

**Book Reviewers
Talk about their Craft**

by Mayra Calvani, Editor

Book Reviewers Talk about their Craft

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Twilight Times Books
P O Box 3340
Kingsport, TN 37664
<http://twilighttimesbooks.com/>

First Edition, March 2011

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Electronically published in the United States of America.

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Mayra Calvani conducted a series of interviews for Blogcritics regarding book reviewing with publishing professionals. All of the participants graciously gave permission for the interviews to be compiled in ebook format and/or as an appendix to *The Slippery Art of Book Reviewing* by Mayra Calvani and Anne K. Edwards. The interviews are listed in the order in which they appeared in Blogcritics. First up is James A. Cox, Editor-in-Chief of The Midwest Book Review.

James A. Cox, Editor-in-Chief of The Midwest Book Review

<http://www.midwestbookreview.com/>

Interview by Mayra Calvani

<http://blogcritics.org/archives/2008/06/01/202918.php>

Started in 1976, [The Midwest Book Review](#) is an online monthly publication aimed at librarians, booksellers, as well as the general reading public. Its mission is to promote literacy, library usage, and small press publishing, which is why this publication is so popular among small publishers, self-published authors, and academic presses. In this fascinating interview, Editor-in-Chief James A. Cox talks about the history and policies of the Midwest Book Review, and he also answers some important questions about the craft and ethics of book reviewing.

Thanks for this interview, Jim. How long have you been reviewing?

I began reviewing books in September, 1976. That means I've been doing this for the past 32 years. During that time the forums utilized by The Midwest Book Review have included AM Radio; Shortwave Radio; Television; Library Newsletters; Amazon.com; Internet databases; and The Midwest Book Review website.

Please tell us about your book review site. How and when did it get started?

My daughter Bethany went off to college and got her degree in Computer Science. She came back home and dragged me out onto something called the Internet in the early 1980s. With her help The Midwest Book Review website was created. Bethany is the Midwest Book Review's managing editor and webmaster.

What makes The Midwest Book Review stand out among so many other online review sites?

The Midwest Book Review began with the mission of promoting literacy, library usage, and small press publishing. As an educational organization we developed our web site at Midwest Book Review as a multipurpose resource with the goal of helping writers to write better, publishers to publish more successfully, bookseller and librarians to stock their shelves more effectively, and readers to read with greater satisfaction. By making our web site as content heavy as possible, constantly updating and expanding it monthly, and enlisting the support of our volunteers, staff, and web site visitors, the Midwest Book Review web site has become the invaluable and comprehensive resource to authors, publishers, librarians, booksellers, and readers that it is today.

What is the most challenging aspect of running a review site?

Properly organizing the steadily increasing numbers of information and resource links, as well as 'how to' articles that comprise the contents of our

web site. As the web site gets larger and larger with more and more content, the struggle is to keep it as ‘user friendly’ as possible.

How many books do you review a month?

I personally review between 30 and 40 books a month. I’m also responsible as the editor-in-chief of supervising the more than 600 reviews a month contributed by staff, volunteer, and freelance reviewers.

How many staff reviewers do you have?

We have nine staff members. They include a Managing Editor (who doubles as our webmaster), a West-Coast Editor, a Literary Editor, four Assistant Editors, and the Mail Room worker.

Are you currently recruiting more reviewers? If so, what are your guidelines?

New reviewers are always welcome. When someone inquires into utilizing the Midwest Book Review as a forum for their reviews we send them the following “Reviewer Guidelines”:

REVIEWER GUIDELINES:

Thank you for your inquiry. All of our reviewers are volunteers who retain all rights to their reviews. Reviews are submitted by email (just type it, or “copy & paste” it, into the body of an email message. Hard cover printouts are mailed to the reviewers for their records. Reviewers submitting one review in a given month are clustered together in the column “Reviewer’s Choice”. Reviewers submitting two or more reviews in a given month are provided their own bylined column (e.g. “Klausner’s Bookshelf”, “Cindy’s Bookshelf”, “Taylor’s Bookshelf”, etc.)

The following should be a part of every review submitted:

Title

Author

Publisher

Publisher Address

Publisher Phone Number (especially an 800 or 888 if they have one)

Publisher Website Address (if they have one)

ISBN

Price

Page Count

Your Name

Reviewer

Here are some guidelines that may be of help in creating an engaging review:

1. Why did you select this particular book for review? Perhaps it relates to your work, hobby, avocation, a particular area of interest, your expertise, or just for fun.
2. How well does the author write, use language, illustrate his/her points, develop characters, clarity of instruction, aptness of examples? Use brief quotations from the book itself to illustrate your observations, opinions, and comments. When doing poetry reviews include a poem, with cookbooks include a recipe.
3. Who is the book intended for? Scholarly reference, non-specialist general reader, devotees of the genre, wide ranging readership, specialized audience, age range, economic or political orientation, etc.
4. Does the book succeed in what the author is trying to accomplish? Entertain, instruct, persuade, inform, train, teach, alarm, etc. Are there suggestions you'd offer the author for his/her next time around in print?
5. What is the author's background or credentials? What other titles does the author have?
6. Are there related or relevant titles that a reader might be interested in?
7. Type your reviews in single spaced paragraphs with double spacing between the paragraphs. The review can be a few paragraphs or a few pages—take as much space as you feel is necessary to say whatever you want to say.
8. Above all else, have a good time putting your thoughts and opinions down. The best reviews are those that you yourself would like to listen to while driving along in your car or chatting with friends over lunch. If a book is badly written or not worth while—don't bother with it. Select another one that you think deserves the publicity that your review as showcased by the Midwest Book Review would afford it.

James A. Cox
Editor-in-Chief
Midwest Book Review

How should an author contact you about a review request? Do you review e-books as well?

Authors and freelance publicists can submit books for review. Some of our volunteer reviewers (but not many) do review e-books. When e-book review requests come in I route them to those particular reviewers and leave it up to them as to whether they will accept or reject the request.

How do you select the books you review? How do you determine which reviews to post on your site?

Every morning the mailroom worker piles up all the incoming books on my desk. I then sort them into three stacks:

1. Instant Acceptance: The book(s) arrive with the proper accompanying paperwork (a cover letter and some form of publicity release), look good, and I have a reviewer who has requested books in that particular genre, category or subject area.
2. Instant Rejection: The book(s) arrive without the proper paperwork; are galleys, uncorrected proofs, pre-publication manuscripts, or Advanced Reading Copies instead of finished copies; have substandard covers, defaced, or some other physical defect.
3. Provisional Acceptance: The book(s) have the proper accompanying paperwork, look good, and if I can recruit a reviewer for it/them within a 14 to 16 week time frame. This is by far the largest of the three stacks at the conclusion of the screening process.

Every book that achieves a review will run in one or more of our nine monthly book review publications as long as that review meets the criteria laid out in our “Reviewer Guidelines”. When the review is run, the reviewer automatically receives an email notification accordingly.

Do you think there’s a lot of ‘facile praise’ among many online review sites? What is your policy when it comes to negative reviews?

Whether praise or pan, the key is how well the reviewers justify their opinion. My own rule of thumb is that if a book is too flawed to be able to recommend it to its intended readership, then it should be rejected for review and another book selected to take its place. But I don’t interfere with any reviewer who wishes to give a negative review if that reviewer has given an articulate and justified rationale for that negative review.

There was a lot of controversy last year between print publication reviewers and online bloggers. In your opinion, what defines a ‘legitimate’ reviewer?

A legitimate reviewer is someone who has read the book they are expressing an opinion on—and expressed that opinion rationally with adequate examples or documentation. The legitimacy of a reviewer does not arise from what medium they are using to express their opinion, nor whether they are salaried, freelance, or un-paid volunteers. It is how well, how persuasively, and how fairly they can express their recommendation on what they’ve read whatever that opinion might be.

What is your stand on paid reviews?

I feel there is an inherent conflict of interest issue of paid reviews. That is why the Midwest Book Review does not accept paid advertising; accept payment for reviews; or allow authors, publishers, or publicists to contribute financially to the Midwest Book Review. The only form of support or appreciation for what the Midwest Book Review tries to accomplish in behalf of the small press community is to permit the donation of postage stamps (which we use in sending out tear sheets and notification letters to authors, publishers, and publicists).

Do you think it's okay for reviewers to resell the books they review? What about ARCs?

Reviewers and review publications own the books they are provided with from authors and publishers in the hope of getting them reviewed. They are therefore the property of the reviewer or review publication to dispose of as they deem best—including selling them—whether or not the book in question made the cut and got reviewed, and whether the review was positive or negative. This is a publishing industry standard and applies to ARCs as well.

Some authors and publishers fear that the sale of a review copy or an ARC will somehow remove or replace an opportunity for the sale of a non-review copy. I feel that this issue should be viewed as an advertising/marketing expense. Reviewers spend time and expertise on reviewing a book and in the case of volunteers, the sale of that book is their only compensation for their efforts.

The key is for authors and publishers to insure that their review copies (for which they have incurred a capital expenditure to publish and mail out) are sent out to thematically appropriate and legitimate reviewers and review publications—and that the submission meets all the requirements of that particular reviewer or review publication.

What are the most common mistakes amateur reviewers make?

Merely summarizing a book and not providing any articulated or detailed analysis as to whether or not the book is to be recommended to its intended readership.

The second most common mistake is to not include all the publisher's contact information in the 'info block' that should be a part of every review. An 'info block' consists of the following:

Title

Author

Publisher

Publisher address

Publisher phone number, email, website

ISBN, price, page count, publication date

This ‘info block’ is important because if the review inspires the reader of that review to want to acquire the book it gives them the information necessary to acquire a copy from a bookstore, a library, or directly from the publisher.

With so many major newspapers getting rid of their book review sections, how do you see the future of online review sites?

The drastic cutbacks in newspaper and magazine space for reviews has redounded to the benefit of the Midwest Book Review and other online review sites. These displaced reviewers have turned to us as an outlet for their reviews previously published in print sources. Over the past few years we have gained at least ten reviewers this way.

Do you keep the author’s feelings in mind when you review?

I do. It is possible, preferable, and more effective to correct an author’s flaws as a writer through civil, reasoned discourse than through mere name calling or ridicule. This is in keeping with our mission statement of helping writers to write better, to improve their craft, to gain a wider readership for their work.

Have you received aggressive responses from authors or publishers because of a negative review? If yes, how do you handle it?

I have indeed. If their criticism is justified on the basis of fact I will remove the flawed review from our website. If the criticism is merely a matter of ego or a difference of opinion, then I will invite the author (or publisher if that is who is making the objection) to submit another copy of their book which I will try to assign to a different reviewer. As to the emotional content of an objection (which can be quite hostile to begin with) I’ve found that a soft, reasoned, non-confrontational response will usually work to calm the conversation down and to replace heated argument with reasonable discourse.

What does your site offer readers?

An archive of tens of thousands of reviews; a ‘Book Lover Resources’ database of Internet resources of special interest to people who read books for pleasure or for a purpose; contact information for thousands of publishers—including antiquarian booksellers; web site search engines; and basic information on the processes of writing and publishing.

What promotional opportunities does your site offer authors?

An archive called ‘Advice for Writers & Publishers’ containing ‘how to’ articles on every aspect of writing, publishing, and book marketing; an archive called ‘The Writer’s Bookshelf’ containing reviews on hundreds of ‘how-to’ books covering every aspect of writing; contact information on both traditional, POD, and self-publishing resources; and ‘Other Reviewers’ which is a database of freelance reviewers, book review magazines and publications, book review websites, etc.

What is the most rewarding aspect of being a reviewer? The most challenging?

The most rewarding aspect of being a reviewer is having an genuine impact and influence on writers, publishers, and the reading public. The most challenging aspect of being a reviewer is trying to earn and maintain that impact and influence.

Is there anything else you would like to say about you or Midwest Book Review?

I've been the editor-in-chief of the Midwest Book Review since its founding and have yet to have a day when I didn't look forward with considerable enthusiasm to going to work. For a dedicated bookworm like me it has got to be one of the best jobs on earth!

Irene Watson, Managing Editor of Reader Views

<http://www.readerviews.com/>

Interview by Mayra Calvani

<http://blogcritics.org/archives/2008/06/03/111918.php>

Irene Watson is the award-winning author of *The Sitting Swing* and *The Story Must be Told*. She's also the Managing Editor of [Reader Views](#), a book review site catering to readers, writers, and the publishing community. Started in 2006, Reader Views reviews both adult and children's books. One innovative aspect of this site is that they have children reviewers reviewing juvenile titles. Although Reader Views charges authors for reviews, Irene clarifies that payment isn't for the review itself, but for the processing involved in publishing the review. She was kind enough to take time out of her busy schedule to answer my questions about her site and the craft of reviewing.

Thanks for being here today, Irene. How long have you been reviewing?

Our online review service has been operational for 2.5 years.

Please tell us about Reader Views.

In 2005 I had my book published and like most authors found it a challenge to get reviews. Knowing there was a need I put out a call for reviewers and was overwhelmed with the response. Then I put out a call for books to review and was even more overwhelmed with the response. At the same time I realized there was a need for budget-friendly publicity packages that authors could afford. Not every author can hire a publicist for \$10,000 three month contract. I added publicity packages within a month and those are going strong.

What makes Reader Views stand out among so many other online review sites?

We offer the personal touch. All emails get answered, we become friends. Once we work with an author we keep promoting them. We are like family - hard to get rid off! Also, our reviews are syndicated and appear in USA Today and Reuters, as well as eight TV stations and several newspapers. No other online review service has this feature. And, our endorsements appear on many books that are found in places like Barnes and Noble. We also have annual literary awards and the books/reviews are listed in the BRI sent to libraries and book buyers.

What is the most challenging aspect of running a review site?

Reviewers that flake out after receiving books to review.

How many books do you review a month?

An average of 120. (This is for Reader Views and Reader Views Kids combined.)

How many staff reviewers do you have?

Our reviewers are volunteers. We have 23 kids and 18 adult reviewers. Of those, there are eight that do express reviews.

Are you currently recruiting more reviewers? If so, what are your guidelines?

No, we aren't. However, I look at all applications. If I see one that would fit into the mold I connect with the person. Our needs are people with very good writing skills.

How should an author contact you about a review request?

Our submission guidelines spell out how to request reviews. They can be found on our website.

Do you review e-books as well?

Yes, we do.

How do you select the books you review?

If the books meet the criteria we have we accept them for a free review. (We don't review pornography or racist themes.) Once accepted the book goes on a pending list. The reviewers pick the books they want to review. If the book isn't picked within 90 days, it is taken off the list and donated.

How do you determine which reviews to post on your site?

All reviews are posted on our site unless the book has an extremely negative review.

Do you think there is a lot of facile praise among many online review sites?

I think there is. I think many people are afraid to give their opinion of what they read, especially family and friends. They tend to "flower" up the reviews.

What is your policy when it comes to negative reviews?

We take each one on its merit. If the book has a lot of grammatical errors or typos, we suggest the author edit the book before publishing more books. If the storyline is bad, we tell them that too. In most cases these are self-published books where the author didn't have the funds to have the manuscript edited before publishing. We try to work with the author and do what is best for them.

There was a lot of controversy last year between print publication reviewers and online bloggers. In your opinion, what defines a legitimate reviewer?

Credibility is very important. It's important to check out what the reviewer will do for you, the author. If it's just someone who wants free books they will post a brief synopsis on the blog only. If it's serious reviewers, they will post the review on their blog as well as Amazon or Barnes and Noble, and such places. I don't take personal blogs as a good source to read credible reviews.

What is your stand on paid reviews?

Being a review service I know there is huge overhead involved in giving a review. Many people don't realize this. If the review is from a credible source the processing of the review (aside from reading the book and writing the review) takes about 2 hours of work. In our case, it costs us an average of \$35.00 to give a free review.

I am for authors paying. However, not for the review itself but for the processing - sort of the shipping/handling aspect. I know many authors and "experts" in the publishing world don't feel reviews should be paid for - however, I don't see these same people ever suggesting how our overhead could be covered.

Do you think it's okay for reviewers to resell the books they review?

Yes, I do. The reviewer took the time and effort to read the book and give a review. The least they could get is a small reimbursement for their time. The books would never sell at the retail price so if the reviewer could get at least \$5.00 for the book, good for them! A reviewer gives the service to the author and should be compensated... it's not the author that gives the service to the reviewer by having them read the book.

What about Advance Review Copies (ARCs)?

No, I don't think ARCs should be sold. They are uncorrected books and should only be used for reading purposes for the review.

What are the most common mistakes amateur reviewers make?

Only give a synopsis of the book and not include their personal opinion. Or, they come from their ego and trash the book in their review.

With so many major newspapers getting rid of their book review sections, how do you see the future of online review sites?

Exploding! However, that said, only the credible ones will survive. It takes a lot of time, effort, and funds to have a book review site. There have been many that tried to establish one only to fail.

Do you keep the author's feelings in mind when you review?

No. The reviewers are asked to give their honest, personal opinion of what they read.

Have you received aggressive responses from authors or publishers because of a negative review? If yes, how do you handle it?

Yes, we sure have. In most cases it's because of editing issues and they are embarrassed. We assess each one and check to see if their response has any merit. We offer another review after the editing issues have been cleared up, or the storyline made more readable.

What does your site offer readers?

Besides reviews and opportunity to buy the book (through Amazon) they can read or listen to interviews with the authors or watch a book video. We also have a monthly book giveaway contest.

What promotional opportunities does your site offer authors?

We have twenty different packages we offer authors. These are things like reviews, interviews, book video production, audiobook production, publicity (pre/post pub), editing, proposal coaching, securing a publishing contact, etc. Full information can be found on our website.

What is the most rewarding aspect of being a reviewer?

Connecting on a personal level with the authors.

Is there anything else you would like to say about you or Reader Views?

We are a one-stop center for authors needs.

Thanks for the interview, Irene!

Magdalena Ball, Founder of The Compulsive Reader

<http://www.thecompulsivereader.com/>

Interview by Mayra Calvani

<http://blogcritics.org/archives/2008/06/05/182209.php>

Magdalena Ball is the founder of [The Compulsive Reader](#), a book review site focusing on literary fiction and long, in-depth reviews. She's also the author of *Sleep Before Evening*, a poetry chap book titled *Quark Soup*, and the nonfiction work, *The Art of Assessment*. A winner of both local and international awards for poetry and fiction, she's had stories, editorials, poetry, articles and reviews published in various printed publications.

Sleep Before Evening, which I had the pleasure of reviewing recently for Blogcritics, was a finalist in the the Regional Fiction category of the 2008 Next Generation Indie Book Awards. She's been writing for Blogcritics Magazine for about a year. In this interview, Magdalena talks about her review site and what she looks for in a review. She also discusses the influence reviews have on whether or not a person purchases a book, and—something most aspiring reviewers wonder—if there's any money at all in reviewing.

It's an honor to have you here today, Magdalena. How did you become a reviewer?

I started reviewing almost by accident some 9 or so years ago. I've always been a voracious reader, and enjoyed talking about and analyzing books with other like-minded readers, but one day I saw a call for reviewers on a now defunct website called BoxPlanet, and I jumped. It was Frank McCourt's 'Tis, and I was already a big fan of Angela's Ashes, and keen to read 'Tis. When I received a beautiful double-book, hard-copy boxed set for review, and was also given the chance to interview McCourt, I was hooked. The idea of feeding what was a big habit with an endless supply of free books, getting the opportunity to talk to my favourite authors, and even getting a small amount of payment was simply too good. When BoxPlanet collapsed, I decided to start my own site to keep things going, which leads me to the next question...

How did the Compulsive Reader come about?

