

# Book reviews in the medical scholarly literature

## Part III: Targets of criticism

by *Françoise Salager-Meyer*

Part III of my contribution based on my studies of medical book reviews (BRs) deals with the evolution of the targets of criticisms in what I labelled ‘early BRs’ (i.e., those published in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century) and ‘late BRs’ (i.e., those published in the closing years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century) [1,2].

But before entering into the heart of the matter, I would like to mention that 1- and 2-authored books are today outnumbered by multi-authored (edited) books. It is thus my contention that the differences between early and late BRs discussed below are in part attributable to the types of books prevailing in each period, each book type calling, it seems, for different kinds of critiques.

This is why I will first present and discuss the critical comments most commonly encountered in early BRs (i.e., those characteristic of single-authored books), then those most frequently found in late BRs (more characteristic of multi-authored works), and finally those common to both types of books.

### Content-related (conceptual) criticisms

#### Conceptual criticisms characteristic of books (mostly found in early BRs)

In early BRs, the most frequent criticism voiced at the conceptual aspect was that related to omission (underemphasise or lack of comprehensiveness) on certain topics. These critical remarks were mostly expressed in the following terms: “*unexplored issues*”, “*only sketchy details on*”, “*no adequate attention has been given to*”, “*... has received scant attention*”, “*... fails to mention*”, “*not enough detail on ...*” etc. Much less frequent was an excess of information (or overemphasis on certain issues) a source of criticism.

Book authors themselves were sometimes directly criticized in early BRs. It is interesting to note in this respect that the blow of the attack was then frequently softened by lukewarm epithets of politeness or praise, a rhetorical strategy called “*courtesy marker*” [3,4] or “*agreement prefaces*” (3) which provided a note of profound deference. In example 1 below, the reviewer’s deep emotion is linguistically realized by means of the adverbs ‘*regretfully*’ and ‘*sadly*’:

1. Dr. Danowski, an outstanding physician, experienced teacher and versatile investigator, has sought to cover a field that less brave a man might have thought too wide for one person to encompass. The reviewer feels that the author has proved the timid appraisal’s correctness: Indeed, it could not be done. ... Errors are too numerous to be listed. ... The reviewer must regretfully conclude that the author has sadly overreached himself. (1946)

We could venture to posit that this ‘good news-bad news’ strategy is a reminiscence of the gentlemanly conduct so characteristic of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century scientific prose [5]. It is interesting to note that I have not found a single example of such a rhetorical strategy in late BRs.

The book author’s lack of critical mind—mostly with respect to reference citing—was also quite frequently mentioned as a critique:

2. In our judgment the text would have considerably more value if the author did not avoid for the most part any critical judgment of the material in the literature. (1955)
3. The efforts of the author are uncritical at times in collecting the extensive and very heterogeneous assortment of data. (1957)

Book authors themselves are today rarely directly criticized and, when they are, the criticisms formulated are very matter-of-factly expressed as example 4 below illustrates. The author’s lack of critical judgment on generally hotly debated issues is sometimes pointed to in today’s BR. For example, the following statement was written by a reviewer about a recently published book on the treatment of the post-menopausal woman:

4. Although the discussions are unbalanced and critical, in my opinion, they are not critical enough....A critical analysis of drugs such as .... would have been instructive since these drugs are being used. (2000)

#### Conceptual criticisms characteristic of edited (multi-authored) works (mostly recorded in late BRs)

Although omission of information is also a source of criticism in late BRs, the most frequent critical conceptual remarks in multi-authored works are voiced at poor chapter integration, lack of consensus or of agreement from chapter to chapter, between chapter redundancy, unbalanced chapters. As one reviewer sums this up very clearly:

5. Everything is in this book, but in some ways, everything is everywhere. (2000)

The review of the second edition of an edited book on molecular biology in cancer medicine echoes this same idea as follows:

6. The book’s major problems are common in multi-authored books: poor integration of chapters, redundancy and inconsistent presentation of information. (2000)

Some reviewers even find such a repetition irritating:

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7. My most serious criticism is the amount of repetition between chapters. While this may be hard to edit in the context of a multi-author book, there are several vast areas that are repeated.... It becomes irritating when reading large sections of the volume. (2000)

In other words, the most frequent conceptual criticism recorded in today's BRs is not so much the omission of information as the lack of cohesion or cohesiveness.

The uneven quality of contributions (i.e. the contributors' competence and qualification) is also a common criticism in edited works. Not surprisingly, in early BRs such a critique was emphatically/emotionally expressed as the following example illustrates:

8. There is still the basic problem of the contributors not being always superbly qualified to write their chapters. (1943)

Another criticism quite frequently formulated in BRs of edited works has to do with arbitrary editing. When uttered in early BRs, such critical remarks were unsurprisingly harsh and face-threatening:

9. ... the rather thoughtless and quite incomprehensible and arbitrary editing of the texts. (1948)

but are only matter-of-factly expressed in today's BRs:

10. Further editing would have improved the cohesiveness of the book. (2000)

### Conceptual criticisms common to both books and edited works

#### *Bibliographical references*

Misquotation, sloppiness, 'non-supportiveness' and triviality in reference citing were frequent sources of criticism in early BRs. These, as can be expected, were expressed in a derogatory (example 11) and, at times, humorous (example 12) fashion, as can readily be appreciated with the following statements:

11. The preface admits that references have been included without verification. (1932)
12. Efforts towards exhaustive completeness which lead to the citation of trivial or discredited contributions alternate with reckless eclecticism. (1938)
13. Whatever possessed the editors to lump together almost 1,000 references contributed by 45 authors and covering a multitude of sometimes not so closely related subjects in one alphabetical list will remain a mystery forever. As it stands now, the list of references is useless and will defy all but the fiercest and most persistent investigators. (1953)

By contrast, today's book reviewers criticise either the lack of or the out-datedness (un-recency) of references, thereby corroborating Motta Roth's observation [7] that in some fields (e.g., chemistry) recency of publication is a crucial factor in book evaluation.

