while "ideas do not leave good tracks," this book does: it gives readers the tools to navigate thoughtfully the claims that they do leave. It does this by providing a framework that includes the history of the field, reviews of its history and current status. They each do a real job of outlining the need for deeper reflection from practitioners and administrators alike as evolving metrics are applied to evaluate academic output and as metrics more generally become an "inevitable feature" of our current higher education landscape (Cronin).

The next two sections ("Critiques" and "Methods and Tools") review current indicators and their applications. The "Critiques" section in particular is a strength within this compilation. For example, in Yves Gingold's chapter "Criteria for Evaluating Indicators," often-cited indicators that fall in their purposed purpose but are widely used (including the h-index and Shanghai Ranking of Universities) are deconstructed clearly. Here the author defines the essential properties of a well-constructed indicator in a way that can easily be applied to validate or invalidate indicators. In a later chapter, Grigori and Vincent Larivière detail their efforts to measure interdisciplinary. The clarity and applicability of the metrics set forth in these chapters, as well as in the many-authored chapter "Bibliometric Standards for Evaluating Research Institutions in the Natural Sciences," should be noted.

In "The Data-It-to-Net" Ronald Day examines what the metrics of citation analysis mean, socially and culturally, in the current research environment. He points out that citation indexing is the precursor to digitally automated social representations and shows that in social computing the issues of "human behavior are similar, but broader, than in classic scholarly citation analysis." Specifically he concludes, "given past examples of 'social' or 'mass' rankings, the expansion of the evaluation system to the popular sphere and the expansion of algorithms rooted in group psychology to the production of knowledge led one to wonder what the degradation of knowledge to opinion, as well, may look like." In this space, scholars must contend with traditional academic systems (e.g., peer review, closed institutions) also establishing identity through social systems. If they do not, they risk being marginalized in both spheres. Day notes, as others have, that the act of cultivating "evidence" for impact "firmly situates the contributor within the system of evidence itself. Given the context of (arguably weaker) relative inclusion that happens when searching, citing, and communicating online, the algorithmic implications for assessing academic identity and impact are not a little terrifying," "particularly as academic evaluation becomes more curious and less careful in the use of metrics."

In the "Alternative Metrics" section, the authors carefully delve into both the enormous possibilities and potential pitfalls of using social media, search engine output, data downloads, readership referrals, and more. The aim of altmetrics is to produce a more nuanced story of the impact and assessment of scholarship (broadly defined) that has been possible prior to our hyper-networked age; however, none of the authors shy away from the perils of this space even as they activate the potentials. Sugimoto examines the sticky subject of academic generalists, arguing that tracing these relationships "could reveal underlying parts of knowledge diffusion, academic mobility, and disciplinary development," particularly when used in conjunction with other variables to provide a "multidimensional view of the scholarly landscape." These provide one of the most surprising chapters, "Evaluating the Work of Judges," which presents innovations in the citation game that stem directly from the legal community, and points out the advantages that the academic community, legal scholars, and political scientists would gain if they were more aware of the metrics work being conducted in each other's fields.

In the "Practicalities" section, the final chapters detail the wherewithal of a publisher's investment in bibliometric measures and end with thoughts on the development of altmetrics and science policy.

There are many worthy contributions even beyond those detailed in this review, containing valuable perspectives and insights. This well-constructed and balanced compilation should be required reading for all information scientists, faculty, and administrators navigating the murky and increasingly multidimensional field of metrics-based assessment, in both the academy and science policy. Anyone involved in developing and assessing collections or answering academic and administrative questions related to the academic value of these collections using bibliometrics must read this book.

Genya O'Gara
James Madison University Libraries
Harrisonburg, Virginia

O'Gara, Genya. Rev. of *Beyond Bibliometrics: Harnessing Multidimensional Indicators of Scholarly Impact*, ed. Blaise Cronin and Cassidy R. Sugimoto. *Collection Management* 40.2 (2015): 114-16. Print.

For more information:



Brian Flota, Reference and Liaison Librarian, James Madison University
Michael Mungin, Psychology Librarian, James Madison University
Genya O'Gara, Head of Collections, James Madison University
David Vess, Digital User Experience Librarian, James Madison University