I started The Compulsive Reader to replace the gap from BoxPlanet. Basically I simply hung out a shingle, taught myself to write HTML (I have some computer knowledge so it wasn't hard), found a host, and started by putting my own reviews up at first. I was surprised at how quickly it started growing, and how fast my email newsletter, which was basically just a list of new reviews on site, sent out monthly, grew. Now I have about 20 regular reviewers, over 8,000 subscribers to the newsletter which also includes giveaways and literary news, and more than 500,000 hits a month. So I don't have to write every review myself, although for me, the real pleasure is still in connecting with, and analysing a book. Compulsive Reader is now in its 8th year and we have 10 new reviews each month (but I'm quite a long way ahead

of myself—there are about 40 reviews already set up and waiting to appear on the front page).

How is The Compulsive Reader different from other review sites?

Well, let me firstly say, as an author as well as a reviewer, that there is always room for more. I think of other reviewers and review site owners as colleagues rather than competitors. I get about 50 review requests a month, in addition to books that my reviewers hunt out and request on their own, and there's simply no way we can do everything. There are many more authors than reviewers, and big name review sources like the NYTimes, NYReview of Books, Guardian Books, or Times Literary Supplement usually limit exposure to well known names. So it's critical for the huge number of less well known authors to be able to get their books reviewed critically.

One of the things that, I believe, readers come to The Compulsive Reader specifically for is that our reviews tend to follow a similar format to those big magazines and papers. Although I do allow for a variety of perspectives from my reviewers, one thing I try to focus on is detailed, seriously analytical reviews which substantiate all comments, and look quite deeply into why and how a book works or doesn't work for the reader. That is, our reviews are pithy! Also, I try to keep the focus heavily on quality. We give priority to the hard to promote genre of literary fiction, and we are always keen to promote new authors with quality books. Being able to help other authors—particularly those with wonderful gems that aren't so easy to promote—is a major perk of this job!

What is the most challenging aspect of running a review site?

My biggest challenge always is time. Running a review site takes time, and it's sometimes administrative time—fixing site bugs, looking for enhancements (like automating those little bars on the bottom that allow you to link to Digg, Technorati, del.icio.us, etc), pulling together newsletters, editing, setting up and posting other people's reviews, running giveaways, or promoting the site are all fun, but time consuming. Reading and reviewing is an absolute pleasure for me, but it also takes time, and it's relatively easy time to give myself to. So making sure that I still spend time writing my own books, and not getting so swamped by The Compulsive Reader, which I love and am all too eager to use as a kind of procrastination from the longer term goals of writing full length books, is the key challenge for me.

Are you currently recruiting more reviewers?

As I mentioned earlier, there are always many more review requests than reviewers, so we're always on the lookout for new reviewers to help meet that demand. I'm a little fussy about length and depth—I like a good, detailed review with lots of specifics, with an ideal word count of over 1,000 words (but I don't count and am open minded). Potential reviewers can just email me with a review and if it fits the site and is well written, I'll publish it. We don't pay, but bios are unlimited, there are no time limits, rights remain with the author (and we're happy to use reprints), and for our established reviewers, I'm always

happy to supply them with the books they really want—so will request review copies on their behalf from publishers. I'll usually circulate requests to all of my reviewers, and if anything appeals, they can just put their virtual hands up.

How should an author contact you about a review request? Do you review e-books as well?

Guidelines for review requests are on the website, but basically authors should just send a few paragraph synopses via email to me, and if I feel the book fits I'll circulate the request to my reviewers to see if anyone wants to take it on. I will almost always take on a literary fiction title if the request is very well written (literary fiction is a fuzzy genre at times, and sometimes authors will tell me their book is literary fiction but the synopsis will read like a very clear Harlequin styled romance or hard core science fiction, and I'll still reject it). Sometimes I might take on books in other genres if I know we have reviewers interested in them (or if they sound so good, the genre becomes irrelevant), and sometimes I'll reject a book because I know all of my reviewers are overloaded and behind on their reviews and not keen to take on more, so I'm not always consistent! It's always worth a try.

What do you look for in a book review?

I'm particular on this point, but I like a review with a lot of detail and specific examples (quotes) which demonstrate the points being made. I'm very keen on an assessment of quality, rather than just a plot summary. I want to know, as a reader as much as an editor, whether this book is worth my limited time and I need enough detail so that I can judge if the reviewer's assessment aligns with my own.

How influential is a positive or negative review on whether or not a person purchases a book?

I'd have to say firstly, that it's almost impossible to determine what the specific drivers for book purchasing are. Somehow your name has to be on a buyer's mind when they're at point of purchase and a positive book review is one way of assisting in making that happen (especially with an online store like Amazon). But I don't want to overstate that value either, as I know authors who have had great reviews and are still disappointed with their book sales.

According to Bowker, there were 411,422 books published in 2007 in the US alone, so having your name on a buyers lips at sale point is not an easy thing to achieve and it may take a lot more than good book reviews (it might, for example, take 5 books out with good reviews, or a big award, or a mention on Oprah, or a big visual promotion in the Borders shop). Book reviews are just one step in the creation of buzz, which also includes radio shows, television (if you're very lucky or well known already), blogging, in person appearances, etc. A good book review, even in the NYTimes, may or may not influence a person into buying a book—they still have to be thinking of you at sale point, and it may simply be that all they can remember is that their friends are all talking

about Dan Brown and Jodi Picoult and both have a big display and were Oprah's book of the month.

What I will say, and this is a very important point, is that book reviews are not solely vehicles for making people buy your book. They aren't promotional tools. They're a key part and parcel of ensuring your recognition as a respected author. That's not necessarily the same thing as being a best selling author (though there is a tenuous connection between respect and sales!). Without positive (respectable, objective) book reviews, you simply won't be seen as professional author in the eyes of the public (yes, the book buying public), publishers, and media sources. It's a key part of being an author—your peer/professional review portfolio. It's a key judgment call, and should be seen that way, rather than seen as a sales tool. That doesn't mean you can't work a good review to influence sales, but authors who see reviews as sales tools only are missing the point of the review—it's part of how you are being judged and that's critical for any creative professional.

Do you think there's a lot of 'facile praise' among many online review sites? What is your policy when it comes to negative reviews?

I've heard this, but I don't think it's true. I've never seen evidence of 'facile praise' and I've seen plenty of negative reviews at online review sites. It is the case that sometimes, online reviews are a little brief and provide too much plot (just a book overview) and not enough analysis about the book's value. Sometimes there isn't any substantiation (example quotes) to go along with the reviewer's statements. That may be because of the perception that online readers have a short attention span—something that isn't true in my experience. I think, however, that most reviewers tend to be critical, and will review honestly—not shying from indicating where a book falters.

I certainly encourage my own reviewers to be honest, and am more than happy to publish negative reviews as long as they are well written and the reviewer provides specific examples of instances where the book doesn't work. That said, there are sometimes instances where a book is so badly written and unprofessional—first time author, maybe self-published and poorly edited—that publishing a negative review would be like kicking a kitten. In those instances, we'll just refuse to do the review, and if it really is self-published or produced by a small house, we'll offer to send the book back. If, on the other hand, a book is awful in every respect, but written by a well-known author at a big house with good sales, I won't hesitate to publish a well written negative review. Sometimes there's a case of "The Emperor's New Clothes" operating with book reviews, and I'm always happy to buck the trend!

What defines a "legitimate" reviewer?

I think that the term "legitimate" is full of emotion and fraught with danger! A reviewer who writes well and does a thoughtful, in-depth analysis of a book is certainly providing as valuable a service as say, Michiko Kakutani of the NYTimes. There are all kinds of blogs and not all of them have been designed to provide professional quality reviews. Some are just casual opinions and aren't

presenting themselves as anything else. Some are focused around discussion about books rather than reviews. It's sometimes easy to blur those distinctions online because everything happens very quickly, and sometimes the editing step is skipped. A well written, well-edited review is a well written, well-edited review whether it published online or in print. The only difference is the medium (and speed of publication!).

What is your stand on paid reviews?

I don't think they're ethical! I understand why an author would be tempted to pay for a review. Some publications like Foreword or Publishers Weekly are incredibly difficult to get reviewed in if you're an 'unknown', but if you are paying for your review, you're effectively becoming a customer, and that muddies the waters of objectivity. I like the idea that reviewers tend to be working for the readers. I love giving an author publicity, but I see my 'customers' as those who are hoping to gain information on books so they can decide where to spend their hard-earned money and time. So I'm not working for the author, I'm working for the reader, and that's where my allegiance lies and who I'm writing for. If someone pays me to do a review, I'm writing for them, and it's a lot harder to maintain objectivity.

Do you think it's okay for reviewers to resell the books they review? What about Advance Review Copies (ARCs)?

As an author, the honest truth is that I really don't care what reviewers do with my book after they review it. I'd certainly prefer it to go into the hands of a new reader than into the garbage. Selling (e.g. making a profit from) review copies or ARCs (I can't really see a distinction, although ARCs may not be ready for the market and the author might be judged by a substandard edition if it isn't obvious) isn't entirely ethical, but it isn't illegal and as an author, I'm more than happy for readers to get my books wherever they can (royalties per book tend to be around 10% for a new book—say \$2 per copy, so the impact on me would be pretty close to negligible) and at whatever discount they find.

As a reviewer, I have a policy of not selling review copies, but I do end up with many more books than I can house (loads that I've never agreed to review that simply come on spec), and I feel comfortable donating these to whatever cause requires books, from the local hospital or library to my children's school fetes. But I don't impose restrictions on what my reviewers can do with their books—the books are theirs to keep, and therefore do with as they see fit. That's part of the deal. Most don't get paid, so getting a book is a small reward which should come without any kind of provisos.

What are the most common mistakes amateur reviewers make?

Book reports. It's pretty common for a new reviewer to write out a book synopsis and tell the reader just what the book is about. But a plot summary really isn't a book review, and certainly doesn't help me as a reader to determine if this book is for me. What I need as a reader is a good thorough evaluation of the book's overall quality—how are characters developed, what is

the narrative thread, what does this book illuminate. If I don't get an analysis, I'm not getting a book review. That's the biggest mistake. But other mistakes are in using cliché and hyperbole ("I couldn't put the book down"), tired phrases culled from other reviews ("tour de force"), or in making sweeping statements that aren't substantiated by examples from the book.

With so many major newspapers getting rid of their book review sections, how do you see the future of online review sites?

I think the future of online review sites is very bright! But not necessarily as money makers. A lot of people talk about making money from the Internet, but I really see the key benefits of online sites like The Compulsive Reader as a kind of community, where like-minded people can "congregate". As a kind of literary community that isn't limited by time and place, an online review site can bring people together—to share their feelings about quality words, and to provide well thought through information on what's new, what's good, and what to avoid. We don't all necessarily write for money—we also write (just as we read), because it's part of the whole pleasurable experience—to work out why something worked and to explore the character, plot, voice, tense, structure of the book we've just lost ourselves in. Writing a review is like a shared, detailed second reading, where one's instinctive reactions are polished, explored and worked through until they are able to be shared with others in a meaningful way. More and more books get published each year, and over the years that I've been doing online and print reviews, I've watched the online demand grow exponentially.

Do you keep the author's feelings in mind when you review?

Yes and no. Yes in that I'm an author and I never feel happy writing negative reviews—I don't write negative reviews easily or lightly. No in that the author's potential feelings don't impact on what I write. I'm generally a nice person, and I enjoy discovering great work, but if, as a reviewer, I'm not honest and only write nice things about books, my reviews aren't worth anything. I never write unsubstantiated invective. I've never written a negative review that was mean or negative in a non-objective way. But I still feel I need to point out where a book has failed in its aims or not worked well—that's part of the whole review process. That doesn't change, even when the author I'm writing about is a friend or family member. I've written some very negative reviews on books sent to me by people I know, and I've even had some reviews rejected because the editor of that publication felt I was too negative. I've occasionally had an author or publisher request that a negative review is taken down. In those cases, I'm happy to accept the rejection and have understood that sometimes my perspective as a reviewer doesn't align with the perspective of the author.

Reviews always have a degree of subjectivity in them, and are never the final word on a book's quality or saleability. Most authors/publishers accept negative reviews gracefully (and there is usually something in them that can be used in excerpt). If it's requested, I will usually comply with requests to remove a review. I did once have a very negative response to a book that I declined to

review. It wasn't a negative review—just a nice note saying that a book wasn't right for *The Compulsive Reader* (I send out a lot of those, by necessity, but I always try to respond to requests). The response I received back was about 3 pages of very angry abuse stating that they felt I was discriminating against them for all sorts of reasons (sex, race, genre, height, weight, nationality, taste in clothing, you name it). The note was almost good enough to publish, never mind the book. I just had a good laugh, and deleted it.

Apart from celebrity reviewers who work for major publications like The New York Times, can a reviewer make any real money from writing reviews?

It depends on what you mean by “real money”. I've made anything from nothing to \$250 USD from a single review, so it does vary a lot, and some of the difference between nothing and \$250 involved things like flexibility, reprint rights, and my own ability to use the review as a promotional medium for my own (for sale) work. That is to say that even the reviews which I wasn't paid “real money” for still had a financial value for me. I would say this, that A.) just like other forms of writing, it isn't something a person should go into for the money (although if you are a book addict, its a very successful way to keep your book bills down and get hold of a wide range of excellent new release novels).

You can probably earn more on average, on a time versus return examination, by working in your local grocery store—though a new reviewer will probably make significantly more than a new novelist for what that's worth (the learning curve is much smaller and the investment of time much lower). B.) If you make a name for yourself, you can actually earn a reasonable return from your reviews if you don't mind giving up rights and are willing to work on a single topic. C.) the perks are worth more than the “real money,” and by perks I don't necessarily mean the review copies although they are a perk, especially in the beginning while you've still got bookshelf space. I mean that, if you are a writer, being a reviewer is a way of being considered important and valuable by the publishing industry, and developing a strong network of publishing contacts which will stand you in very good stead should you ever become inclined to write your own books.

What advice would you give to beginner reviewers who wish to make a career in this field?

Just like any other form of writing, a review needs to be crafted carefully. Learn your craft by reading other reviews (the good meaty ones you get in the *Observer*, *The NY Review of Books*, *Salon*, *The Compulsive Reader*, etc. Only go into it if you really, truly love to read (or do whatever it is you are reviewing). The heart of a good reviewer is being the natural consumer for what you are reviewing.

Thank you for such an insightful and informative interview, Magdalena!

Carolyn Howard-Johnson of The New Book Review

<http://www.howtodoitfrugally.com/>

Interview by Mayra Calvani

<http://blogcritics.org/archives/2008/06/07/071041.php>

Carolyn Howard-Johnson is the founder of Authors Coalition, an award-winning author and poet, a columnist for My Shelf, and an instructor for the UCLA Writers Extension Program. Her books include the popular titles *The Frugal Promoter* and *The Frugal Editor*, both USA Book News' Award winners. Carolyn is also the editor of [The New Book Review](#), a book review blog with a different twist: authors may submit reviews which have already been written about their books, thus extending the life of the reviews. In this interview, Johnson discusses the influence and effectiveness of reviews in terms of book promotion, among other things.

Thanks for being here today, Carolyn. How long have you been reviewing?

I've been reviewing for about eight years. Now I really only review movies occasionally for the *Glendale News Press* and even more infrequently for my series called Reviews for Ritters (tm). The latter are reviews written for well-known books but rather than recommending a book (or not!) they are examinations of how master authors tackle specific elements of writing. Thus they are directed at writers—really—more than readers. They're really tools for learning our craft.

Please tell us about The New Book Review. How and when did it get started?

The New Book Review is unusual in that it does not offer review services (either free or paid) to authors. Rather it is a place where authors can submit reviews that have already been written for their book, thus extending the life of the review. Readers are welcome to submit, too. The New Book Review is a blog rather than a site and the submission guidelines may be found in the left column. Of course, writers must have permission from their reviewers to republish the review and must give the reviewer full credit for their work.

What makes The New Book Review different?

Probably just that it is simple and easy to remember. THE NEW BOOK REVIEW. Its concept may be more original than the name. The "new" means that I take a 'new' view to books. Reviews for all books (other than pornography) are welcome. If someone loved a book enough to write a review for it, it belongs at The New Book Review. By the way, I will accept critical reviews but not slash and burn critiques. If the reviewer can't recommend a book, then why would my readers want to know about it?

What is the most challenging aspect of running your blog?

As you can see, I make it easy. If people don't submit material in a way that I prescribe in the guidelines, it doesn't get published. That's a good lesson for all. To promote well, authors (and others) must make it easy on the editor.

Do you have staff reviewers?

I suppose every person who submits a review is on my staff. Kind of a neat concept, don't you think?

How should an author contact you about a review request?

Just follow the guidelines on The New Book Review.

How do you determine which reviews to post on your blog?

As long as a review meets the guidelines (found in the left column of the blog), I accept them. When needed, I edit them. Sometimes there is a wait. I try to never post more than one review a day. All those who submit are asked to do a little promotion of the fact that their review has appeared. That helps all the participating authors get more exposure.

How effective are reviews in terms of book publicity?

Reviews are very important to an overall book campaign. I do think that authors need to put them into perspective, though. They are part of a campaign. A vital part but still only a part with every part working together. *The Frugal Book Promoter* gives authors and publishers information on how to get reviews but also about those other essential parts of a promotion effort.

How influential are reviews on consumers?

For some consumers, they are very influential. My daughter-in-law (she helps me nominate books for my Noble (Not Nobell!) Prize that appears on MyShelf.com) buys her books almost exclusively on the basis of reviews. But different people buy their books differently. I believe that word-of-mouth is more influential and most studies uphold that view. By the way, winning a contest can be a big influence, too. And what a wonderful opportunity a win is to get the word on a book out there.

Do you think reviews can make or destroy an author's career?

They say there is no such thing as bad publicity. I also think that many authors view reviews as bad reviews when they aren't. A review will have more credibility if it isn't all raves and rose petals. A balanced review is more credible. And like everything in our culture, reviews are short-lived. Everyone forgets them in short order. Except maybe the author.

Do you think there's a lot of 'facile praise' among many online review sites?

Facile praise. Quite a term. Yes, I do. But if someone loves a book, who out there should tell them that they are wrong. I'd just prefer reviews to be a little

more even-handed. After all, the review process is about learning for the author and credibility for the reader, too.

There was a lot of controversy last year between print publication reviewers and online bloggers. In your opinion, what defines a 'legitimate' reviewer?

It is very hard to draw a line, isn't it? Weren't the reviewers for the New York Times at one point beginners. Does one have to have a BA in English Lit or an MFA in writing to be considered an expert. I think the point here is that people should always be aware of where the material they read is coming from. What is the reader's standard for credibility? Apply those standards. No one should believe everything they read. On the other hand, opinions of others should be respected. Just because a reviewer doesn't agree with us, doesn't mean that their opinion is not valid. This is one of those arguments never to be won, one of those problems never to be solved.

What is your stand on paid reviews?

I'm against them. Paying for something undermines its credibility. And, yes, that even applies to the paid reviews that *Kirkus* does.

Do you think it's okay for reviewers to resell the books they review? What about advance review copies?

No, reviewers should donate their books to libraries. It is a fine point of ethics but an important one.

In your opinion, what are the most common mistakes amateur reviewers make?

You named it! Facile reviews.

With so many major newspapers getting rid of their book review sections, how do you see the future of online review sites?

I think there is a place for shorter, quicker reviews online regardless of what the LA Times does with their pages. Still, one hates to see lovely old review sections in journals and newspapers deteriorate.

Do you keep the author's feelings in mind when you review?

Absolutely. But I also keep the future of her craft in mind.

Have you received aggressive responses from authors or publishers because of a negative review? If yes, how do you handle it?

Not so far. I did quit reviewing for a newspaper who demanded that I write only good things because it was a "family newspaper." This is a freedom of the press issue. Reviews—once committed—get to say what they want. Only their own standards should affect what they say.

What does your blog offer readers?

The New Book Review offers readers a variety of review for books that they might miss if they only peruse the major journals.

What promotional opportunities does your blog offer authors?

Oh, you know me. All publicity and exposure is good publicity and exposure.

What is the most rewarding aspect of being a reviewer?

