

A Question of Courtesy

You, an author's editor, are editing a book review. The review is well written and speaks favorably of the book author's research. In addition to describing the author's life work, the reviewer comments extensively on the author's background and motivations. This commentary is based not only on published materials but also on the reviewer's interaction with the author in professional settings over the years. You wonder whether you should advise the reviewer to obtain permission from the author to include the commentary or whether at least the book author should have, as a professional courtesy, a chance to review the review before submission. How should you proceed?

Solutions

Under no conditions would I consider it acceptable for an author to review a review of that author's book. Nor can I conceive of this even being couched in terms of courtesy because it hardly would be courteous to the reviewer. Nikita Khrushchev once described this proposed process as setting the goat to watch the cabbage patch. The pressures it would put on a reviewer would be huge and corrupting. As it is, many reviews are insipid and neither enthusiastic nor seriously critical.

The author has the opportunity to write to an editor complaining about a published review. I've seen this done occasionally, and it is a good idea. There is no guarantee that reviewers will always be capable or unbiased. I think the current system is fairly good and cannot think of any way to improve its imperfections. An editor's judgment in selecting reviewers is an important part of the outcome.

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I can think of no circumstances in which it is appropriate for a book's author to see a review of his or her book before the review

is published. Although reviews are subjective opinion pieces and have been upheld as such by a high court, editors and reviewers have alternatives to consulting the author directly and thereby compromising the review process.

The editor should be aware at the outset of whether a potential reviewer knows the book's author personally. Usually, a person invited to provide a review will disclose such a relationship. If not, the instruction and copyright-transfer form that the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) sends to book reviewers will reveal this information; like that sent to manuscript authors, the form requires disclosure of any "financial or personal connection or conflict of interest involving the book . . . , its author(s), editor(s), [or] . . . publisher." Acquaintance with an author does not preclude review, especially if the relationship is strictly collegial—an institutional or specialty history might best be reviewed by a participant—but the editor (and reader) needs to know.

Personal comments in a review can be written and edited without consulting the book's author. Awareness of the potential for libel, however unlikely, is always good practice. The line for libel is crossed when the reviewer comments on the author personally rather than only on the content of the book. For instance, it is safe to say that the author does not mention a particular seminal event, but dangerous to state that the author has a selective memory. Complimentary personal remarks are probably acceptable, but the reviewer must make clear his or her connection with the author and whether information is from the book. Consider "The author describes Dr S as a veritable Osler on rounds" versus "I would add to the author's account that, as Dr S's resident, I found him to be a veritable Osler on rounds."

Generally, contact between reviewers and authors or publishers is proscribed. We have made an exception for reviews of new media; often the reviewer needs the personal help of the vendor's technical support ser-

vice. As book review editor, I might in a particular case consult with the author when fact-checking after exhausting other sources, but this, too, is rare. Clarity and fairness fulfill the duty to readers and provide sufficient courtesy to authors.

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I would not want a book reviewer to clear a review with the author of a book nor seek his or her permission to say relevant things about the book and about the author even if the reviewer has learned some of it through conversation with the author, no matter who wants the author to exercise this review—the author or the reviewer. Authors who wish to control the content of reviews could write their own and attempt to place them in publications, although I doubt they would succeed. Reviewers who doubt the legitimacy of their own assessments should not write reviews. Implicit in this opinion is that review and permission are equivalent to the right of the author to dictate revisions or to the imposition of restraint on the reviewer beyond that imposed by normal standards of civility. The author should not have, any more than the subject of an investigative report has, the right to restrain the reviewer or revise the review. In fact, I believe that if the author were allowed to revise a review written by another, there would be an undisclosed conflict of interest. Questions of accuracy, taste, and reader interest are the responsibility solely of the book reviewer, book review editor, and publisher. This opinion does not hold if the review is written for the publisher of the book, but in that case the conflict would (surely) be disclosed (and the impact of the review necessarily diminished).

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SOLUTION CORNER

New Question: A Question of Protocol

The authors of a book manuscript tell you that they would like to ask several people to read the manuscript and render a critical appraisal before the manuscript is sent to a publisher. They ask you the usual protocol for soliciting such advice. What do you reply?

The situations described as New Questions in this column are not necessarily based on actual situations, and the ones that are may have been modified to focus the question. Send your responses to the new question to Della Mundy,

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