

The Art of the Book Review: Exploration of Health Science

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Editor's Note

There are so many books available to the practicing health care professional today that it is often difficult to decide which book to read. Choosing and reading a publication is very much like performing a "review" of the material. I have asked Jay Shenai, our Book Review Editor, to present his thoughts on the "Art of The Book Review." His insight will assist us in this process.

Gilbert I. Martin, MD
Editor in Chief

*I shall ever try to keep all untruths out
from my thoughts, knowing that thou art
that truth which has kindled the light of
reason in my mind.*

—Rabindranath Tagore

Reviewing a book for a journal is a fine art and, if done correctly, can be an important source of information for the lovers of tomes. This editorial focuses on the key elements of a good book review, with special relevance to books of health science.

The most critical function of a book reviewer is to highlight the gist of the subject covered by the author(s) of the book. A good reviewer not only summarizes the core message, but also provides a thoughtful perspective, much akin to someone writing an editorial to complement a scientific article in a journal. While remaining unbiased and entirely objective, the reviewer may hint at the value of the book after exploring its potential strengths and weaknesses. The reviewer should comment on the organization of the book, particularly with reference to the index, references, and appendices. The reviewer should address the questions related to the aesthetic aspects of the book. Is the book divided into sections of readable lengths? Is the font used pleasing to the eye? Are there illustrations that break up the monotony of the book?

A qualified reviewer has expertise in the field pertinent to the subject of the book. Experience strengthens this qualification, whereas bias and/or conflict of interest weaken it. A good reviewer suggests the readers who are most likely to benefit from the book,

comments on the value of the book for the money, and makes a recommendation regarding its imprimatur.

I am an ardent bibliophile, and many books, mostly related to science, adorn my bookshelf. A lot of these books I learned about through book reviews published in distinguished journals. What makes these books unique? As one of my English teachers would say, every book should contain a message that is clear, concise, and correct. To this I might add: timely, imaginative, and inspiring. Clarity of presentation is an asset, perhaps an innate gift, possessed by some authors. *Understanding Acid-Base* by Benjamin Abelow¹ comes to mind as an example of trenchant writing. To be concise is prudent, particularly in the current times of speedy electronic informatics. *Advice to a Young Scientist* by P. B. Medawar² illustrates vividly the power of knowledge contained in a compact little book. Accuracy is indispensable in any scientific presentation. *Time to Heal* by Kenneth M. Ludmerer³ depicts the painstaking detail in the coverage of the evolution of medical education in the United States. Timeliness is critical, as the strong winds of progress shift constantly our state of knowledge. Delays in processing have outdated many a book by the time of publication, with the exception of a few. *Lives of a Cell* and *The Medusa and the Snail* by Lewis Thomas^{4,5} are examples of timeless wonders in medical literature. An imaginative approach goes a long way in clarifying complex subjects, even to the uninitiated. *Life Itself* by Boyce Rensberger⁶ is a superb example of how the mysteries of a cell at its most fundamental level can be explained with fascinating drawings, both real and schematic, and clever writing. Inspiration is a key to enhancement of our pursuit of knowledge. *Olser: Inspirations from a Great Physician* by Charles S. Bryan⁷ imbues our mind through innumerable anecdotes, quotations, and excerpts from one of the most prolific medical practitioners of the past century.

All of us involved in health science have a responsibility to keep abreast of the latest developments, the multitude of techniques for diagnosis and treatment of disease, and the unrelenting barrage of information engendered by scientific inquiry. We need to have a healthy skepticism in the midst of a sense of awe for validated truths. We need to remain inspired, hungry for knowledge, and willing to add to our current state of understanding of the human mind and body. Voracious reading is sine qua non for accomplishment of these objectives. To phrase a common quotation from an unknown source, "Those who don't read have no advantage over those who can't." Thoughtful book reviews can and should aid our search for the ageless classics.

References

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