Well, I am an author's advocate—at least with some of my writing. Therefore I'm always interested in helping authors reach readers with what they are passionate about. That's certainly why they write, right?

Is there anything else you would like to say about you or The New Book Review?

Just please come to The New Book Review. To find new and different material to read. Authors should come to reach new readers, cross-promote, and grow their footprint on the Google search engine.

Thanks Carolyn! It was a pleasure interviewing you!

Ron Kavanaugh, *Mosaic Literary Magazine*

<http://mosaicmagazine.org/>

Interview by Mayra Calvani

<http://blogcritics.org/archives/2008/06/09/124713.php>

Launched in 1998, [Mosaic Literary Magazine](#) is a quarterly print publication exploring the literary landscapes of Black and Latino writers. Each issue contains an interesting blend of essays, profiles, and reviews. Its publisher, Ron Kavanaugh, is a former director of the Bronx Writers Center of Marketing and Public Programs at Bronx Museum of the Arts, and founder of a site dedicated to African-American literature on the internet. Though Kavanaugh prefers to assign reviews, freelance reviews are also considered and writers are paid an honorarium and contributor copies. Visit the site for submission guidelines.

Thanks for being here today, Ron. What do you look for in a book review?

The review should summarize the book—characters, locations, et. al.—without giving away the plot. It should refer to pivotal touchstones on which the book may turn or rely. But honesty is paramount. The review should refer to critical points as writing style—did the writer hit his or her intended mark?—or literary influences that may have contributed to style or storyline. The review should be direct without being either overly harsh or gushing praise.

What are the most common mistakes amateur reviewers make?

Too much enthusiasm, to the point of the review seeming to be an advertisement. Also, assuming the reader of the review has prior knowledge of the book and not explaining the book well enough for the reader to care about the book and therefore the review.

Do you think there is much value in being unkind but truthful when a book really stinks?

Sure. Some authors should never be published and I think it's a reviewer's responsibility to critique to that extent. Assuming that everything: publisher, writer, reviewer, bookseller, and and reader are connected then not to review books honestly is to perpetuate a bad writer's career, lessening the chances that a decent writer may be published instead.

Do you take into consideration the feelings of an author when you review or do you refuse to be swayed by them?

The African-American literary community is quite small and incestuous so I often meet writers and explain that we aim for honesty above all else. Oddly, it's the bad writers that hold reviews in the highest esteem.

What style of reviews do you think have the most value? Do you think many independent reviewers on the web tend to give “facile praise” to books?

I do not put much weight in online reviewers who are not working for a larger entity, i.e., Salon.com. The reviews you read on Amazon.com raise serious questions as to whether these are reviews or savvy marketing placements. For the most part I think reviews should be assigned and when someone reviews a book of their choosing it casts a shadow of the autonomous process of reviewing.

Do you look on reviews as a critique or just your opinion of the work?

Art is so subjective to begin with, I call them reviews but they're basically opinions of the reader as reviewer.

Do you get feedback from readers?

Sometimes, not often. We're a small magazine.

Apart from celebrity reviewers who work for major publications like The New York Times, can a reviewer make any real money from writing reviews?

I'm not sure. Most publishers do not pay a great amount for reviews. We only started paying for reviews five years ago. The margins are small for literary-review publications.

What advice would you give to beginner reviewers who wish to make a career in this field?

I think reading reviews helps a lot. Because you're a writer doesn't mean you're a reviewer. And, many writers cannot separate themselves from the camaraderie of the writer's world, which often clouds judgment and effects honesty.

Do you consider/publish reviews by independent reviewers?

On occasion I do. If I get a sense of veracity from the reviewer I'll accept a review. I probably turn down 95% of the book review offers I receive, preferring to assign reviews.

Do you read reviews to select your reading material?

No, I don't. My personal reading comes from recommendations or browsing bookstores—reading the back covers.

Thanks for the interview, Ron!

Bev Walton-Porter of Scribe & Quill

<http://www.scribequill.com/>

Interview by Mayra Calvani

<http://blogcritics.org/archives/2008/06/12/000937.php>

Bev Walton-Porter is an author, reviewer, freelancer, editor and publisher. She's the lady behind the successful ezine, [Scribe & Quill](#). Her books include *Sun Signs for Writers*, *The Complete Writer: A Guide to Tapping Your Full Potential*, and *Mending Fences*. Her work has appeared in many publications, both print and online. In this interview, Porter talks about her e-zine and about various aspects of book reviewing. She welcomes e-books for review and is currently looking for more reviewers to join her staff.

How long have you been reviewing?

Wow...let me think! About 11 years, when I first became a full-time professional with my writing. I have reviewed books for Inkspot (the awesome site run by Debbie Ridpath Ohi many years ago), The Charlotte Austin Review website (now defunct), Bridges (based out of B.C. Canada), Suite101, Inscriptions, and, of course, Scribe & Quill.

Please tell us about Scribe & Quill.

My site isn't just for book reviews. *Scribe & Quill* covers many areas related to writing, reading and publishing - including book reviews. I first launched *Scribe & Quill* as a small e-zine on ListBot in the late 90s and it has evolved into a larger e-zine with 6,000+ subscribers, plus a web site, editing services and online professional writing courses that dovetail with and complement the zine. I think longevity is our greatest hallmark. *Scribe & Quill* has been around in some form or another for over a decade, and in the online world (especially for small-size e-zines), that's a long time!

What is the most challenging aspect of running a review site?

Finding reliable reviewers who are also willing to review both print and electronically published books. We also like our reviewers to be willing to review any type of book, and sometimes that can be a challenge as well.

How many books do you review a month?

Since we no longer publish monthly, but rather quarterly, we publish five to ten reviews per issue. Due to the influx of review books, it's likely we'll publish additional ones on the site in between issues of the zine.

How many staff reviewers do you have?

Ten, but we are looking for more.

Are you currently recruiting more reviewers? If so, what are your guidelines?

Yes we are! Our guidelines can be found at *Scribe & Quill*. For further information, send an e-mail to scribequill@gmail.com with REVIEWER in the e-mail subject line.

How should an author contact you about a review request? Do you review e-books as well?

Have them send an e-mail to scribequill@gmail.com with REVIEW REQUEST in the subject line. We welcome e-books and actually prefer electronic copies of review books.

How do you select the books you review? How do you determine which reviews to post on your site?

If you send us a book, unrequested, we may or may not review it, depending on our current queue. It's best to send a query first, then we'll let you know how to submit your book for review. We receive countless books per year for review and most are suitable for review. However, if your book includes questionable or perhaps illegal content, we may choose not to review it. In all cases, we reserve the right not to review any particular book due to a variety of reasons. However, we publish reviews of all books we select for review.

Do you think there's a lot of 'facile praise' among many online review sites? What is your policy when it comes to negative reviews?

First and foremost, we want honest reviews. That means that while we are always pleased to find books that get an excellent review from us, we are aware that some books won't always hit that top mark. Therefore, while we will run a review about a book that may not be completely positive, we try to be tactful about our criticisms and comments about a book. There's usually something constructive that can be said in the face of a not-so-good book. For instance, there's a tactful, yet honest way of mentioning that a book's characters could be fleshed out, and then offering suggestions for how the author might have done that more successfully.

There was a lot of controversy last year between print publication reviewers and online bloggers. In your opinion, what defines a "legitimate" reviewer?

If you review a book, whether in print or online, you're "legitimate." I think it's a silly argument that is a waste of time and breath. Just review books and stop with the silly in-fighting over such things. We have better tasks to accomplish and can better use our energies.

What is your stand on paid reviews?

I believe if a publication pays for reviews, that's obviously a good thing. However, if you're asking if I think it's legitimate for authors or publishers to pay for people to review their books, I would have to say I believe that's unethical. If you pay someone to review a book and you're an author or a publisher, then it seems you're 'buying' a positive review. In addition, I believe

if you have a personal or professional 'axe to grind' against an author or publisher, I believe you should not review any books related to said author or publisher. I've seen reviewers and others try to inflict damage on an author's reputation and work by posting less-than-positive reviews that were based on a personal vendetta rather than an objective view of the book itself.

Do you think it's okay for reviewers to resell the books or advance review copies they review?

If a reviewer has many books and needs, for whatever reason, to thin out his/her previously read and reviewed books, then I think donating them to the library would be the first recommended action. I don't believe advance review copies should be sold or donated under any circumstance, though.

What are the most common mistakes amateur reviewers make?

Going over or under the word count. This is because they either haven't been detailed enough with their review, or they haven't imparted the necessary information and criticism in a succinct and cogent manner.

With so many major newspapers getting rid of their book review sections, how do you see the future of online review sites?

I believe online review sites will continue to grow, and if there's a shortage of reviews in print papers, that void will be filled by online reviews and reviewers.

Do you keep the author's feelings in mind when you review?

Yes, in that comments or criticism about a book and its author should always be constructive, as well as honest. I believe a criticism or a comment should be constructive rather than just mean or intentionally nit-picky. Authors put their hearts and souls into their books.

Have you received aggressive responses from authors or publishers because of a negative review? If yes, how do you handle it?

Yes, on occasion. I respond to the author and/or publisher and explain that we strive for honest reviews of books, but realize that reviews are subjective. While one reader or reviewer may love a book, another one may not for various reasons. My stance is if you don't want an honest review of your book by a reviewer, then perhaps you shouldn't send us a copy for review. Also, keep in mind that one reviewer's take on a book does not necessarily reflect how I personally would view that book, nor is it the end-all, be-all review of the book.

What does your site offer readers?

We offer articles, interviews, columns and book reviews about all aspects of writing, authors and publishing. We also occasionally publish fiction and poetry, so there's a smorgasbord of available 'treats' for people who love to read.

What promotional opportunities does your site offer authors?

Authors may send us press releases about their upcoming book releases and we'll run them in our e-zine for no charge. In addition, if an author is launching a promotional tour, we'll run announcements on that as well. Finally, we do offer paid text ads and banners for more lengthy and concentrated exposure.

What is the most rewarding aspect of being a reviewer? The most challenging?

The most rewarding is, of course, discovering new authors and books that you may not have otherwise discovered. The most challenging is balancing the commitment to both readers and authors/publishers when it comes to a fair and honest assessment of a book.

Is there anything else you would like to say about you or Scribe & Quill?

I'd also like to invite readers to also visit a couple of my other sites they may find of interest: Sun Signs for Writers, Int'l Order of Horror Professionals site and my own website with links and information on my nonfiction and fiction books. Thanks for giving me this opportunity!

Thank you, Bev!

Lesa Holstine of Blogcritics Magazine and Lesa's Book Critiques

<http://lesasbookcritiques.blogspot.com/>

Interview by Mayra Calvani

<http://blogcritics.org/archives/2008/06/12/033624.php>

Lesa Holstine began her library career as Director of a Public Library when she was only 22 years old. Presently, she's a Library Manager and reviewer for *Library Journal*, *Blogcritics Magazine*, and various websites. Her own blog, [Lesa's Book Critiques](#), is syndicated through Blogburst, and her reviews are often picked up by Reuters and USA Today. In this interview, Holstine talks about reviewing, including objectivity when reviewing friend's books, as well as the philosophy behind reviewers who write mean, nasty reviews.

How long have you been reviewing?

I've been reviewing for about 18 years. I started by reviewing teen mysteries for Voice of Youth Advocates. For two years, I wrote a weekly book column for a newspaper. Two years ago, I started reviewing women's fiction for *Library Journal*. I've been writing short reviews for Stacy Alesi's website bookbitch.com for almost three years. And then I started my blog.

Please tell us about your blog, Lesa's Book Critiques. How and when did it get started?

Lesa's Book Critiques came about because I had a new job, and was missing the opportunity to talk about books. I went to a library workshop at which I learned how to blog. A light bulb went off, and I saw this as my chance to talk about books. I wanted to share my excitement for books. I read a little of everything, and, I think that comes through on my blog. There's an emphasis on mysteries, but I review biographies, women's fiction, children's and teen books, and more sports books than people might expect. I've had the blog since January 2005. I'm very proud of the fact that Lesa's Book Critiques is syndicated through Blogburst, and my book reviews have been picked up by USAtoday.com, Reuters, IBS, and other distributors.

I also use the blog to report on authors appearances I attend at the library I manage, the Velma Teague Library in Glendale, Arizona, or appearances at the Poisoned Pen Bookstore in Scottsdale and, once in a while, at Changing Hands Bookstore in Tempe.

I also run weekly contests on my blog that bring in additional readers. Once in a while, I'll do an author interview.

How long have you been writing for Blogcritics Magazine?

I've been writing for *Blogcritics* for just nine months. In that time, I've written 28 reviews for them.

How many books do you review a month?

I read 13-15 books a month, so that's how many I review. Of course, I might dip into a few more books but I only review the ones I finish.

Do you publish freelance reviews by other writers, or only those written by you?

When I started the blog, I included a couple other people, but I found that I was doing the bulk of the work. Then, Madeira James, a web designer that I respect, suggested that I should make the blog more professional. I changed the original name of the blog, and took back its identity. Now, I only do reviews that I write.

How should an author contact you about a review request? Do you review e-books as well?

Authors can contact me via email at lesa.holstine@gmail.com. However, I make no promises. Since I am the only one doing reviews on the site, and I don't read more than 15 books a month, there will be no more than that on the blog. However, if I receive the book at least two months ahead of publication, it will at least appear in my monthly column, "Treasures in My Closet." That column is occasionally picked up for syndication, so the book does receive some publicity.

I don't review e-books. I'm sorry. I'm enough of a luddite that I prefer to hold the book in my hands.

Do you think there's a lot of "facile praise" among online review sites?

Maybe, but many people might read my blog and comment about all of the positive reviews. Periodically, I'll write a column explaining why there are so many positive reviews. I not only have enormous piles of ARCs (Advanced Reading Copies) in my closet, I'm also a librarian with easy access to three collections. There are too many good books out there for me to waste my time on books I don't enjoy. I seldom finish a book I don't like, so those books are never reviewed.

If I'm reviewing a book that I've received through *Blogcritics Magazine* or *Library Journal*, I have an obligation to read and review it. Then, a book might receive a negative review on my blog. Almost every book will receive some praise, if it was worth finishing.

Is there too much "facile praise"? Are reviewers gushing over every book, or every book by one author?

In that case, it might be too much. However, I can't speak for other reviewers, because I don't know their intent in praising books. I don't think I gush over most books. I try to point out similarities to other books, weaknesses if I notice them, and, most of all, the excitement or value of the book.

The purpose of my blog is to share books. I want people to be excited about them, know what books are being published, and learn about new books and authors. As a librarian, my job is to help people find something new to read. I hope people will be excited about the books I review on my blog.

In your opinion, how influential are reviews on the consumer?

Reviews can be influential, once the reader learns the taste of the reviewer, and whether or not their taste in books matches the consumer. As in anything, a reviewer must build trust with the consumer. I have both library patrons and blog readers who read books I recommend because they have similar tastes, or because they trust my evaluations. However, just as in buying a product, I'm sure most consumers consider the source of the review. It's a matter of trust. Once a reader finds a reviewer that matches their reading tastes and needs, that reviewer can have a great deal of influence. It's why readers have their favorite blogs, and their favorite review sources. They trust that the reviewer will not steer them wrong.

What do you look for in a book review?

To be honest, I usually don't read a review if I'm planning to read the book. I might read it after I've read it, to find out if I felt the same way as the reviewer. I've found too many reviews that spoil the book for me, giving away too much of the plot. I look for book reviews to tell me about new authors and their books.

So, what do I really look for? I look for a review that does not give away the plot or the ending. There was quite a discussion online recently about a mystery. There was a turning point in one book in the series. How do you discuss the next book without giving away the events that happened, for people who might not have reached that book in the series? As a mystery reader, I like to read the books in order, so I don't want the plot lines spoiled for me.

I try very hard not to give away too much in my book reviews, while still informing the reader about the book, so they can decide for themselves if they want to read it.

Do you think the average reviewer can review a friend's book and still be objective?

This is a difficult question to answer because it has so many aspects. Is this a close personal friend? How will the friend feel if you're honest with them, if the book is bad?

I consider myself an average reviewer. I review books by authors I've corresponded with, and, in some cases, met. However, they are not close personal friends, and they know I'll be honest when I review the book. Of course, remember what I said earlier, that most books on my blog will receive a positive review. If I review it there, the authors know they will probably receive a positive review, not because of our "friendship," but because I finished the book, and found some value to it. If I don't like a book, I've been known to tell authors why the review will not appear, because I didn't finish it, and therefore, can't give it a review.

I don't know that any of us are actually objective about reviews. I look forward to books by a number of authors, and I have expectations that I will read and enjoy their books. Is it objective that I'm going to review a book that I

know I will in all likelihood enjoy? I already have expectations for the book or author before I even start the story. If I'm disappointed, I'll say so.

To be truly objective, we should probably only read books by authors we don't know, and ones we've never read before. In that way, there will be no preconceived ideas as to what to expect.

Do you think a review written by reader has less value than one written by a professional reviewer? What defines a true "reviewer"?

That's a good question. What does define a true "reviewer"? Was I a reviewer in fifth grade when I did a book report, and stood up, and said why I liked or didn't like the book I just read? What makes a person a professional? Are you a professional if you get paid?

I have received payment by the publishing magazine for only one review I ever did, and I didn't consider it my best work. I may spend one hour on a five or six paragraph review for my blog, trying to find the right words to convey the spirit of the book, without ruining it for a reader.

In my opinion, a true reviewer is someone who is well-read, and wants to share their opinion about a book. So, every review is written by a reader. I consider myself a reader first, and a reviewer second. There are many "readers" who write blogs, and review books, who I find express themselves much better than professional reviewers who think they need to tear apart the entire book, and explain it to me. If I want to read the book, I don't want it torn apart. The best reviewers let me know why I should care about a book, why I should want to read it. It doesn't need to be a professional.

What is your stand on paid reviews?

A paid review is just a commercial for a book. It has no more value to me than a commercial.

Do you keep the author's feelings in mind when you review?

Yes, and no. The reviews are intended for the reader, not the author. I want to encourage people to read. However, if I'm going to criticize a book, there are ways of doing it tactfully. I don't have to tear the author apart, even if I don't think the book was well-done. I will criticize a book, but I certainly do not intend to do it viciously.

If a book is terrible, do you think a reviewer should write and publish the review, or should she decline to write a review?

It's up to the individual reviewer, or the editor or source that assigned them the book. If I receive a book from *Blogcritics Magazine* or *Library Journal*, and the book is terrible, I will write the review. However, if I receive it for my blog, and the book is terrible, I won't finish it. Therefore, the review will not appear on my blog. I have written negative reviews, when a favorite author disappointed me, but even then, I knew other readers might feel differently, and I stressed why the book didn't work for me.

There are some bloggers out there who have acquired fame as tough reviewers because of their harsh, nasty reviews. What's behind this philosophy?

I have no idea. There is also a professional journal that has a reputation for its snarky reviews. Most librarians don't respect that journal, and its circulation certainly is not those of the journals that readers can depend on for reliable, unbiased reviews. Bloggers might receive some notoriety for writing nasty reviews, but I don't think they will be respected.

I would prefer that readers know they can find a reliable review source at Lesa's Book Critiques, a blog that will tell them why they should buy, borrow, or pick up a book, rather than a negative source that will tear the book apart.

Thank you for this interview, Lesa!

Alex Moore, Book Review Editor of *ForeWord Magazine*

<http://www.forewordreviews.com/>

Interview by Mayra Calvani

<http://feeds.blogcritics.org/~r/bc/books/~3/311086771/071204.php>

Started in 1998, [ForeWord Magazine](#) is a bi-monthly print review journal focusing on books published by independent and university presses. The magazine employs reviewers from all over the United States and Canada. As stated by their website, *ForeWord's* readership is about 85% librarians, 12% bookstores, and 3% publishing professionals. They also put the journal in the hands of agents and editors from big publishing houses who are looking for the brightest talents from the small presses. If you'd like your book considered for review, follow the submission guidelines. *ForeWord* is a pre-publication journal, meaning that they only review galleys and advance review copies before the book has been officially released, so copies must be submitted at least three months prior to publication. *Foreword* is also the home of 'Book of the Year Awards,' a unique award focusing not only on independent and university presses but also on self-published books, ebooks, and print-on-demand (POD) titles.

