

How to Review Scholarly Books: Reading, Writing, Relishing

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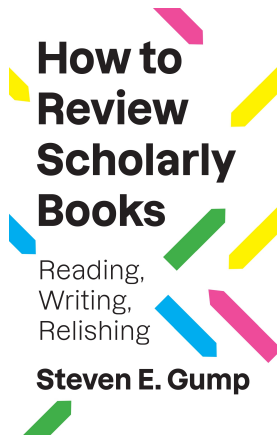
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Reviewing books and teaching book reviewing have been a prominent part of Dr Steven Gump's career for more than two decades. In *How to Review Scholarly Books*, he shares wisdom gained both from his own experience and from a vast range of other writers on book reviewing in general and scholarly book reviewing in particular.

Early in the book he makes the case that "scholarly book reviewing is fundamentally a form of criticism that crosses into the terrain of scholarly service" (p. 4), a welcome reminder that research articles are not the only means of contributing to a field of scholarship. While prepublication book reviewers can serve as gatekeepers (influencing what is or is not published, and how material is written), Gump describes postpublication reviewers as the "commentators" that place a work in context and make the case for its place in a body of written knowledge (p. 11).

Varying his focus across five chapters, Gump explores the process of getting started in scholarly reviewing (Chapter 1), reading as a reviewer (Chapter 2), the process of writing a review (Chapter 3), special cases from review essays to writing reviews of anthologies (Chapter 4), and finally, improving the craft of reviewing (Chapter 5). Throughout the book, Gump writes in an engaging conversational style, and his work is firmly anchored in the broader scholarship of reviewing with extensive references to works present and past.

It may seem overwhelming to say something useful and relevant about a book in the few paragraphs often allotted to reviews. Gump recommends focusing on three goals: presenting a contextualized summary, providing clear analysis, and writing a cogent assessment. Gump encourages reviewing with a spirit of generosity and recommends avoiding the behavior of a "restaurant inspector seeking code violations" (p. 167). He also gives helpful warnings against "fatal flaws" that can diminish a review, such as critiquing "an imaginary book you wish the author had written" and using the book review as a platform on which "to grandstand or foreground your own ideas" (p. 99). A book review, after all, is a review of the book at hand.

Enlivening scholarly writing may seem like an oxymoron, but Gump's recommendations on this front can be used in any genre of scholarly work. Some ideas are simple. He advises varying the length of sentences and paragraphs as well as avoiding "hedge" words that avoid commitment (p. 174). Other ideas are a bit less traditional but all the more valuable for their unexpectedness: using analogies and metaphors, appropriately using puns, and even writing the review as an acrostic (ie, spelling the author's name or a theme word with the first letters of each paragraph). In short, he reminds readers that to make an important contribution to scholarship, writing does not have to be stodgy to be significant.

Within each field of inquiry is a preferred means of scholarly dissemination and debate. The primary intended audience for this book is reviewers in the humanities and social sciences, "where monographs . . . are key vehicles for disseminating ideas" (ie, the "book disciplines"; p. 1). While in medicine the journal article plays a more prominent role than does the scholarly tome for advancing scholarship and practice, the wisdom shared in this volume includes valuable insights for reviewing books of medicine (ie, texts), books about medicine (eg, history and sociology), and books about the people affected by what we do in medicine (eg, narratives both fictional and true). Whether or not you write much about what you read, you will find ideas in this book to relish.