#### Audience

The concept of audience—answering the question 'whom is the book intended to' or pointing to the rather limited potential readership—was quite frequently referred to in early BRs:

14. This is a book of a necessarily limited appeal. (1943)
15. It is unclear for what audience the book is intended. (1961)

The following harsh and face-threatening audience-related question was obviously found in an early BR:

16. For whom is this expensive, Gargantuan, grotesque opus intended? The essence of a good textbook is the judicious omission of the irrelevant. This book exemplifies the opposite approach, which may be termed 'from soup to nuts'. Is it then supposed to be an encyclopedia for the practitioner of endocrinology who is no novice? (1946)

Later BRs also critically refer to the concept of audience, but when they do, they rather address the question of whether the book really attends the intended or potential readership:

17. The book is insufficiently distilled for the editor's target audience of busy clinicians and managers. (1999)
18. The limited detail of bowel movements is insufficient for surgical trainees or specialists who wish to develop an incontinence practice, as mentioned in the preface. (1999)

#### Errors

Errors are another source of criticism in both early and late BRs, but here too, the types of errors referred to in early BRs differ from those towards which the criticism is voiced in late BRs. Indeed, in early BRs, errors in grammar, orthography, typography, bibliographical references and errors of interpretation on figures, graphs or tables were the most frequent sources of errors mentioned. These errors underlined careless proofreading and were bluntly and face-threateningly referred to as 'too many', 'an inexcusable collection', 'too numerous to be counted', 'countless' and 'glaring'.

Few errors as such are today mentioned in BRs, and these are not linguistic or typographical, but refer to errors in web page indications or to the incorrect use of statistics. We could speculate that automatic correction with the use of computer-incorporated dictionaries and in-house editing greatly facilitate book authors' job, at least as far as orthographic correctness is concerned.

#### External/non-textual criticisms

The variety of external (i.e., non-content-related) criticisms is much greater in early BRs than in later ones. For example, price was quite a common target of critique in early BRs.

19. The advice to the would-be buyer who is about to hock a prized belonging to raise \$60—the book's sky-high price—is very simple: Don't. (1938)
20. Since the price places the book beyond the reach of any but the most affluent medical student, it is fair to ask if it is an adequate monograph for the internist. (1958)

By contrast, we do not find a single (positive or negative) price-related remark in today's BRs.

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Overall presentation was also much more of a concern yesterday than it seems to be today. Indeed, in early BRs, reviewers would complain about the fact that the “*book value is impaired by a rather disjointed presentation*”, that the readers would have preferred a “*slightly smaller format*” or that the book organization was “*haphazard*.”

In early BRs, visuals quality (drawings, artists’ sketches and X-ray reproductions) were frequently qualified as “*mediocre*”, “*poor*” or “*impossible to interpret*”.

In today’s BRs, by contrast, criticisms to non-textual materials are much less frequent and are mostly directed to the fact that plates and illustrations are in black and white, that radiological and histological images “*lack clear markers to identify the features of interest*” and that photographs (taken from digitized images) are blurred.

The examples provided above thus show that the targets of criticisms have changed a lot over time and so has the ‘culprit’ of the flaws mentioned<sup>1</sup>. Indeed, in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, it was the book author who was blamed for having omitted important information or for having misquoted bibliographical references. By contrast, it is the book or a book chapter that is now being criticized for being redundant or for lacking cohesion.

**Overall conclusions**

The examples provided in Parts I, II and III of this diachronic study of medical BRs have put forward a certain number of differences with respect to the way criticisms were formulated in the mid- and end-of-20<sup>th</sup> century BRs. The Table below summarizes the main findings.

The changes observed in the rhetorical evolution of criticism reflect changes not only in the scientific enterprise but also in the scientific society in general. Such changes should not be considered as a sign of progress or improvement but as a process of selection and adaptation to the increasing volume of scientific papers, to the needs and the increasing complexity of the context in which scientific activity develops and to the changes suffered by the scientific enterprise whose actors—who come from different linguistic and geographical horizons—must struggle to make themselves visible on the Big Science stage.

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	<b>Early book reviews</b> (mid-20 <sup>th</sup> century)	<b>Late book reviews</b> (closing years of the 20 <sup>th</sup> century)
<b>Tone of voice</b>	emotional, face threatening	casual matter-of-fact
<b>Humour</b>	quite frequent	almost non-existent
<b>Targets of criticisms</b>	omission of information sloppiness in reference citing book price audience	lack of cohesiveness poor editing unrecency in reference citing audience
The “ <b>judge</b> ” (book reviewer)	polemical arrogant aggressive passionate	Neutral detached, <i>efface</i> unemotional tries to minimize interpersonal damage
On the bench of the “accused”	an animate entity, a person: the author	an inanimate entity, an object: the book or a book chapter
Science	Polemical “ <i>science in the making</i> ”	harmonious cooperative, respectful concord-seeking “ <i>science once made</i> ”

<sup>1</sup> It is worthwhile mentioning here that in 19<sup>th</sup> century BRs criticisms were mostly voiced at methods and surgical procedures, especially when comparing the way these methods/procedures were performed on both sides of the Atlantic (USA vs UK). The reviewer would then go at great length to explain why, how and to what extent he disagreed with the book author. At that time, criticisms were also targeted at questions of nomenclature, definition or classification. However, the closer we get towards the year 1900, the more important do visual elements become: table presentation, illustrations and drawings were more and more frequently the targets of critical remarks. This means that it is from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that scientists began to integrate the visual and the textual and to exploit the cognitive possibilities of visual elements.