In this interview, Book Review Editor Alex Moore talks about reviewing and shares the perfect structure of a great review. If you'd like to become a *Foreword* reviewer, send him a message through the magazine's website. [Editor's note: *ForeWord Magazine* is now *ForeWord Reviews*.]

Thank you for being here today, Alex. What do you look for in a book review?

I look for narrative energy: a combination of book information, something surprising, and delightful phrasing.

What are the most common mistakes amateur reviewers make?

Using first person; there are too many I's and you's, etc. making words echo ad nauseam; third person is more objective and balanced. I also find that some reviewers don't have the breadth of background to be aware of what has already been written - what's bad and what's good.

Do you think there is much value in being unkind but truthful when a book really stinks?

There is never much value in ever being unkind, but the truth can be told tactfully through good word choice and sensitivity.

Do you take into consideration the feelings of an author when you review or do you refuse to be swayed by them?

We always try to take into consideration people's feelings whether author, publicist, or publisher; they appreciate candor delivered respectfully.

What style of reviews do you think have the most value?

The structure I prefer is: good lead (an interesting anecdote, a good quote, an amazing fact, or significant statement), summary of contents but not to give away ending in fiction, author's credentials, two-three specific examples through detail and description of the author's literary style and/or significant insights and trenchant observations, reviewer's criticism/comments, conclusion with a hoped-for flourish or connecting tether to the opening. Approximately 450 words.

Do you think many independent reviewers on the web tend to give "facile praise" to books?

I've read only a few, but they seem to be ones of whitewash written by the author's best friend.

Do you look on reviews as a critique or just your opinion of the work?

Critique. Our reviewers are essentially unknown outside their universities and places of employment; that is why we use third person for a more objective review. Everyone has an opinion.

Do you get feedback from readers?

Yes. *ForeWord* reviews are appreciated; they engage and are informative.

Apart from celebrity reviewers who work for major publications like The New York Times, can a reviewer make any real money from writing reviews?

No. *ForeWord's* reviewers, besides a small stipend, are compensated by having their review published in a respected magazine. Consistently good reviewers also get printed books in their area of interest.

What advice would you give to beginner reviewers who wish to make a career in this field?

Read reviews from the best publications and compare; then mimic with creativity the ones that the reviewer most enjoyed.

Do you consider/publish reviews by independent reviewers?

No. All book reviews are assigned by me. Part of the reason is *ForeWord* is a prepublication review journal; I see books before they are published.

Do you read reviews to select your reading material?

No. *ForeWord* reviews books that I decide are distinctive and distinguishable from the rest. We get 700 books a month; 8% are reviewed divided into 20 categories. *ForeWord* is a trade journal published once every two months; we review books published by independent and university presses for librarians and booksellers.

Thanks for your time, Alex. It was an honor having you here today!

Stephanie Padilla, *New Mystery Reader*

<http://www.newmysteryreader.com/>

Interview by Mayra Calvani

<http://blogcritics.org/archives/2008/06/14/053806.php>

Started in 1992, the *New [Mystery Reader](#)* is a web-based magazine featuring information on new mystery releases in both hardcover and paperback. Each monthly issue features book reviews, short stories, articles, and author interviews. Founder and Editor Stephanie Padilla considers freelance reviews and is currently looking for quality reviewers. If you'd like to review for *New Mystery Reader* or would like to submit a book or short story for consideration, please read the submission guidelines. Padilla also offers Authors Services in the form of manuscript evaluation. For Padilla, the toughest part of being a reviewer is being able to keep own's honesty and integrity when writing a negative review while not being unkind to the author.

Thanks for this interview, Stephanie. What do you look for in a book review?

The most important aspects that we try and share with readers is both a synopsis of the book as well as an intelligent opinion of the overall quality of writing inherent in the book. Of course, we hope that it will be honest, insightful, and offer something fresh and different than the many others out there.

What are the most common mistakes amateur reviewers make?

It seems that many new reviewers tend to give a much more positive review than sometimes deserved, but the worst mistake might be in giving away too much of the plot. Simple, I know, but you'd be amazed how often new reviewers tend to forget that they're speaking of a book that people have yet to read.

Do you think there is much value in being unkind but truthful when a book really stinks?

That's a tough question that I grapple with daily; integrity is very important to me, and I feel the main loyalty should be with the readers of our magazine. However, I think that one can express a truthful, albeit negative, opinion without being unduly unkind. This is one of the most difficult aspects of reviewing, and it's always a fine line to walk. There are ways to suggest that certain aspects of a novel are lacking in a diplomatic manner, and I know that I, and most of my reviewers, feel really bad when faced with such a situation. I have found that a good way to approach is to remember that while it may not be the type of book that personally strikes you, it still may have a quality or two worth pointing out amongst the bad.

Do you take into consideration the feelings of an author when you review or do you refuse to be swayed by them?

I have a very deep respect for those that have the courage and creativity to attempt to put something “out there”, and so I approach most books with that in mind. However, I must admit that I will give “a break”, so to speak, to the newer novelists for the same mistakes that I will point out coming from a better known author. With the kind of support staff these guys have, it seems that they should be long past certain types of mistakes that you will all too often still find in their published works.

What style of reviews do you think have the most value?

Personally speaking, I would appreciate an honest review that explains WHY the book was either liked or disliked, along with a detailed synopsis of the book. Although, of course, not TOO detailed.

Do you think many independent reviewers on the web tend to give “facile praise” to books?

Actually, yes I do. The web has opened up a way for anyone and everyone to express their opinions, and while I’m not saying this is a bad thing, it can be misleading in a way. The entire publishing industry works much like any other industry, and so there is some pressure on to keep a positive outlook in order to continue being on the give away list. But I have found that this may be more of a misconception than a reality, as most publicists are very accepting of the occasional negative review. But nonetheless, one should be wary of any site that is too positive.

Do you look on reviews as a critique or just your opinion of the work?

Another tough question! I would say both. I hate to be so bold as to suggest that I could possibly know of a better way to write, because wouldn’t I be doing that if I did? But as one who reads a massive quantity of books, and who knows the genre extremely well, I do think I, and those on my staff, are indeed qualified to know the difference between quality and the lack thereof. But basically, the bottom line is that it is truly just an opinion, albeit an educated opinion, just as is any critic’s opinion, whether it is for movies, television, books, etc...

Do you get feedback from readers?

Oh, yes! Sometimes it’s not always nice either. But it’s always welcomed. I’ve had my reviews critiqued just as closely as I’ve critiqued the book and it’s always an eye opener. And in reference to your previous question, I always print out that it’s just an opinion after all. When one reads, or watches, ANY review, whether it’s on television, the New York Times, or the Internet, one should always keep in mind that no matter what the credentials of the reviewer, it’s still only an opinion and opinions are subjective no matter how one tries to argue otherwise.

Apart from celebrity reviewers who work for major publications like The New York Times, can a reviewer make any real money from writing reviews?

Maybe back in the day before the Internet there may have been a chance. But now with the pervasiveness of so much information, most of it free, and the decline in newspaper and magazine readership, it seems highly unlikely. If you can get something for free, and there are many quality sites out there willing to provide exactly that, that means the paying jobs are going to become even more rare, so no, I don't think one can make a lot of money out of reviewing, unfortunately!

What advice would you give to beginner reviewers who wish to make a career in this field?

That there really is no way to have a career entirely in this field, unless you're willing to do more than just reviewing, but you're going to have to be willing to dip your feet into a other areas in order to make living, such as editing, publishing, representing, or promoting. But if it's just reviewing you want to do, do it with a commitment and love for books, nothing more.

Do you consider/publish reviews by independent reviewers?

Oh, definitely. Anything that's well written will be looked at and most likely accepted if it falls within our general publishing guidelines, which are really very few.

Do you read reviews to select your reading material?

Actually I do sometimes. It's funny to see how, after reading a book and writing a review, it measures up to different opinions. I try and represent any and all genres within the mystery framework. So just about any type of mystery is welcomed and so it's a mix of what is sent, and what I feel that we "should" include. But always welcomed are new authors from the small publishing houses. I have added a page to the site devoted entirely to "small press" and only hope that readers will continue to give these authors at least a glance.

Sharyn McGinty of In the Library Reviews

<http://www.inthelibraryreviews.net/>

Interview by Mayra Calvani

<http://blogcritics.org/archives/2008/06/16/071327.php>

Sharyn McGinty is the Print Review Coordinator of [In the Library Reviews](#), a review site also featuring author interviews, spotlights, and contests. Started in 2002, the site reviews books and ebooks in most genres, including Christian and inspirational titles. Read their guidelines for details. McGinty is currently looking for more reviewers. If you're interested in joining her staff, take a look at the reviewer guidelines. In this interview, McGinty talks about her brainchild site and about the various aspects of reviewing.

How long have you been reviewing?

I have been reviewing off and on for nearly ten years. I started reviewing for Sime~Gen, Inc. and eventually started my review site. I closed that first site down after about two years. About six years ago, I opened In the Library Reviews.

Please tell us about your book review site. How and when did it get started?

In the Library Reviews is the brainchild of my best friend and I. We were tired of reading so many reviews based on a star-rating, as at the time over-rating was common practice. After much discussion, we launched In the Library Reviews on April 1, 2002 with the radical idea of not having any ratings whatsoever. As the years passed, a lot has changed, including adding a rating system.

What is the most challenging aspect of running a review site?

For me, it's balancing the review site with everything else in my life. As a homeschooling mother of three, trying to find time to review and update the website is a challenge. I usually end up staying up well past midnight trying to get everything done.

How should an author contact you about a review request?

First, I would suggest the author visit our site and decide which of our three review coordinators should be sent the request. Joyce Handzo (fourhandz@msn.com) is our Christian/Inspirational coordinator. All requests that fall into this category, be they ebook or print, should be sent to her Safiya Tremayne (safiyatremayne@gmail.com) handles all ebook requests. Sharyn McGinty (inthelibraryreviews@gmail.com) handles all print books.

Second, be sure to include the following information: Title, Author, Author Email, Author Website, Publisher, Publisher Website, Publisher/Publicity Email, Place where the book can be purchased, Publishing Date, Genre, Price, ISBN, and Brief Synopsis.

How do you select the books you review? How do you determine which reviews to post on your site?

Our books are selected by the reviewers themselves. Our review coordinators know which genres our reviewers like and have gotten good at judging which books they will read. When in doubt, the review queries are sent to the reviewers and they have the final say.

Unless two reviewers are unable to review a book, all books are reviewed and the reviews posted to the site. In some cases, mainly when publishers automatically send all releases to us, a review may take several months due to the fact our reviewers are usually booked solid and have to make time to squeeze in a book that wasn't requested.

Do you think there's a lot of 'facile praise' among many online review sites? What is your policy when it comes to negative reviews?

As a rule, I don't visit other review sites. Mainly to avoid changing the look of the site or unconsciously making my reviews seem too much like ones I'd read. As to 'facile praise,' I find this a lot when I'm looking up book information on Barnes&Noble and glance at the customer reviews. There are several reviewers there who do nothing but give 5 star reviews. In the Library Reviews has posted what some would consider negative reviews. We don't review to stroke an author's ego. We're reviewing to let people know if a particular book is worth their money. If the book is badly written, we'll state that. Even the author dislikes the review we're going to post it. Otherwise what's the point of reviewing if all we're doing making sure the author is happy?

Do you keep the author's feelings in mind when you review?

Yes and no. I phrase my complaints tactfully, doing my best to encourage rather than denigrate their work. But their feelings don't influence my reviews, even if it's one of my favorite authors and they specifically asked me to review their book.

Have you received aggressive responses from authors or publishers because of a negative review? If yes, how do you handle it?

Never from a publisher and only once from an author. I passed on my reviewers' reasons and apologized. This particular author proceeded to bash the review site on several online romance novel groups, not realizing or caring I was a member and would recognize her. Oddly enough the majority of the authors on these lists denounced this author's behavior as juvenile.

What is the most rewarding aspect of being a reviewer?

Beyond the books? (smiles) When I receive a note from the author saying my review brightened their day or encouraged them to keep writing when they were doubting their ability, it makes me smile. However, the most rewarding thing is when the author takes the time to just say "thank you." I realize it's a ridiculously small thing, but reviewing takes time away from my family and

other pursuits; having an author recognize that fact makes it worth the sacrifice.

Thanks for taking the time to answer my questions, Sharyn! I appreciate it!

Katie Trattner of Blogcritics and Katie's Reading

<http://katiesreading.blogspot.com/>

Interview by Mayra Calvani

<http://blogcritics.org/archives/2008/06/17/152613.php>

Katie McNeill writes reviews for *Blogcritics Magazine* and her own blog, [Katie's Reading](#). She specializes in what she loves to read, paranormal books—from horror to dark fantasy to paranormal romance. She also writes a weekly column for Blogcritics called “Beyond Bounds: The Paranormal and Fantasy with Katie.” If you'd like your book reviewed by Katie, visit her blog and drop her an email. In this interview, she talks about the influence of reviews and she also compares reviewers who write nasty, mean reviews to playground bullies seeking attention.

Thanks for this interview, Katie. How long have you been reviewing?

I've been reviewing for over two years now.

Please tell us about your blog, Katie's Reading. How and when did it get started?

I started blogging almost three years ago and Katie's Reading is my third attempt at keeping a blog running. I tend to get really wrapped up in it for awhile until something else grabs my interest and then the blog suffers. But this one is concentrated on reviews and book news only and that helps a little when it comes to updating.

How long have you been writing for Blogcritics Magazine? Please tell us about your paranormal column.

I've been writing for Blogcritics for over two years. It's a great outlet and I'm constantly amazed by the amount of e-mail I get because someone has seen a review I wrote. I started the column a few months ago and I'm still working on it. It's concentrated on paranormal and fantasy because that's what I tend to read the most and we didn't have a column that focused on those genres.

How many books do you review a month?

The number of books I review varies from month to month. I tend to read an average of four books a week and not all of those get reviewed. Sometimes it's nice just to read something and not feel like you have to take notes mentally. But I've found that even when I don't intend to write a review I usually do. It's just so hard not to talk about what I'm reading.

Do you publish freelance reviews by other writers, or only those written by you?

On Katie's Reading I only publish my own. I don't have the energy or time to expand it to include other people's reviews. And honestly I can't see anyone wanting to publish their work on my blog when they could build one for themselves.

How should an author contact you about a review request? Do you review e-books as well?

If an author is interested in contacting me my e-mail is listed on Katie's Reading. At the moment I'm trying to steer clear of e-books. I spend so much time on the computer at work and then at home. When I finally do get a chance to read it's nice to get away from the computer.

In your opinion, how influential are reviews on the consumer?

A reader is always going to be surfing around for what they want to add to their stack of to-be-read books. A good review is a great jumping off point. If I'm really interested in a book I tend to read all the reviews I can find so that I get a well rounded idea of the book. I think that most people are like that. But then there are always those spur of the moment purchases that everyone makes.

What do you look for in a book review?

I'm one of those very odd people who will usually read the end of the book first. So in a book review I don't mind spoilers or major plot points being revealed, as long as it's well written and entertaining.

Do you think the average reviewer can review a friend's book and still be objective?

I would like to think so. If the book is bad and you've been honest in your review about it a friend should appreciate your honesty. But hopefully the book is fantastic.

Do you think a review written by a reader has less value than one written by a professional reviewer? What defines a true 'reviewer'?

A true reviewer can read anything, not just what their personal preference might be, and present the book in an entertaining way flaws included. A lot of people will read just what they like and it's easy to write a review for something you love. The test is reading something you dislike but not having that cloud your review for the book.

What is your stand on paid reviews?

I would love to be paid for mine. Writing is a business and I think that anyone who starts a blog or starts writing reviews for a site has the voice in the back of their head that says "Hey, wouldn't it be great if I got paid for this?" We would all like to get paid to do something we love. Is it more or less objective? I think that would depend on the person writing it. I would hope that if you were getting paid to review something you would still be honest. Not to mention that you would get paid for a bad or a good review because the person paying you wouldn't be the author.

Do you keep the author's feelings in mind when you review?

I do. I know how hard it is to write a novel. I keep in mind that the author spent untold hours agonizing and editing and pouring over pages. If something

stands out, weak plot or flat characters I'll mention that, but I also try to pick out redeeming points in the book. It's possible to be honest about the book without bashing an author.

If a book is terrible, do you think a reviewer should write and publish the review, or should she decline to write a review?

I think that if you have a book to review, good or bad, you should review it.

There are some bloggers out there who have acquired fame as tough reviewers because of their harsh, nasty reviews. What's behind this philosophy?

Mostly I think it's attention seeking. It's so hard to get noticed on the web and one of the easiest ways is to be nasty. It's like a bully on the playground. You might not be getting positive attention but you're still getting attention.

Thanks, Katie.

Cheryl C. Malandrinos, Editor of The Book Connection

<http://thebookconnectionccm.blogspot.com/>

Interview by Mayra Calvani

<http://blogcritics.org/archives/2008/06/19/165528.php>

Cheryl C. Malandrinos is the Editor of [The Book Connection](#), a blog focusing on reviews, author interviews, and on hosting virtual book tour guests. She's also a reviewer for The Muse Book Reviews. Cheryl is currently looking for more reviewers to join her blog, especially for those who review ebooks. A virtual book tour coordinator for Pump Up Your Book Promotion, Cheryl sees a bright future for review bloggers and calls the Internet a 'huge promotion playground' for publicists and authors.

Thanks for this interview, Cheryl. How long have you been reviewing?

Hard to believe, but I've been reviewing books for two years now. I began by reviewing books for my own enjoyment at my Aspiring Author blog. Then I joined The Muse Book Reviews in 2007. In July of last year, I was interviewing so many authors and reviewing so many books that I began The Book Connection - which is where I post all my reviews now.

How many books do you review a month?

This all depends, because in addition to reviewing and interviewing authors at The Book Connection, I am also a virtual book tour coordinator for Pump Up Your Book Promotion. In addition, I'll review just about anything and some months I have more children's books—which can be read quicker than novels. So, it can range anywhere between two and ten books a month.

Are you currently recruiting more reviewers? If so, what are your guidelines?

This is something that I've considered for a while now, because I would like to grow the site and offer more to my readers. If anyone is interested in reviewing for The Book Connection, he or she can contact me at [cg20pm00\(at\)gmail\(dot\)com](mailto:cg20pm00(at)gmail(dot)com). Place "The Book Connection" in the subject line and include a copy of a recent review, any publishing credits, what genres he/she is interested in reviewing, and if he/she accepts eBooks.

I encourage anyone who is interested in becoming a reviewer for The Book Connection to view the site and see what types of reviews are there. While I don't expect everyone to write in a similar style, I expect a review to provide enough information to the reader to allow her to make an informed buying decision. A synopsis and three sentences doesn't cut it.

How should an author contact you about a review request? Do you review e-books as well?

Authors may contact me at [cg20pm00\(at\)gmail\(dot\)com](mailto:cg20pm00(at)gmail(dot)com) with "Book Review Request" in the subject line if they are interested in having The Book Connection review their book. The only thing I don't review is pornography. I

don't accept eBooks any longer. These books tend to get buried at the bottom of the "to be read" pile. After spending eight to ten hours a day on the PC, I don't really want to subject my body to reading a 200+ page book on it. Besides, I read in the tub to relax before bedtime, and I haven't found a PC or eReader that can work under those conditions. This could change, however, if additional reviewers come onboard.

How do you select the books you review? How do you determine which reviews to post on your site?

Everyone has their own personal tastes, but I consider each request by the synopsis sent to me. If the author's website is listed in the email, I will go out to the site to find more information and an excerpt. I always post a review at my site—good or not so good. I have a fancy for Christian and inspirational fiction and non-fiction, memoirs, romance, children's books, and historical fiction. I enjoy reading about the American Civil and Revolutionary wars, so books set during these time periods are ones I make a point to look for.

Do you think there's a lot of 'facile praise' among many online review sites? What is your policy when it comes to negative reviews?

I believe this comes down to some readers being easier to please than others. I've gone to review sites and thought, "Does she like every book she reads?" But I've also gone to review sites and thought, "Does this person like anything he reads?" No book is going to be all good or all bad. There are going to be things you like and aspects you don't really care for. A good reviewer can combine those things and provide a reader with a basis for a sound buying decision. As for negative reviews, I've had to write them, but once again no book is going to be filled with flaws and have not even one redeeming factor. I mention both in my reviews and I do so without being brutal. I've read some reviews and wondered if the reviewer is a sadist. Nothing is served by ripping an author's book to shreds. Give readers some credit, they don't need biting marks from a reviewer to learn the areas where the book failed to meet a person's expectations.

There was a lot of controversy last year between print publication reviewers and online bloggers. In your opinion, what defines a 'legitimate' reviewer?

A reviewer is a reviewer. Now, some might carry more weight than others, but a review that highly recommends an author's book, whether it comes from the New York Times or an online review site, is still a feather in an author's cap.

What is your stand on paid reviews?

I don't know how sites get away with this. There are so many book review sites out there that review books for free. Why would an author pay for one? Do the words, "I highly recommend this book," sound better coming from a paid site than a free one? I don't believe the reader cares one way or the other as

long as she doesn't end up wasting money on a book that isn't what she expected.

Do you think it's okay for reviewers to resell the books they review? What about Advance Review Copies?

This is basically getting paid for a review and I think I've made my thoughts clear on that one.

What are the most common mistakes amateur reviewers make?

Giving away too much of the story or not providing enough information for the reader to make a sound buying decision. I've actually almost done the first one myself. When I get excited over a book I've just read, I want to tell the world about it. But a few times I've looked over my review again and said, "You can't tell them that!"

With so many major newspapers getting rid of their book review sections, how do you see the future of online review sites?

Since online review sites are a big part of the virtual book tour business, I say that these sites are going to become more and more important to publicists and authors in the future. Publicists and authors are really in tune with how to reach a wide audience, and therefore, the Internet has become a huge promotion playground for them.

Do you keep the author's feelings in mind when you review?

Not really. I mean, I don't write scathing reviews, but only because I don't believe they serve a purpose; not because I'm concerned with hurting the author's feelings.

What promotional opportunities does your site offer authors?

The Book Connection also interviews authors and occasionally has guest bloggers. When I have time, I provide updated news about some of my former clients from Pump Up Your Book Promotion.

What is the most rewarding aspect of being a reviewer?

I am given the chance to discover many talented writers who I never would have found otherwise. I look forward to following their careers.

Is there anything else you would like to say about you or The Book Connection?

The Book Connection has grown a lot in the past year. I'm very proud of what we've accomplished. I encourage readers and writers to check us out and see what we have to offer.

Thanks Cheryl!

Eveline Soors of Euro-Reviews

<http://www.euroreviews.be/>

Interview by Mayra Calvani

<http://blogcritics.org/archives/2008/06/20/221225.php>

Eveline Soors is the Book Review Editor of [Euro-Reviews](#), a Belgium-based online review site specializing in women's fiction—biographies, memoirs, African-American books, chick-lit, column books, erotica, and other women related non-fiction. What makes Euro-Reviews stand apart from other sites is that they also review books written in Dutch. For American authors, this is a good venue to showcase their work to the Dutch-speaking readers who visit the site. Soors is currently looking for ebook reviewers and is open to submissions from authors. She also offers a wide array of promotional opportunities for writers who would like to publicize their work.

Thanks for participating in this series of interviews, Eveline. How long have you been reviewing?

I started around August 2005, so I'd say I officially started reviewing around that time. I started reading and keeping notes on what I'd read long before, though. When I was still in school and we got these lists of books we should read (that everybody hated by the way, everyone except me!) I actually read them and wanted to write the summary of the story down as well as what I thought of it, just as a reminder for later but also as a sort of inventory of the books I've read and my thoughts on them. I didn't know yet at that time that I could share them with millions of others. It has so much more purpose now! I would also like to say that I think reviewing has done a lot for me personally. English is not my main language (that would be Dutch, and French is my second language), and after having read lots of reviews over these last few years I have expanded my vocabulary so much. I love the English language so I welcome every improvement.

What makes Euro-Reviews stand out among so many other online review sites?

I think that one of the strongest points of Euro-Reviews is that we offer reviews in Dutch and English language. This means that even though a Dutch reader is looking for a Dutch book he or she might be attracted by a cover or a title from an English review and 'accidentally' get to know this book and its authors. I'm convinced that a lot of readers discover great books that way. A lot of authors also like to know if their books are appreciated just as much overseas. Another interesting aspect of our site is that readers can leave small comments on books. This is a good thing because this way you encourage interaction between authors and readers and between readers and other readers. Also, we try not to focus on erotica books only (already too many sites do that), but we also want to cover biographies, memoirs, African-American books, chick-lit, column books, and other women related non-fiction.

What is the most challenging aspect of running a review site?

Finding adequate reviewers who are willing to review in return for e-books and a print every now and then. You have to trust them and be sure that they will not drop out before handing in the review. Because there is no contract (since this is fully voluntary), that is a difficult thing. Keeping up with the high amount of review requests and e-mails is also quite challenging when you have a full time job.

Are you currently recruiting more reviewers? If so, what are your guidelines?

We are constantly searching for new reviewers. Because of the high rate of new e-book review requests we are currently only accepting reviewers that want to review e-books, though. People interested in reviewing for Euro-Reviews can fill out a form on our website with some basic information like how many books they can review for us, what languages they speak, if they've reviewed in the past or are currently reviewing elsewhere as well. They also need to write a test review on a book they've read, or use a review they've done in the past. I see from there if they've got what it takes and if they 'have' it they can join and start right away.

How should an author contact you about a review request?

We review prints, e-books and (just a few) audiobooks. Authors can contact Euro-Reviews by visiting our website and reading the 'About Us' section first so they know who to contact and what information to submit.

How do you select the books you review? How do you determine which reviews to post on your site?

I try to upload as many requests as time allows and reviewers can select from that list. I never force someone to read a book they might not like. Everyone likes different genres, some like erotica, others don't, so I always mention those things clearly so they know what book they are getting. I post all reviews submitted by reviewers unless I find them to be copied off from another site, badly written, or really offensive.

Do you think it's okay for reviewers to resell the books they review? What about advance review copies?

I think it's okay to resell prints because you can't keep all the books if you review a lot - it might just get too crowded. Reselling e-books would be illegal. Advance review copies shouldn't be sold either because they might be slightly different from the actual book and if it's still unedited it might not do good to the author. Personally I keep all my books, unless they are really bad. The only really bad books I ever got were those I received when I did paid reviews for a (very) short time. The weekly deadline and the awful selection (9 out of 10 of the books were absolutely not my thing) made me quit quite quickly. So those are the only books I ever tried to sell. Nobody wants them though.

Have you received aggressive responses from authors or publishers because of a negative review? If yes, how do you handle it?

It has happened. I feel it is unprofessional of an author (or publisher) to directly attack a reviewer for just giving his or her opinion. I can expect it from readers but an author should not get involved as it always leads to a nasty situation! Every time an aggressive response is given it really disappoints the reviewer and it just feels like you can't be honest or you'll get snapped at. (It only happened twice over the three years that we're reviewing.)

What does your site offer readers?

We offer reviews for our Dutch as well as our English audience and try to cover both prints and e-books as well as an occasional audiobook. We've also had the pleasure to interview several authors in the past and hopefully many more to follow. Authors, and even readers, are free to share stories related to either books or travelling. It would be really nice to have a list of experiences from people who visited different places all over Europe. We also have a weekly column done by Morgan Ashbury and from time to time we have a listing of contests.

What promotional opportunities does your site offer authors?

Authors are free to place book excerpts and promo messages in our Yahoo group. They can place banners or cover ads on our site, they can do a column if they'd like or write articles on our site. They can post their contests and I also personally select 'announcements' every now and then to give some promo to (mostly) organizations or events that I think deserve it.

Thanks for your time, Eveline! I appreciate it!

Kevin Eagan of *Blogcritics Magazine* and *There There Kid*

Interview by Mayra Calvani

<http://blogcritics.org/archives/2008/06/24/142328.php>

Kevin Eagan is one of a team of editors at *Blogcritics Magazine* and founder of *There There Kid*, a blog focusing on cultural and literary criticism. He also writes a weekly feature for *Blogcritics* called *The Early Word*, where he talks about some of the latest fiction books being released by both big and small publishers. In this interview, Eagan talks about *Blogcritics*, his blog, and he offers his critical insight into the slippery slope of book reviewing.

Thank you for taking the time for this interview, Kevin. How and when did you get started and how long have you been an editor here?

Blogcritics has been around since 2002, but I've been involved with the site as a writer since October 2007 and as an editor since March of this year. I haven't been here nearly as long as some of the other editors - some have been here since the site launched - but I've certainly experienced a lot of different opportunities and challenges since I started working here. The section is especially interesting because of our diverse group of writers, and being an editor here has introduced me to new books and critical approaches I may not have found otherwise. We certainly cover nearly every approach to book reviewing you can find out there.

On average, how many books does BC review a month?

The number of books we review in a given month varies, but we do cover most of the major releases coming out each month. Because of our large and varied collection of writers, we cover everything from the latest bestsellers to the most obscure indie novels, so readers will find plenty of ways to discover new books. We have a very sizable Graphic Novel/Comic Book section plus several reoccurring features that focus on specific genres. We also run a weekly feature called *The Early Word* (fiction and non-fiction) that fellow *BC Books* Editor Gordon Hauptfleisch and I update weekly to give readers an idea of new books coming out each week.

*I'm sure many readers who are also writers are wondering, "How do I write for *Blogcritics*?" Could you offer some tips?*

Well, other than reading our submission guidelines which are linked at the bottom of our front page, writers should definitely come into the whole process with an open mind and a willingness to dive in deep and really understand what they are reviewing. Often, new writers come in treating their *Blogcritics Magazine* experience as an extension to their own blog, when it is really a separate and completely different experience. *Blogcritics* functions as a fully fledged online magazine and our articles appear in Google News and Yahoo News, so we have pretty high standards in terms of content. However,

Blogcritics Magazine is a good place for both new and established writers to expand their talents and gain new exposure.

For our Books section, we are interested in reviewers who write more than just bland plot summary or tip-of-the-iceberg analysis. The best reviews are the ones that dig deep and take on new approaches, and even though every review should give the reader a sense of what the book is like, it should also reveal new and profound insights into how the book influenced the reviewer. In my opinion, most people who read book reviews want to know more than just what happens in the book; they want to know how it all connects personally and culturally.

You also keep a blog, There There Kid. Tell us about it.

There There Kid is a new experiment of mine that I've enjoyed putting together over the past few months. I call it a "weblog of mixed media plus cultural criticism with a literary bent" because I believe that book reviewing (and art in general) doesn't happen within a bubble - it is one way in which we try to connect the seemingly random and absurd aspects of human nature into some form of coherence. There There Kid's essays try to find connections between works of art, such as a book and a CD, that have similarities in theme. It's basically a blog that takes the cultural studies approach to literary criticism and doesn't try to partition art into different categories, which is how I've always approached my own book reviewing.

At the same time, we do regular features and reviews each month, and I have a couple of writers who help out in this way. Since I started the site a couple months ago, I've had a decent response from outside readers and am looking to expand the number of articles on the site because I realized I can't do it all on my own. So I'm still looking for new writers and have posted submission guidelines on the site.

Do you think there's a lot of "facile praise" among online review sites?

I often find book reviewing sites that read more like some type of fanboy forum than a respectable form of literary criticism. While I don't expect every review I read to be a well-informed scholarly exposé, I do expect the reviews to read better than a press release. The Internet is a great place to find some excellent review sites, but it's also rife with gushy fan forums that hold no weight.

I feel that "facile praise," as you put it, happens when a reviewer has not done their research - and yes, researching the author, book, and topics expanded upon in the review is incredibly important. Book reviews that hold weight have to go beyond the personal opinion of the reviewer (although personal opinion is very valid in a review, there should be plenty of evidence to back it up). Using examples from the book or taking a particular critical viewpoint can help avoid the cliched praise of books found in some reviews.

There are some writers out there who have acquired fame as tough reviewers because of their harsh, nasty, mean reviews. What, in your opinion, is behind their philosophy?

I think some reviewers want to stand out from the crowd by offering a contrasting opinion, but some are just too mean. Whenever I write a review about something that I really didn't like, I always try to say something good about it. After all, it's never all bad, and there has to be something valuable to offer the reader.

Mean reviews can be as bad as overly gushy reviews, and it can make the reviewer look ignorant, especially if their critical opinion is so off the wall that it just doesn't make sense. So maybe those who write snarky reviews are just trying to get attention, I don't really know.

If a book is terrible, do you think a reviewer should write and publish the review, or should she decline to write it?

It depends on how bad it is. I've reviewed books that I thought were terrible, but I still wrote the review and took a little extra time to explain why I thought it was terrible (it's easier to write reviews on stuff you enjoy, by the way). When I send the review to the promotional person who took the time to send me the advanced review copy, I usually get a response thanking me for the honest opinion, even if it might not be the opinion they'd like to read. Also, I've had authors write me back respectfully disagreeing, creating an intriguing and thoughtful dialogue about the book. It's opened up new insights into my approaches as a reader as well. So far, I haven't had an author write back with a nasty comment, and I always approach my negative reviews with civility and respect because I see it as the beginning of a debate, not as a chance to destroy a writer's career.

If a book was so bad that it wasn't readable, I'd send it back. But that's another issue.

In your opinion, how influential are reviews on the consumer?

I personally think back cover blurbs are more influential in terms of actual book purchasing, at least for me. I do read reviews to discover new books, but I usually read the reviews after reading the book because I like to discover someone else's opinions of the book; it helps solidify and confirm my own opinions.

What do you look for in a book review?

I look for the ability to see the book as part of a culture, not just as part of an author's bibliography or as part of a "market." The review has to go beyond plot summary, and has to have some type of critical argument that's clearly expressed throughout the whole review. I'm more interested in hearing an original, thought provoking perspective on the book than I am about finding out the plot details of the book.

Do you think the average reviewer can review a friend's book and still be objective?

That's a tough question. I personally would not review a friend's book unless he or she knew I was going to be as critical of the book as I would any other book. However, I'd probably save my "review" for drinks and conversations at the bar and help my writer friend improve, if I thought it was necessary. Then I'd buy a round of drinks.

Do you think a review written by a reader has less value than one written by a professional reviewer? What defines a true "reviewer"?

All reviewers are readers first, critics second. That's how it should be, at least, so I think a reader's review should hold just as much influence as a professional reviewer as long as it is written well and does not fall into the traps that a lot of beginner reviewers fall into (the "facile praise" or overly negative stuff we mentioned earlier, for example).

In fact, I'd rather read a "reader" review than a professional review, and I have found that sites like Blogcritics, PopMatters, and Bookslut all hold their own against the established publications such as The New York Times Sunday Book Review. Every reader should take a close look at all of these publications when looking for good book reviews.

Do you think a reviewer or site that receives payment for a review from the author or publisher can be honest and objective?

I find that to be very unethical. It's one thing if the publisher sends the reviewer a free copy of the book in return for an honest review of the book, but paying someone for positive publicity is flat out wrong. There's no possibility for being honest or objective when money has been handed out.

New reviewers should be careful of publishers who do this type of thing. I personally don't know of any specific examples, but I'm sure it happens, and a new reviewer should realize that this is not the common practice.

Do you keep the author's feelings in mind when you review?

Only to the extent that I want the author to know my opinion of the book. I don't worry about whether or not my review will hurt their feelings, but I do want the author to read my review. After all, if I took the time to read and then thoughtfully analyze an author's book, I want them to know about it. Like I said before, my reviews have elicited responses (and ensuing debates) from authors, so I definitely enjoy that.

Amazon and many other online retailers and review sites rate their books. Do you think this is a good thing? Is rating books fair? What should people keep in mind when looking at these ratings?

Amazon's rating system is more in line with giving the consumer choices in their purchases, so it's a little different than a star rating in a book review. Some sites choose to do a star rating system, and I'm neutral on the subject. I personally think the review should be written clearly enough to figure out what

that reviewer has rated the book, and I don't seek out a rating system when I read reviews. However, it's nice to see one at the end, especially when the reviewer is not as clear about how the book is written.

Anything else you'd like to say to our readers?

If you feel compelled and have something to say, consider writing book reviews. Books are slowly becoming a dying medium, so keeping literary criticism alive and interesting is more important now than ever before. Whether you join a site like Blogcritics or There There Kid or decide to start your own blog, remember that there are other people out there who are interested in what you have to say if you have something truly interesting to say.

Thanks for your time and for such insightful answers, Kevin!

Rachel Smith, founder of Bitten by Books

<http://www.bittenbybooks.com/>

Interview by Mayra Calvani

<http://blogcritics.org/archives/2008/06/24/003058.php>

Rachel Smith is the founder of [Bitten by Books](#), a new book review site focusing on paranormal fiction, urban fantasy and horror. At the moment, the site has 18 reviewers who review about 100 books a month. Smith considers both electronic and print copies. She's also currently looking for more reviewers to join her team, especially those who are willing to review e-books and love the paranormal/urban fantasy genre. In this interview, Smith talks about her site, reviewing, and the long-lasting appeal of vampires in literature.

Thanks for this interview, Rachel. Why don't you start by telling us a bit about yourself?

I am an avid reader and have been since the early 70's. I enjoy primarily paranormal fiction, but can occasionally be caught reading non-fiction, chic-lit or books on esoteric subjects. I am the founder of Bitten by Books, which takes up a large amount of my time. When not reviewing books, I can be found blogging about my favorite products at Weird Stuff in My Desk or creating custom perfume blends and doing readings for my other business, Fragrant Soul. I have also worked as a spiritual counselor and teacher for many years. When not reading or hanging out online I enjoy spending time with my husband, playing with our gaggle of dachshunds, and listening to music.

Tell us about your blog, Bitten By Books. How did it get started?

Bitten by Books really stemmed from my obsession with paranormal fiction. I read about 4-6 books per week on average, which is a lot of information rolling around in my head. I found that if I could write down my thoughts about the books, it helped clear the mental backup, and cleared my reading palette for a more enjoyable experience with future books. I also wanted to review books at my own pace, on my own terms, so starting Bitten by Books seemed like the right thing to do. Little did I know how popular the site would become.

How many books do you review a month?

Bitten by Books has over 18 reviewers and as a whole we review 100 plus books per month at this time. Personally I review about four books a week, although it really depends on what is going on for the site each week. I review less on weeks where we host author spotlights, and more when a reviewer is on vacation or book volumes are higher. Our goal is four reviews posted to the site, seven days a week. We are currently meeting and exceeding that goal.

Do you review e-books as well? What are your guidelines?

We do review a lot of e-books. Personally, since I purchased a Kindle, I am finding e-books to be more enjoyable and easier to read. The guidelines for all books are that they have to be within the scope of what our site offers to our readers. The focus of the Bitten by Books website is to provide book reviews for all types of paranormal fiction, urban fantasy and horror.

Who is your favorite fictional fiend - vampires, werewolves, etc.?

I would have to say vampires are my favorite. I can't begin to imagine the issues fur ball creatures have, although I have to say that I do enjoy a good storyline that incorporates both Werewolves and Vampires in a classic alpha power struggle. That is what endears me to Laurell K. Hamilton's Anita Blake series so much.

What is it about vampires? Why do they hold such never-ending appeal?

With vampires, I think they are the ultimate character for mental escapism. They are portrayed as exotic creatures of the night that have everything their undead hearts desire. Beauty, money, super powers, eternal youth. Vampires give the phrase "keeping up with the Joneses" a whole new meaning.

Any particular great books you've read recently you'd like to recommend?

Wow, that is hard to narrow down. There have been a few that have been particularly memorable this year. One is Happy Hour of the Damned by Mark Henry which is kind of a "Sex in the City" with zombies type storyline. I'd also recommend Black Magic Woman by Justin Gustainis, which introduces a new series featuring Quincey Morris, supernatural detective. Accidental Werewolf and Accidentally Dead by Dakota Cassidy are an absolute riot. You can visit our site and see the reviews I have done for more recommended reading.

I also had the opportunity to review Black Magic Woman recently. I agree it's a memorable book. But to go back to reviewing, what happens when you get a terrible book? Do you go ahead with the review, or decline to write it?

We owe it to our readers to review books honestly and feel it is important to the author as well. We review them regardless of the quality of the book.

Some bloggers out there seem to enjoy trashing books with mean, snarky reviews. What would you tell these bloggers?

Bloggers of this caliber are typically attention seekers. Like my mom used to say, you catch more flies with honey than vinegar. I always wonder if their one minute of infamy really weighs out in their favor, over long term legitimate commentary.

On the other hand, other online reviewers never get tired of giving facile praise. What would you say to these?

I think it is important to have balance in all things. If a reviewer is using terminology such as "always fabulous," buyer beware. Statements of "all-ness"

are not based in reality. Not every book written is great, so please do not insult your audience's intelligence by not providing an honest review. If it is bad, find a way to offer constructive commentary for the author. That is more beneficial in the long run than copping out to a praise-ridden review. Besides, honest subjective reviews garner the trust of your readers and endear them to actually listen and act upon your advice.

Do you think a review has a lot of influence on whether or not a person buys a book?

For me personally, reviews have a lot to do with what books I buy. I typically will visit one or two review sites to see what they have to say about a title and make my decision from there. Everybody views the world through a different lens. Some are drawn to cover art, others to the label of a well known name. It really depends on the consumer.

Is there anything else you'd like to share with our readers?

I really want to encourage avid readers who have not yet tried e-books to do so. There is a whole group of amazing authors who are only producing electronic books. By not giving them a try, you are really missing out. Bitten by Books is currently looking for more reviewers to join our team, especially those who are willing to review e-books and love the paranormal/urban fantasy genre. Please stop by and join us for our upcoming author spotlights, author guest blog spots and contests every week.

Thanks for your time, Rachel!

Andrea Sisco of Armchair Interviews

<http://www.armchairinterviews.com/>

Interview by Mayra Calvani

<http://blogcritics.org/archives/2008/06/25/191509.php>

Andrea Sisco is the co-founder of [Armchair Interviews](http://www.armchairinterviews.com/) and the author of the forthcoming mystery novel *A Deadly Habit*, to be released from Five Star in 2009. Started in 2005, Armchair Interviews now has about 100 staff reviewers who review an average of 200 books a month. This popular review site receives about 2 million hits a year and has been named by Writer's Digest one of the Best 101 Websites for Writers for three years in a row. Armchair Interviews has a lot to offer authors and readers, from audio interviews, to audio blurbs, to contests, to ads, to a whole range of resources on books and writing. It also publishes a monthly newsletter. Sisco is always on the lookout for quality reviewers.

Just drop her an email at Andrea@armchairinterviews.com and she'll get you started. Armchair Interviews reviews most type of books in about 43 genres, with the exception of ebooks. In this interview, Sisco talks about the challenges of running a big review site, and about her forthcoming novel, among other things.

Thank you very much for this interview, Andrea. Tell us a bit about Armchair Interviews.

Our knowledge of books and our excitement and passion for the idea of Armchair Interviews was the beginning of creating a great site. We placed ourselves in the able hands of Paul Larson of Creative Arc in Minneapolis and he patiently worked with Connie and me to design an attractive, user friendly site. We then began to add other things like audio and written interviews, contests, a reader's page, an author's page, etc., for our visitors.

But it's the reviewers. They're passionate about the written word. They're good writers, responsible people and, oh so much fun. They work hard. They work with us, not for us, and that's the difference I think. They are Armchair Interviews. And we've gained new friends from around the United States and the world through Armchair Interviews. They simply are the best. Check out our site and then other sites and you'll see what I mean.

What is the most challenging aspect of running a review site?

Time. It's primarily two people (Connie and I) running Armchair Interviews with some help from Paul Larsen (our go-to guy for web help) and Jeff Foster who does some marketing for us. Connie has a business (that pays the bills) and must give that time. I am a writer, I travel a great deal with my husband, we live in Minnesota and Arizona (which is a time and logistics challenge) and we have numerous children and grandchildren I want to spend time with. Connie and I always want to do more and wonder where we'll get the time.

But money is another important aspect. It takes money to create a good site and money to maintain and improve a site like ours. Authors often don't like paying for ads, interviews, etc. The problem is, if the site isn't paying for itself, it goes away. They don't understand the number of people we reach and what it costs to maintain a site like ours. Some authors are appalled that sites like ours would charge to promote their titles. Hey, think New York Times, People, USA Today... We may be small, but like them, we have to have revenue to survive. I can never understand why they don't blink an eye at the idea of a magazine, television or newspaper ad, but believe that the internet should be free.

Note: We don't charge to review a title.

How should an author contact you about a review request? Do you review e-books as well?

An author should go to www.armchairinterviews.com and click on our FAQ for review submissions and follow the directions. You'd be amazed how many people don't think the rules apply to them. Often though, they read the directions and send me an email and a link to their web site so I can gather the necessary information myself. That will not get an author a review. Time is short; we have about 400 submissions a month and can't fill them all. It's easier to go with the people who follow the directions. So read the FAQ and follow the directions! How to get that review or interview is another Q & A interview and one every author should hear if they want review coverage. But that's for another time.

Do you think there's a lot of 'facile praise' among many online review sites? What is your policy when it comes to negative reviews?

Criticism is okay. And we criticize books. But we will never, ever trash a book or an author. We want to celebrate authors and their work. If a book (and unfortunately it's almost always self-published) is so awful (poorly written, edited, etc.) we won't review it at all and inform the author of the issues. But we'd like authors to remember: A review is one person's opinion.

In your opinion, what defines a 'legitimate' reviewer?

I'm not sure I can give you a definitive answer. It's like art; I may not know what good art is, but I'll tell you when I see some. Peruse the sites. What do they look like? How many titles have they reviewed? Do they offer anything besides reviews (nice for building traffic and authors want traffic)? If you contact them do they respond in a timely manner and are they professional in their responses? Ask them how long they've been in business and what their stats are.

But the bottom line is: Print publication continues to reduce their coverage of books. Internet is the coming wave and is even now, becoming the place to go for learning about new books. If I had a small promotion budget, I know I'd get more bang for my buck with Armchair Interviews than with a magazine or newspaper. Why? Because other than *USA Today*, most newspapers are local

or regional. And I could never afford *USA Today*. Magazines? Well most are out of the price range also. Television and radio are usually local (budget restraints). That leaves the internet and it is huge!

What does your site offer readers?

Armchair Interviews offers readers well-written and comprehensive reviews in approximately 43 genres. What's really nice is we have 'experts' reviewing for us. Authors, engineers, medical doctors, veterinarians, professors/teachers, you get the picture. So if we have a book that fits into a particular field, we can usually find someone who is 'in the know' about the subject matter. And for fiction, well, we have some well read, talented writers who can give a 'spot on' critique of the book. Without our reviewers, we couldn't exist. They are simply the best in the business.

Armchair Interviews also provides readers with written and audio author interviews. We're branching out in our interviews and including industry professionals such as publicists, editors, agents and the like. While contests and give aways are not a big part of the site, we also do a number of those yearly. We try and keep up with and report industry news and let people know who has won the various writers' awards.

But most importantly, we have grown to a point where our site is filled with information for readers, but it's also a great place for author's to be seen, because our readership continues to grow.

What promotional opportunities does your site offer authors?

We offer ads, audio author interviews and written Q&A interviews. They are really reasonable in cost, given our audience. We can provide an author with tailored packages to fit their needs and pocketbook. Connie and I are very conscious to remember that most authors do not have a huge promotional budgets. Contact us for promotional information.

We have authors, publishing houses and publicists that regularly work with us to promote their authors. Oh, and sometimes, for fun and to help, we'll do a give away for an author we feel strongly about. That's a freebie in conjunction with the author or publishing house.

Tell us about your new 'Audio Blurbs.' What are they and how can they help authors and publishers?

Armchair Interviews wanted to do something different to help promote authors. After some thought, Connie Anderson and I decided to record audio ads. This is like a movie trailer, but with the audio only. They are approximately one minute in length and if the audio interests readers, they can click on the book cover icon and purchase the book.

It's simple, fun and unique. We've just enlisted several professional actors to help with the voice work.

I understand you're also an author with a mystery novel coming out soon. Tell us about that and how you find the time to write while maintaining such a demanding review site.

Yes, my agent recently guided me through the first time novelist contract. I am so happy that is done. Now I'm in edits. And I'm happy to report they were miniscule, but still demanded time. *A Deadly Habit* will make its appearance in 2009 and will be published by Five Star (a part of Cengage Learning).

I don't know how I find the time to do all that I do. Perhaps I'm overly organized. But let me tell you, living in two different parts of the United States, having a large number of children and grandchildren, traveling, running Armchair Interviews, writing a mystery series and now coauthoring a Young Adult Fantasy series with romantic comedy author, Kathleen Baldwin is like negotiating a mine field, time wise. Frankly, I do what I can and to the best of my ability.

There is one thing I know for sure; there will not be a second Penelope Santucci mystery published exactly one year from the publication to *A Deadly Habit* because I'm just plotting it now. I also think that it is helpful to have a supportive and understanding husband (Bob Pike). He is the author of 21 business books, a professional speaker, runs our family consulting business and is the chairman of a non-profit faith organization, so he knows what a full schedule is and he pitches in and helps when needed.

I also have some great kids and in-laws. They're helping with the promotion of *A Deadly Habit*. My actor/screenwriter son, Guy Wegener is producing a video trailer of *A Deadly Habit*. Not the still shot videos one sees, but a real 'movie' video trailer. And my son-in-law, Alan Pranke is building my personal author web site, www.andreasisco.com. It will be up sometime in late summer of 2008.

And Connie Anderson, my best friend and co owner of Armchair Interviews feeds me info, helps out when I'm on a deadline and keeps me sane. I could go on, but you get the picture. I'm blessed to have wonderful people in my life who want me to succeed. Oh, and I don't watch a great deal of television and I don't sleep a lot. But at my age, I've heard we need less sleep. I love all the things that I do and they are so exciting. I don't want to let any of them go. I might miss something.

Anything else you'd like to say to our readers?

We'd invite you to check us out. We've got almost 3000 reviews, numerous audio author interviews (they change all the time), contests and a lot of scrumptious information. And the newest thing is: We have a member's only site. For a very small amount of money monthly, we have a place where members can go for 'stuff' that's not on the regular site.

Thank you, Andrea! I appreciate your time!

Lea Schizas of Muse Book Reviews

<http://themusebookreviews.tripod.com/>

Interview by Mayra Calvani

<http://blogcritics.org/archives/2008/06/26/171543.php>

A resident of Montreal, award-winning multi-genre author and editor Lea Schizas describes herself as a late bloomer who “finally woke up after a 23-year self-induced coma taking care of the family, and rediscovered my passion for writing.” She is the co-founder and Editor-in-Chief of two *Writer’s Digest* 101 Top Writing Sites of 2005 & 2006 and recipients of the Preditors and Editors Most Useful Writing Sites Award: Apollo’s Lyre and The MuseItUp Club. She’s also the founder of The Muse Online Writers Conference, The Muse Marquee, and co-founder of *Coffee Cramp eZine*. Her published works include *Toggle Rich Editor*, *The Rock of Realm*, *Doorman’s Creek*, *Aleatory’s Junction*, and *The Muse on Writing*. Because of her supportive, helpful sites and groups for writers, Lea is affectionately referred to as ‘Mother Hen’. Her book review site, [Muse Book Reviews](#), caters to authors of most genres.

Thanks for being here today, Lea. How long have you been reviewing? Please tell us about your book review site. How and when did it get started?

The Muse Book Reviews came about a year after I opened the doors to the MuseItUp Club, in 2004. I wanted to branch out in different areas within the writing world to help members and offering reviews was the first on my list.

What makes The Muse Book Reviews stand out among so many other online review sites?

Good question. We take all genres, whether you are self-published or with a small to large publishing house. Most of my reviewers accept ebooks/PDFs or a print book. I would say the unique aspect of the Muse Book Reviews is the fact we help authors by promoting them in all of the sites/newsletters/blogs affiliated with the MuseItUp Club. There are some very low costs with some of the promo, like five dollars for a whole month’s visibility on any of the sites, along with a mention in some of the newsletters. As a writer, I know how much it costs to keep a book alive so we’re not out to make holes in a writer’s pocket but to offer as many areas of promotion as possible.

What is the most challenging aspect of running a review site?

In all honesty, the challenging part is making authors understand that when they submit their books to a review site, we are there for our readers and not necessarily there for the authors. This may sound harsh but bear with me. As a reviewer, we need to inform the reader on what the book is about, the good and what we felt might be lacking in the book. We never bash, that’s not our intent. A reader seeks out review sites to get an impression on a book, to spend their hard-earned money or not. At times, there are some reviews that are not favorable and this is the part that is always distressing.

How many books do you review a month?

We're not a big review site but I believe I can safely say we review anywhere between 10 to 20 books a month.

How many staff reviewers do you have?

There are seven reviewers currently.

Are you currently recruiting more reviewers? If so, what are your guidelines?

Yes, reviewers are always welcome. Guidelines to be one of our reviewers is simple: Send me a sample review of a book. Once I review it I send the reviewer a template how I like the set up of a review done to place in the site. The next step would be for the reviewer to send me a bio, website link if any, what genres they are willing to review, and whether they accept ebooks, print copies, or both formats. Anyone interested can email me at: museitupeditor@yahoo.ca with Reviewer Request on the subject heading.

How should an author contact you about a review request? Do you review ebooks as well?

On the website, our guidelines clearly mention to look over our Reviewer Contact page, find a reviewer who is suitable for the book's genre, and to email the reviewer directly. The reviewers' preferences, whether ebook or print are mentioned.

How do you select the books you review? How do you determine which reviews to post on your site?

As I wrote above, we accept all genres except for pornographic stuff. We review anything from picture books to erotica. After all, we are a review site catering to all readers.

Do you think there's a lot of 'facile praise' among many online review sites? What is your policy when it comes to negative reviews?

Unfortunately, I do believe that many 'writer friends' who are reviewers do help fellow writers. I find this does nothing to help the writer if the book truly is not up to par. The reviewer risks the chance of ruining their good name if it gets out after several readers purchase the book based on that reviewer's recommendation.

As for negative reviews, we have four ratings:

1 rose = average

2 roses= good

3 roses= great read

4 roses= highly recommended

As you can see we don't have 0 roses for bomb. We're not there to bash. The lowest rating is one rose. In all these years I've only had one author who requested a review not be posted. We post all of our reviews. When a writer

sends us a book, they understand a review will be posted. This year, to be honest, one of the reviewers contacted the publisher, told them she was not able to write a review based on several reasons, one being she found the book read more like a draft than a published book. That review was never written.

There was a lot of controversy last year between print publication reviewers and online bloggers. In your opinion, what defines a 'legitimate' reviewer?

What defines a 'legitimate' reviewer? One who is honest about their reviews based on an objective evaluation on the book itself and not what the reviewer might have liked the book to have contained. We judge a book based on consistency, plot, characterization...basically what you would judge when doing a critique. A few typos here and there is not going to make us write a bad review. However, change your character's name a few chapters down, then go back again further in the book, and we'll mention that. Headhop from one character to another, we'll mention the difficulty in connecting with any one character because of that. These are all elementary details a writer should know before they get published. However, give us a good plot, memorable characters and situations, and we'll praise that.

What is your stand on paid reviews?

I am against them. I understand some sites will review your book quicker for a fee. If the fee includes other areas, like an interview, a possible chat with the author, spotlight the author...then I'd say you are buying a promotional package. But to pay for one review – no. As a writer, I would feel the readers would think I paid to get a good review and I know that is not the case. When paying for a review you are not guaranteed how the review will go.

Do you think it's okay for reviewers to resell the books they review? What about Advance Review Copies (ARCs)?

Most online reviewers are not paid. What they do get is the free book to review. Once it comes in their possession, the book belongs to them. I personally have never sold a review book. I've made baskets and donated them to the retirement homes, yes.

I've reviewed arcs, pre-edited arcs, and I will never do that again. When the arc is riddled with mistakes, switches from third person POV to first person POV...how can you critique this? How do I know what the final book will be like? What I did in these cases, and I'm talking big traditional houses here, is I gave my impression on the storyline only but made sure to mention I read a pre-edited arc. I couldn't write about the characters since the characters needed fleshing out.

What are the most common mistakes amateur reviewers make?

That's an easy one and I've had to edit their reviews in the past. They tell you the whole story, revealing the outcome. A big no no. If the reader knows what's going to happen you've just spoiled it for them.

You need to give the essence of the book first. Then your impressions, followed with who would enjoy the book.

With so many major newspapers getting rid of their book review sections, how do you see the future of online review sites?

Forget about the newspapers getting rid of their book review sections. What is flooding the market now, and more and more review sites are going to be inundated with review requests, is the fact more and more writers are going the self-published route, along with several new smaller presses coming to the surface.

Do you keep the author's feelings in mind when you review?

Always. Mind you, when I say always I'm not referring to gearing the review to suit the author. Oh no. What I mean is that we will not sarcastically bash a writer's work. We will offer the good qualities in the book before we dig into what we felt were missing elements that took away from the read.

Have you received aggressive responses from authors or publishers because of a negative review? If yes, how do you handle it?

No, like I wrote earlier on there was one author who requested we not post the review because it pointed out the various parts in the book the reviewer felt fell short to classify it the genre the writer stated it was.

What does your site offer readers?

We host interviews with authors, chats to meet some of the authors, and we also have the Bragging Rites yahoo group where we invite our readers to join us and read upcoming new releases, read excerpts and meet some of the authors online.

What is the most rewarding aspect of being a reviewer?

Knowing with each review, if the writer knows how to properly read a review, I am helping them hone their future work.

Is there anything else you would like to say about you or The Muse Book Reviews?

I'd like to add that reviewing books is truly an honor for us because we have someone's baby in our hands. Believe it or not, we try to find good qualities first over the bad ones in any book and not out to 'get a writer'. We have been lucky and blessed to have had writers with quality books, some 1 rose rated and others 4 roses rated. Most of our authors have emailed us to thank us for our honesty and they now, after reflecting on what we wrote, can see how to improve that area in their writing in their upcoming books. This is the best flattery anyone can give us and we'll continue offering our honest reviews.

Thank you, Lea!

Rachel Riebeling Durfor of Rebecca's Reads

<http://www.rebeccasreads.com/>

Interview by Mayra Calvani

<http://blogcritics.org/archives/2008/06/27/145446.php>

Established in 1998 by Rebecca Brown, [Rebecca's Reads](#) is a book review site and publicity service website. When Brown retired from reviewing in 2006, the site remained online but it wasn't until January 2008 that it flourished under new ownership with many new services for authors and readers. Rebecca's Reads considers most type of books in both print and electronic formats. In this interview, Rachel Durfor talks about the site, as well as various aspects of reviewing.

Thanks for this interview, Rachel. What makes Rebecca's Reads stand out among so many other online review sites?

We not only provide book reviews, but we're also a publicity service site for the reading audience, authors, publishers, publicists and buyers/sellers. In addition to book reviews, we provide other budget-friendly publicity options such as press release writing and distribution, production and distribution, book videos, editing, and book proposals. Also, Rebecca's Reads has been syndicated and our sites have appeared in Reuters and *Chicago Sun-Times*.

How should an author contact you about a review request? Do you review e-books as well?

We have a submission form online for authors, publishers or publicists who would like to submit a book for a publicity package.

For a book to be considered for a complimentary review, books can be sent to Rebecca's Reads, Review Request, 7101 W Hwy 71, Ste 250, Austin, TX 78735

Yes, we do review eBooks. To submit an eBook for a complimentary review, I can be contacted at Rachel@RebeccasReads.com.

How many books do you review a month?

Since our reopening in March, we've been averaging about 35 book reviews per month, but the numbers are rising all the time!

How do you select the books you review? How do you determine which reviews to post on your site?

We have a pending review page on our site. Our reviewers select the books they want to review and email us their choices. We then send them the books ASAP. All reviews are posted, unless they are extremely negative.

What is your stand on paid reviews?

We provide different levels of publicity packages to promote books. These include an expedited review, meaning that they will receive a review within two

weeks of the reviewer receiving the book, but actually the payment covers the other services included in the package.

Do you think it's okay for reviewers to resell the books they review?

I personally think it's inappropriate for reviewers to resell the books or advance review copies they review. We encourage them to donate or give away the books if they do not want to keep them.

Do you think a review written by a reader has less value than one written by a professional reviewer? What defines a true 'reviewer'?

I don't think so, no. A review done by a professional reviewer might be better put together, but that doesn't mean that their review should garner any more significance than one done by a layperson.

I think a true reviewer is someone who's able to give an unbiased opinion on what they're reading, while at the same time keeping the reader at bay with their own writing.

If a book is terrible, do you think a reviewer should write and publish the review, or should she decline to write a review?

You know how your mother always told you "if you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all?" Well I think that holds true, somewhat, in the world of book reviewing. Yes, you want to say whether you recommend a book or not, but it's really not necessary to trash a book or an author. I've learned that to most authors, their book is like their baby, and you never tell a mother her newborn baby is kind of, well, unattractive, even if it is. It's just polite. If one of our reviewers really dislikes a book, we ask them to send it back; we really don't like to publish negative reviews. Most of the books we receive are by fledgling authors, and we'd rather help them advance their writing careers, not hinder them.

There are some bloggers out there who have acquired fame as tough reviewers because of their harsh, nasty reviews. What's behind this philosophy?

Maybe it's only about acquiring fame to them. Some people really don't care who they step on to get to the top, you know.

Thanks, Rachel! I appreciate it!

Linda Mae Baldwin of Road to Romance

<http://www.lindamaebaldwin.com/>

Interview by Mayra Calvani

<http://blogcritics.org/archives/2008/06/28/205047.php>

Until six months ago, Linda Mae Baldwin was the Inspirational Review Coordinator for Road to Romance. Though she still reviews for them, she now primarily reviews for her own site. In addition, she's an Associate Reviewer for *Romantic Times Magazine*, and authors and publicists often send her advance review copies and finished books for review. For review requests, you may contact Linda via her web site.

Thanks for your time, Linda. How long have you been reviewing?

I have been reviewing for about five years. I was the inspirational review coordinator for Road to Romance until the owner sold it last year, and I've been a reviewer for *Romantic Times Magazine* for about three years. Just recently I've been putting reviews on my own Web site LindaMaeBaldwin.com.

Tell us about your site.

I have a personal award, the Flamingo Award. If you get Five Flamingo's it's like stellar. If you only get one flamingo, it means I didn't like the book too much.

How many books do you review a month?

I do at least one for Romantic Times, and want to do at least five for my site, but haven't gotten there yet.

How do you select the books you review?

Usually a publisher, public relations firm or author requests a review from me.

How do you determine which reviews to post on your site?

I am going to post all that I read. (Eventually.)

What is your policy when it comes to negative reviews?

I try to be honest. If I can't get into a book, I say so, if it's slow, I say so....I also try to always something good. There is always something good.

There was a lot of controversy last year between print publication reviewers and online bloggers. In your opinion, what defines a "legitimate" reviewer?

Good question. I guess anyone who wants to offer up a review can do so. It's got to be fair and balanced though.

What is your stand on paid reviews?

I would take it but so far, no offers. **grin**

Do you think it's okay for reviewers to resell the books they review? What about advance review copies (ARCs)?

This is a HUGE issue, it seems. Even publishers are conflicted (I've asked a few and they give different answers.) Although, it's not about selling the ARC's, it seems we all understand that is a no-no. Yet, they do show up on eBay and other sites. It's unethical I think, especially REAL ARC's, that are totally full of typos and can even be totally different than the final product, to sell these. It's not fair to authors or publishers.

What are the most common mistakes amateur reviewers make?

Completely praising a book or completely trashing one.

With so many major newspapers getting rid of their book review sections, how do you see the future of online review sites?

I'm not so sure they will be successful. I try to hit Amazon, Barnes and Nobles and CBD sites to leave reviews there too. They get a lot of exposure.

Do you keep the author's feelings in mind when you review?

Do you mean do I worry about hurting them? I guess to a certain extent. I do try to offer a balanced review so there is no way someone is going to be slammed.

Have you received aggressive responses from authors or publishers because of a negative review? If yes, how do you handle it?

I haven't.

Thanks, Linda!

Hilary Williamson of Book Loons

<http://www.bookloons.com/>

Interview by Mayra Calvani

<http://blogcritics.org/archives/2008/06/29/130651.php>

Founded in 2002 by Hilary Williamson, [BookLoons](#) now offers readers close to 10,000 reviews on various genres—from children's to teens to most adult categories. Williamson is very selective when recruiting reviewers and edits all reviews herself before they appear on the site. On average, between 100-150 reviews are added to BookLoons each month. If you're interested in becoming a BookLoons reviewer or would like to submit your book for review, contact Williamson at editor@bookloons.com.

Thanks for stopping by at Blogcritics today, Hilary. Please tell us about your book review site. How and when did it get started?

I launched BookLoons in Fall 2000 as a place for people to connect to books that interest them, in a broad range of genres, covering mainly new releases but also old favorites that site visitors might have missed over the years ...

What makes BookLoons stand out among so many other online review sites?

That question might better be addressed to our site visitors :-).

But we do aim for a consistent quality of review. I pick reviewers carefully and edit all our reviews. We also cover a broad range of genres, which some might see as an advantage or the converse. 30-40 new reviews are added weekly. Also reviews (we have close to 10,000 now) remain online permanently and are available through a variety of search paths.

What is the most challenging aspect of running a review site?

Time. I write a significant percentage of our reviews myself, do all the site updates, and also spend a great deal of time communicating via email with publicists and reviewers.

How many books do you review a month?

We post somewhere between 100 and 150 new reviews every month on BookLoons.

How many staff reviewers do you have?

We have close to thirty, about a quarter Canadian and the majority from the United States. However, some are much more active than others, and some are quite specialized in what they review, while others (including myself) read broadly.

How should an author contact you about a review request? Do you review e-books as well?

We obtain most review copies directly from publishers and publicists. We don't review e-books yet as most of our reviewers don't have good e-book devices. Authors also occasionally contact us directly (editor@bookloons.com) in which case I ask for a summary, publishing details, and a link to an online excerpt so that reviewers can assess whether or not the book interests them.

Do you think there's a lot of "facile praise" among many online review sites? What is your policy when it comes to negative reviews?

There is certainly a fair amount of "facile praise," not only among review sites (and on bookseller sites) but also on book jackets from other authors - as a reader, I find the latter most disappointing, when an author I trust leads me astray.

I believe that an objective review should let someone else know what the reviewer liked or disliked about a book, so the site visitor can get a sense of whether or not it would appeal to them.

We do write negative reviews when called for, but try to always end on a positive note.

Over the years, I have had a few authors email to say they were very unhappy about reviews. My policy in that case is never to modify the review, but rather to take it off the site if the author wants that. (I've done it 2 or 3 times in the last 8 years).

There was a lot of controversy last year between print publication reviewers and online bloggers. In your opinion, what defines a "legitimate" reviewer?

That's an interesting one! We actually wrote an article ("What's in a Review?") on the subject last year with input from all BookLoons reviewers - and they had a lot to say.

My bottom line (quoted from the article): "First and foremost, surely it's a wonderful thing to have this powerful grass-roots resource (the Internet, bloggers and review sites) spreading the word about good books and authors?" and in conclusion, "While I hope that literary reviewers will continue to remind us of what makes great 'writing', I - along with fellow readers and reader reviewers - feel perfectly free, ready and willing to comment on what makes great 'reading'."

What is your stand on paid reviews?

They're not reviews; they're part of book marketing, which is fine as long as you don't call them reviews and are above board with site visitors. I do not accept paid reviews on BookLoons, nor do I accept fees for featuring books on the site (as I understand some sites do). I do run ads to cover hosting fees, but they're clearly labeled as such.

Do you think it's okay for reviewers to resell the books they review? What about advance review copies (ARCs)?

ARCs should not be sold - that's clearly indicated on the covers. But I think it's fine for reviewers to sell final copies if they want to do so, as the books are generally their only payment for reviews. I give my copies away (those I don't keep for my ever expanding personal library :-).

Do you keep the author's feelings in mind when you review?

When I write (or edit) reviews, I try to be tactful. But the review is not for the author (aside from helping give his or her book exposure), it's for the reader wondering if that book is to their taste. So I try to focus on that.

What is the most rewarding aspect of being a reviewer?

Reading of course (and getting new releases of favorite authors early!) But also, the excitement (that all readers have) of discovering an excellent new author, and being able to play a small part in sharing that discovery with the reading world. One of our reviewers (Josephine Locke) put it well in "What's in a Review?", saying "My hope is that something in any review, even minutely, plays a note, reaching out and touching potential readers." That's why all of us read and review after all.

Thanks for this interview, Hilary!

Meet Judi Clark, Founder—MostlyFiction.com

<http://mostlyfiction.com/>

Interview by Mayra Calvani

<http://blogcritics.org/archives/2008/06/29/204927.php>

Started in 1998, MostlyFiction.com is an online review site with about 16 staff reviewers who review an average of 20 books a month. One thing that is of interest to authors, is that each review is linked to the author's website and includes the author's complete biography with links to Amazon.

If you'd like to become a reviewer for MostlyFiction.com, please read the submission guidelines. In this interview, founder Judi Clark talks about the challenges of maintaining a review site and also discusses various aspects of reviewing, among other things.

Please tell us about your book review site. How and when did it get started?

MostlyFiction.com was started about ten years ago. I decided to teach myself how to build web pages, so it started as an HTML exercise. I had just sent a friend an extensive list of recently read books each with a paragraph about the book. It seemed like a good thing to stick on a web page. As I made my way through the HTML exercises, I expanded the list into individual author pages (researching the authors and books turned out to be fun) and placed the pages on virtual bookshelves. Amazon.com had recently started the associates program and it seemed like a good fit; family and friends agreed it was convenient. Shortly after I signed up with Amazon.com (and got my letter from Jeff Bezos!), I decided to rename my site to MostlyFiction.com. I also found myself writing better reviews, so much so that I started to attract the attention of publicists, publishers and authors.

I was amazed that I was getting free books just because I decided to pursue this hobby. Of course, it opened up soul searching questions on whether or not I should accept the books (yes, but no promises) and if I was obligated to review if I did accept them (no). Thus, early on I had to establish answers to these questions. Meanwhile, the site did accomplish my main goal. I landed a new job, though the job itself had nothing to do with building websites. Just the fact that I had the site going proved something, I guess. It also helped to land subsequent jobs, of which web skills came in handy. I did not bring in other reviewers until 2002. I was nervous because I wanted to keep the site's voice (i.e., my voice), yet I wanted to cover more books. So I had to find a way to convey what I wanted others to write in a review. I suppose that at heart I am a control freak (not all those who live and work with me are saying) and it was a bit hard opening up to other styles and thoughts. But I'm glad I tried it because I have made some great friends and have learned so much working with other people and accepting their review suggestions and styles. I've been lucky that most of our reviewers are better writers than I am. And for those that are not, I have learned that I have a passion for editing.

What makes MostlyFiction.com stand out among so many other online review sites?

Good Question! Do we stand out? I think we have good reviewers and I feel that we try to go a little deeper with our reviews. I hope that we convey how much we love to read. There are many good review sites out there, which I am glad about because it says people are reading. MostlyFiction.com is a bit unique in that we link to other sites from our review page. Every author page has a Bookmarks section in which I add links to interviews, reading guides and other people's reviews. Most sites do not do this because they don't want the traffic leaving their site. Of course, I don't want people to leave MostlyFiction.com either but I like helping people learn more about the author or book. I also include a complete bibliography for each author (with links to Amazon.com). So it is more than just reading a review, it is sharing an enthusiasm for the author. This is the format that I settled on when I started the site and I have maintained it ever since. I do it for selfish reasons, I love learning about the authors and reading other people's reviews as much as our own. I just hope that MF visitors get as much out of these links as I do.

I should also mention that since all our reviewers are volunteers and I maintain the site in my spare time, you can trust that we are just making recommendations and have no hidden agendas. We love discovering new authors, we love reading new books by our favorite authors and we love writing our reviews. I hope that when people visit our site that this is what they take away as well as a few good reading suggestions.

What is the most challenging aspect of running a review site?

Mainly, having enough time to do everything that I want to do with it, settling for doing what I can.

A good challenge is matching books to reviewers. Unfortunately, I do not have the time to write reviews much any more so this means when I read a book I want reviewed, I search around to see who I think will do a good job with the book. Since reading and reviewing is subjective, I need to find someone who will pretty much see the book the same way I do. Usually, I am rewarded with a better review than I think I would have written. But, there are times when I pass the book on, read the submitted review and realize that the review hardly touches on any of the aspects that I thought they should and moreover, they say more negative than positive. Do I still post the review? Another side of the same problem is when a submitted review seems shallow, especially in comparison to other reviews out there. I'm torn between publishing the review (with some edits) to get the word out because I want to recommend the book or to not post it at all because the writing is not up to par with my expectations for the site.

Running this website is an interesting form of management because every contact is a virtual relationship. Communications is 100% email. Of course, it doesn't have to be this way, I could talk to reviewers on the phone—but this style suits me and my limited time and has not failed me yet. The only downside is that every once and a while a reviewer falls off the face of the

virtual earth and I have no idea what happened to them. Fortunately, this haunting event is rare. And I hope the explanation, if I ever learn it, is far more mundane than my imagination would have it.

How many books do you review a month?

I try to post at least twenty reviews a month, but when I fall short it has more to do with my real job work schedule than the number of reviews available to post. Fortunately, I never run out of reviews. Considering the number of books that are published in a month, to review 200 books a year is just a drop in the literary bucket. I try to mention new releases and forthcoming books for authors who are already featured on the website and for authors who are getting industry buzz, but again, this usually proves to be a more ambitious project than I have time for. My priority is to post book reviews, thus everything else takes a back seat. Despite never catching up, I would still take on more reviewers if their writing style warranted it.

How many staff reviewers do you have?

Currently, we have sixteen volunteer reviewers for MostlyFiction.com. Some frequently contribute, others are more sporadic. I manage the group very loosely because I understand that people get busy in their lives and can't always commit to a deadline. But I do have some guidelines to help people stick to their commitments. Regardless, it is a big time commitment to say that you want to be a regular reviewer. If someone just wants free books, I recommend that they visit their local library.

From the start I have been amazed that people want to review for no pay, except maybe a free book. What motivates them?

For some it is a stepping stone to getting a job writing. Others are already writing books and reviewing is both a way to study other people's writing and to get their name out there. Many of the reviewers, especially the more prolific ones, are top Amazon.com reviewers. For them, MostlyFiction.com gives them an opportunity to write longer, more in depth reviews or if not that, at least a chance for the review to stay. I never take down a review/author page, and every reviewer has a list of the books that they have reviewed on the site if they need to send a link of their reviews. And finally, some people have discovered that reviewing does let them enjoy reading more.

Are you currently recruiting more reviewers? If so, what are your guidelines?

We always need more reviewers. Those interested in reviewing are requested to complete a questionnaire that helps me learn about their reading interests. I also request that they submit an audition review. I prefer the audition review to be written for MostlyFiction.com because I think every site has something different that they are looking for in a review. And I want to know if this reviewer gets what MostlyFiction.com is about.

How should an author contact you about a review request? Do you review ebooks as well?

We have information on our website on how to submit requests for book reviews. But I don't want to give false hope. I am overloaded with book requests and do not get back to the majority of people who are good enough to take the time to send an email with all the requisite information. I feel bad about this but I just do not have enough reviewers to cover all the books that need to be reviewed. But anyone who wants to try me, then just follow the submission guidelines. I guess it is like the lottery because I do accept some of these books for review.

How do you select the books you review?

I let the reviewers select the books that they want to review. MostlyFiction.com exists to recommend books, therefore, it makes sense for the reviewers to want to read the books that they review. When I receive unsolicited books, I post the ones that I am interested in having reviewed on a TBR (to be reviewed) page. Reviewers can then claim any of these books. I also make suggestions to reviewers to help them discover some authors that they might not have read before. It is my job to know which books will appeal to which reviewers. I also request books from publishers on behalf of the reviewers. Many of the reviewers also visit their local library (some even work in libraries) and get their books this way and yes, we do buy books as well. I try to keep track of who is reviewing which book on the TBR page. Overall, there are enough books that we do not have too many conflicts and the reviewers often work out conflicts amongst themselves. And when they can, I publish multiple reviews of the same book since it usually means the book is really worth recommending.

How do you determine which reviews to post on your site?

The books laydown or release date is the first criteria. We never publish ahead of the laydown date, but if a review is ready on the day it releases then I try to post it. Anyway, recently released books get priority. Though I do mix in the older books because I need to be fair to all reviewers and some prefer to review books that have been out for awhile. I do say that a good book doesn't go out of style, so older books are just as welcome, especially if the review is well written. I stress a little bit making sure that I'm being fair to all reviewers. Since the books that we read range from prize winning literature to sleuths and mysteries, and even some nonfiction, I try to mix it up.

The final criteria is the time factor. If I don't have much time, then I choose a review of a book that already has an author page so that I only have to refresh the bibliography and bookmark links when I post the review. If I have sufficient time, I will tackle one of the more prolific writers since I know the research will take longer. The well written review always has a better chance of getting published. Reviews that need a lot of editing sometimes never make it since by the time I can do the edit, the review is often no longer freshly written and it is too late to ask the reviewer to rewrite it.

Do you think there's a lot of facile praise among many online review sites? What is your policy when it comes to negative reviews?

I tell reviewers that they must finish a book to review it. If they don't like a book, then let me know, but move on and find a book that they like. (Life is too short and we absolutely do not have time to read every book so be choosy!) On the other hand, if they finish a book and by the last page decide that they do not like the book yet feel obligated to write a review to warn others away from it or to just want to air their disappointment, then I recommend that they tell the reader why they were compelled to finish the book (i.e. what is good about the book) and then say why the book disappointed.

When I am choosing the next review to post, I find that I tend to skip over the negative reviews that don't meet this criteria and go for the ones in which the reviewer is recommending the book. However, when it is a well written review, then I do willingly post it, even if it is a negative review. If I read the book and agree with the reviewer's comments, then I am more apt to post the negative review.

I basically believe that reading is subjective and one reviewer's experience does not reflect all readers' experience. I like a review that lets me decide if I will like the book, whether I agree or disagree with the reviewer's opinion of the book.

Do I think there is a lot of facile praise out there? Not among the bloggers and the ordinary people that like to write reviews. Because MostlyFiction.com links to other site reviews, I do read reviews from a lot of different sites. Certainly, we all know that the Amazon.com system breeds friends of the authors and sometimes I and the other reviewers are fooled. But most people are sincere about their comments and reviews. Or maybe, I just have learned how to avoid the unhelpful reviews.

There was a lot of controversy last year between print publication reviewers and online bloggers. In your opinion, what defines a legitimate reviewer?

Getting paid and having deadlines seems like criteria that makes one a legitimate reviewer. Or maybe that's just a professional which probably can be considered the same as legitimate. I love it when MostlyFiction.com is quoted in book blurbs and by other sites. It doesn't happen often enough, but somehow that makes me feel our site is more legitimate. So by that criteria, I'd say popularity does lend itself to legitimacy as well. Although we have some very fine writing on MostlyFiction.com, I think most people would classify us as talented amateurs.

What is your stand on paid reviews?

I assume by paid reviews you mean that the newspaper, website or blogsite is paying the writer for a review that they asked them to write and not the publisher paying for the review at the newspaper, website or blogsite. If so, then I think that people who get paid to write reviews have generally earned the right to be compensated. I like to read both professional and amateur reviews when I'm trying to decide on a book. I never think, oh that person got paid so

they must have had to say that. A well written review will always tell you what works and does not work in a book. Even if someone is writing a fluff review, the writer knows how to get a didn't like message out. Again, I think reading is subjective, so I don't think it matters if someone is paid. A well written review is helpful regardless.

I think it would be cool if I could pay our reviewers.

What about reviewers or review sites that charge authors and publishers for a review?

Interesting concept, but I would not do this; I think it would change MostlyFiction.com's purpose. First, it seems that you would have to guarantee a large enough audience that you could ensure that the author or publisher was getting their money's worth from this stealth form of advertising. The reviewers would then be required to write the review even if they hated the book, turning a passion into a job. And, finally, you get into the ethical problem of whether or not to write an honest review. One of my first jobs out of college was to write puff articles on seacoast restaurants that bought advertising from the newspaper. As I say, there is always a way to write a review to get your honest opinion out (describing the tacky decor worked in one instance) but it still left me with a queasiness that eventually made me decide that the job wasn't for me. So I think that ethically, I wouldn't be up for charging; if I wanted to make more money I'd be more honest and sell ad space. Of course, this also makes me wonder whose reviews can be trusted if this is common practice. I feel so naive!

Do you think it's okay for reviewers to resell the books they review?

Yes. Though most people I know (including myself) like to hold onto the good books so it is not really an issue. Selling books online doesn't actually make money, but it does pay for shipping the book to the new owner. Also, selling books to brick and mortar bookstores is usually for credit and it often takes three to five books to get enough credit to buy one book (and even then you have to pay some cash). Selling books is usually more of a way to manage the book piles that are getting out of control in the house. For me, I have found that it is much easier to just gather up the books and drop them off at my local library, as I suspect is true for most people who are getting ten or more unsolicited books a week.

Advance review copies (ARCs) are not supposed to be sold and I do not know of any bookstores that will take these. It is a complete mystery to me as to how someone rids themselves of an ARC for money. That said, I have purchased ARCs in used bookstores. The fact only further exacerbates the mystery.

Anyway, my agreement with the reviewers is that when I send them a book it is theirs to keep as it is the only pay that I can give them. They can do anything that they want with it, which means they can add it to their bookshelf, donate it to the library, sell it or leave it for someone to find by chance at the laundromat.

When everyone has an e-reader and ARCs and review copies are sent via email, then we will not have to worry about managing our paper books. I think this will be a sad day for me, but a happy day for my husband.

What are the most common mistakes amateur reviewers make?

Writing a book report instead of a book review is one thing. But there is also a lot of careless bad writing. Some people do not rewrite and reorganize. They seem to think that the way the words fall out of their heads is perfectly good. They just rattle off their thoughts.

Also, people need to think about what they read. Answer questions like, how does the title relate to the book, if there is an unusual chapter structure, how does this affect the book. In other words, answer questions on how, as well as what, and who, and when. I am always surprised when a reviewer does not mention a thing about where the story is located. If the location is not important, well that is something worth mentioning too but location is often intricately a part of a book. If the reviewer does not like a character, does that make the book good or bad? More readable or less readable. Do you relate to this character to be able to enjoy the book? If there is a structural issue, think about how it affects the book, assume that the author chose to do this on purpose, then consider the purpose and its affect on reading the book. No review should just jump to a conclusion that it is faulty without an exploration of the author's motives. Does the chosen point of view help or hurt the story's purpose. Usually exploring these deeper questions results in a better reading of the book and better review writing.

With so many major newspapers getting rid of their book review sections, how do you see the future of online review sites?

It's an interesting question because I think you have to look at which books get reviewed by the newspapers and how these books are chosen. With approximately 10,000 novels published each year, it is impossible to cover all new fiction no matter how many review outlets there are. So these newspaper reviews become legitimate filters that help direct our attention to a few worthy books; though I strongly suspect that the chosen books are first filtered by Publishers Weekly and Kirkus Reviews. So ultimately the question is, if newspapers stop being a cog in the publishing industry publicity, then what? And what do the paid book reviewers do for a living in the future?

No matter the intention, every book review is publicity. I don't care what my reasons were for starting MostlyFiction.com, this site quickly became part of the PR cycle. It's the nature of the beast. If all newspapers were to decide to drop book reviewing from their budgets, then some of the existing, or maybe some new websites, will rise up and fill the gap to filter and promote. The publishers need book reviews. Some sites are already more legitimate than others. These sites will probably have an even larger offering of advance review copies. Maybe we will recognize the new legitimate by the number of books they review at laydown date, as long as the reviews offer quality writing. It is hard for me to imagine that hasty quick Amazon.com blurb reviews will do the trick.

Maybe, the sites that become new legitimate, will initially emulate the print world (or derive from the print world since most major newspapers print their books reviews online so why wouldn't they continue doing this?) But with 175,000 new books published every year it is hard to imagine that this structure could last long. Moreover, as ereaders become more common and publishers will be able to push out review copies for less money, maybe the whole model will break apart.

If this happens, I just want it known that I will accept any unemployed book reviewers as volunteers at MostlyFiction.com.

Do you keep the author's feelings in mind when you review?

I think about the fact that someone put pen to paper (or fingers to keyboard) and has written a complete book. Thus, they deserve respect because this is not something that I will ever accomplish. I prefer that our reviewers be the good reader and give the book a chance. However, if the book is just not enjoyable, then leave it be. Hopefully, someone else will find more pleasure in the book and they can write a fair review.

Have you received aggressive responses from authors or publishers because of a negative review? If yes, how do you handle it?

Yes, back in 2003. One of our reviewers followed my guidelines and said what she liked about a certain book and what she did not like about it. In her opinion the author had done a writerly trick at the end of the book and just ruined it for her. Up to that point, she enjoyed it quite a bit, but she could not recommend the book because of this flaw. The book was published by a small independent and they needed our review to generate some publicity. Naturally, they were appalled when they saw what was posted. I had not read the book myself and felt a bit helpless as I considered what to do - stick up for my reviewer or persuade her to soften her review. When I looked around at other reviews, we seemed to be the only site to pick up on this flaw. But then, there were only a few reviews and those sites were smaller than ours with more fluffy reviews. I had more discussion with the reviewer to just make sure she wasn't being a sloppy reader. Despite thinking she was probably right in her assessment, I still decided to pull the review and post just the excerpt instead. Without reading the book myself, I didn't think I should keep the review posted. And since the book didn't interest me enough to read it, I figured taking the review down was the moral answer to the dilemma.

Since the reviewer involved in this incident has just published her first book, I'm tempted to revisit this issue with her and see what she now thinks about how I handled this situation.

That incident helped me solidify my rules for bad reviews. And I haven't had anything as strong or nasty as that incident since.

Though I did have one author who decided her self-published book was terrible and asked me to remove any mention of the book because she didn't want to be associated with it. It was too bad because the book wasn't all that bad.

I also had one author ask me to cut words out of a review that I had written because he felt that I had given away too much of the story. I did change it but I don't think I made the right decision because I do not think that I gave away too much. But I was young then. Now I would simply tell him that no one remembers the review itself, only whether or not the book sounded interesting enough to read the book and I would have left my review alone.

Kooky reader comments is another thing. Lots of these over the years, usually threatening to boycott the site for one reason or the other.

What does your site offer readers?

Reading suggestions. Although we read a lot of new books, because that is fun, we also read not so recently published books. We hope that we are like a friend that recommends a good book. Some you want to try. Others, you are glad that you know about them mainly because you know it is NOT one that you will want to read. It is hard to imagine that you would visit MostlyFiction.com and not find a good book to read.

What promotional opportunities does your site offer authors?

None outside the obvious; that every review is publicity. If we really want to call attention to a book, then we might do an interview or a book giveaway. For a few years, I went crazy with book raffles; so much so that it started to feel more like we were just pushing anything and everything. We tried to review the books that we gave away, but it didn't always work out. Worse, I'd realize that we were about to raffle a book that no one was that crazy about. So now I'm only doing book giveaways for books that we truly want to promote. Of course, since several of our former reviewers are publishing books this year; we will promote those! Nepotism reigns supreme in the publishing world.

What is the most rewarding aspect of being a reviewer?

Reviewing slows you down and lets you really, really read the book. When you know that you are going to write a review, you do read more carefully because you do not want to make false statements in your review. Often the process of writing a review lets you see the book more clearly and sometimes you like a book even more when you finish the review than when you started writing because reviewing makes you a better reader.

Another reward is discovering new authors. I cannot imagine my reading life with having become involved with reviewing and reviewers. I am a better person for this experience. Moreover, the fact that I get to do research on the authors for the bookmarks section and the bibliography section has offered further enrichment. I really hope that this experience is passed on to all our site visitors.

Is there anything else you would like to say about you or MostlyFiction.com?

Simply put, we love to read and we love to tell you about good books. It would be great if more people were to discover MostlyFiction.com because I think our reviewers deserve a larger audience. I don't expect us to ever become

one of the big legitimate sites but we should be a place you come back to on a regular basis just to make sure you don't miss any good reads.

Gail Pool, Author of *Faint Praise - The Plight of Book Reviewing in America*

<http://www.reviewingbooks.com/index.html>

Interview by Mayra Calvani

<http://blogcritics.org/archives/2008/06/30/135638.php>

Former Boston Review Editor Gail Pool has been involved in literary journalism for three decades. She has been a magazine editor, a review editor, a critic, a columnist, and a freelance journalist. Her columns, essays and articles have appeared in publications such as the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, *The Houston Post*, *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, *The St. Petersburg Times*, *The Kansas City Star*, *Columbia Journalism Review* and *The New York Times*, among many others. She has also written about reviewing for *The Women's Review of Books*, *Boston Review*, and *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Pool is the author of *Faint Praise: The Plight of Book Reviewing in America*, published by the University of Missouri Press. For her impressive compilation of articles and essays on book reviewing, visit her [website](#).

Thank you for being my guest today, Gail. Why don't you start by telling us a little about yourself?

I've been involved with reviewing in one way or another for about 30 years. I started out as a reviewer at *Boston Review*, where I later became an editor, assigning essays and reviews. Since then, I've been a reviewer, columnist, or review editor for publications ranging from *The Christian Science Monitor* and *The Cleveland Plain Dealer* to *The Women's Review of Books*, *the Nation*, *The Radcliffe Quarterly*, and *The Library Press*. I really feel I've seen the field from many angles.

What constitutes a good review?

Well, I think there are many ways of writing—I don't think there's a formula. But a good review should include an accurate description of the book that places it in a meaningful context and an assessment of whether or not the book succeeds in what it set out to do and why. As an article in its own right, a review should also be well-written and interesting to read.

What is the difference between reviewing and criticism?

There are different kinds of criticism, and reviewing is one kind. Historically, reviewing has referred to the criticism of new books. This means the reviewer is writing for readers who haven't read the book—which is why an accurate description is so important. And it also means that critics haven't discussed the book before, so reviewers are on their own in forming their opinions. This is one of the reasons reviewing is so difficult.

Do you see a review as an opinion or as a critique of someone's work?

I see a review as a critique of a work. It contains the reviewer's opinion about the book, but it goes beyond expressing an opinion: it explains how the reviewer arrived at his or her opinion, providing reasons from the book. I think of a review, even a short review, as an essay explaining a response to a book.

Do you keep the author's feelings in mind when you review?

I focus on the book when I'm reviewing, and I try to respond to the book. My job is to write about the book, after all, not the author. And I'm writing for readers, not the author. Still, I'm aware that the author does have feelings, and I don't see the need for nastiness. I don't think criticism should be personally hurtful.

*In your book, *Faint Praise: The Plight of Book Reviewing in America*, you refer to book reviewing as a "troubled" trade. What has gone wrong with reviewing?*

Reviewing in America has always been a troubled trade. Since reviews first appeared in this country, people—even reviewers—have been complaining about them. You should read the insults heaped on reviewing in the 19th century! And many of the complaints, which have remained remarkably similar over time, are justified. Too many good books are ignored, too many reviews are hype. But there are many reasons reviewing hasn't been better, including the fact that the field has never received financial or cultural support. The reviewing community hasn't resolved those underlying problems.

How has book reviewing changed during the last 10 years with the rise of so many online review sites?

The main change has been the increasing number of self-published reviews with no editorial oversight. We've always had many amateur reviewers—unpaid reviewers writing for newspapers or literary magazines, specialists reviewing in their field. But in the past there were review editors, whose job was to choose worthwhile books, match them with knowledgeable reviewers with no conflict of interest, and edit the reviews for coherence and clarity. I see this role, if it's well done, as important, partly for the integrity of the review, and partly for quality. In my experience as a writer and editor, writers need editors.

You also state that bad reviewing happens despite good intentions and that many intelligent people who love books can sometimes say unintelligent things about them. Would you elaborate?

What I meant is that reviewers set out to write good reviews, but constraints work against them: deadlines can force them to read and write quickly, a lack of space can force them to leave out important points, low fees limit the time they can devote to a book, the pressure to be "lively" too often leads to snappy rather than thoughtful writing. In the end, whatever reviewers' intentions, reviews are often poorly written, poorly argued, filled with clichés and overpraise.

Do you think there's a lot of 'facile praise' among online review sites as opposed to print publications? If yes, why?

I think there's a lot of facile praise both in print and online, and on the whole I believe the reasons are similar. One central reason is that we tend to think that being "fair" means being kind to the author rather than honest to the reader. The tendency to praise too highly is a tradition firmly embedded in American reviewing. I think it's embedded in American culture.

There are some bloggers out there who have acquired fame as tough reviewers because of their harsh, nasty, mean reviews. What, in your opinion, is behind their philosophy?

I think they're trying to show how smart they are, especially how much smarter than the author whose book they're writing about. These reviews seem to me more about self-promotion than criticism. But this isn't limited to bloggers. Nasty reviewing has a long history in print, and there are some good satirical essays mocking this kind of oneupmanship.

If a book is terrible, do you think a reviewer should write and publish the review, or should she decline to write it?

If a reviewer finds a book so poorly conceived and written there's nothing of interest to say about it, I don't think she should review it. But to some degree the decision depends on the book and the aims of the reviewer or publication. Some books are bad in significant ways—they reveal a trend in writing or thinking that's worth discussing. And there are weak books written by well-known authors that readers will want to know about, good or bad—but they need to be reviewed honestly: the reviewer has to guard against being intimidated by the famous name.

In your opinion, how influential are reviews on the consumer?

This has always been a hard question to answer because influence is difficult to measure, but I think reviews have an impact on sales and also on reputation. Reviews may not create bestsellers as Oprah does—although *The New York Times Book Review* has quite an impact—but the Amazon ranking for a book certainly rises after almost any review, so they do sell books. Reading groups use reviews in selecting books. Award committees use reviews. Bookstores and libraries rely on reviews in trade publications, the *Times*, and local papers. Directly or indirectly, reviews bring books to a reader's attention.

Can the average reviewer review a friend's book and keep their objectivity?

No, I don't think a reviewer should review a friend's book. The relationship is bound to interfere with her response to the book.

Amazon and many other online retailers and review sites rate their books. Do you think this is a good thing? Is rating books fair? What should people keep in mind when looking at these ratings?

I find the rating system too crude to be useful. Reading a review, we learn not only about the book but also about the reviewer's viewpoint and can judge for ourselves whether we want to read it. A rating accompanied by a few comments tells the reader almost nothing. Especially since reviewers apply these ratings so differently. One reviewer will praise a book, with no criticism, and give it 3 stars, while another will call a book poor and also give it 3 stars. How do we interpret this? The visual impact of these stars is hard to ignore, but I think readers should be cautious in using them.

Do you think a review written by a reader has less value than one written by a professional reviewer? What defines a true "reviewer"?

It depends on the reader and the professional reviewer. Since reviewing began, readers have become "professional" reviewers by reviewing. There aren't credentials or degrees. But those readers who became good reviewers had critical skills, writing skills, and they did the necessary work. And it does require work to write a good review. The reviewer has to have the background knowledge to assess a particular book and the ability to articulate his or her views on how and how well the book works. Ideally, the professional reviewer has devoted time to learning his subject field and how to write about books, and if he has, this gives value to his review. The reader, if his review is to have value, has to do this as well. It takes time and skill, which is why I'd like to see reviewing as a vocation.

Do you think a reviewer or site that receives payment for a review from the author or publisher can be honest and objective?

I think it's a bad idea in many ways to pay for reviews. There's a potential conflict of interest that's best avoided. Just as important, I think, it means that books are selected for review because publishers or authors can pay, not because they've been judged worth reviewing. And with so many books, we need to give attention to those that are worthwhile, not those that are best funded.

Do you see true good reviewers as endangered species?

I think that good reviews have always been an endangered species. But I do think the field is in transition right now. The danger is that the very concept of a good review will be lost amidst the mass of ratings and "comments." But it seems to me that there will always be people with critical skills who will want to critique books well. And as some of our best critical magazines, bloggers, and online Web sites show, they'll find a way to do that.

What advice would you offer aspiring reviewers?

My advice is to read widely. Read literature from the past as well as the present, to develop a feel for good writing and a context for understanding and

appreciating what's being written now. If you're interested in a particular field, read in that field, know the background. In reviewing, I suggest reading carefully, writing precisely, and being brave as well as thoughtful. We need critics who will say they think something is good when it's being ignored or that it's weak when it's being hyped as the new great thing, and that takes courage.

Mayra Calvani

Mayra Calvani is the author of several books. Her stories, articles and reviews have appeared in many online and print publications in the States, England and Puerto Rico. In addition, she is assistant editor of Voice in the Dark newsletter, where she writes a monthly column. She has lived in America, Asia, the Middle East, and is now settled in Brussels, Belgium, where she lives with her husband, two children and a variety of pets. Her hobbies include playing the violin and astronomy/sky observing.

<http://mayracalvani.com/>

**Be certain to look for Mayra's informative book:
The Slippery Art of Book Reviewing
by Mayra Calvani and Anne K. Edwards**

"...Anyone who aspires to reviewing books effectively and responsibly needs to master the information, apply the advice, read carefully the recommendations, and take advantage of the resources to be found in Mayra Calvani and Anne K. Edwards' superbly organized and thoroughly 'user friendly' instruction manual *The Slippery Art of Book Reviewing*."

James A. Cox, Editor-in-Chief *Midwest Book Review*

If you're an experienced reviewer, *The Slippery Art of Book Reviewing* will serve as an excellent reference tool and amalgam of resources. If you're a beginner, this book will show you how to write a well-written, honest, objective and professional book review. It will also teach you:

- How to read critically
- How to differentiate the various types of reviews
- How to rate books
- How to prevent amateurish mistakes
- How to deal with the ethics and legalities of reviewing
- How to start your own review site
- How to publish your reviews on dozens of sites and even make money while you're at it, and much more.

If you're an author, publisher, publicist, bookseller, librarian, or reader, this book will also bring to light the importance and influence of book reviews within a wider spectrum.