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Assessing the Value of Scholarly Book Reviews among Geographers

Jeffrey S. Smith
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According to the latest data available, in 2013 a staggering 68,000 scholarly books reached print in North America alone. Book reviews have long served as an important tool to keep tabs on the content and quality of all of those books. In decades past, perusing book reviews was essential in conducting a literature review and a tool for authors to demonstrate the impact that their book has on a field of study. Most important, though, book reviews play a vital role in academic advancement by calling attention to books that successfully add to new knowledge and warn against books with defects and deficiencies. Despite their overwhelming importance, no one has systematically analyzed the value of scholarly book reviews. Moreover, in our current age of the Internet, e-mail, and social media, it is important to know the worth of book reviews. Drawing on the results of a 2018 survey sent to select members of the American Association of Geographers, this article assesses the value of scholarly book reviews among geographers. It answers these questions: Who writes and reads book reviews? What are the characteristics of a useful book review? Is writing a book review considered a valued scholarly activity? Does writing book reviews help advance a person’s career? Because geography is a microcosm of academia, this study has applicability across the social sciences and humanities. Do scholarly book reviews still matter?

Key Words: human geography, monographs, promotion and tenure, scholarly book reviews.

From the classes we teach to the topics we research, geography is a microcosm of academia. This axiom is most evident in the ways in which geographers disseminate the results of their research. As former American Association of Geographers (AAG) President Eric Sheppard (2012) noted, physical geographers tend to publish highly abbreviated, multi-authored articles that summarize advances in their subfield. The most common outlet for GIScientists is conference proceedings. At the other end of the spectrum are social scientists who typically write lengthy, sole- or joint-authored articles. Human geographers are a subset of the discipline who favor writing books, and it is commonly held that they have not earned their stripes until they publish one. The eclectic nature of geography makes it challenging for administrators to evaluate the quality of each individual publication; such a process is akin to comparing apples and arroyos to oranges and organizational theory.

Each year thousands and thousands of scholarly articles reach print. The standard by which these publications are measured rests largely on a journal’s impact factor and each article’s citation index. Yet, for various reasons, including the enormous volume of articles that reach print each year, only 45 percent...
of journal articles are ever cited by other scholars (Bauerlein et al. 2010). Equally challenging is trying to gauge the worth of the thousands of books published each year. In some circles, considerable value is placed on monographs published by leading university presses (e.g., Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard). Still others value volumes published by major publishing houses (e.g., Routledge, Rowman & Littlefield, Wiley), especially when part of a special series. Because there is no book impact factor or citation index for books, the tool most commonly used to evaluate their merit is the scholarly book review.

Despite their perceived importance to people’s careers, to date, no one has systematically analyzed the value of book reviews. Drawing on the results of a 2018 survey sent to specialty and affinity group members of the AAG, the purpose of this article is to assess how human geographers regard the value of single-book book reviews. This article seeks to answer such questions as these: Who writes and reads book reviews? What are the characteristics of a useful scholarly book review? Is writing a book review considered a valued scholarly activity? Does writing scholarly book reviews help advance a person’s career?

This study is timely for numerous reasons. First, in decades past, perusing book reviews was an essential step in conducting a background literature review for one’s research. Single-book book reviews help readers learn about new works reaching print and where they fit within existing knowledge. In our current age of Internet searches and social media, it would be helpful to know whether book reviews are still valued. Second, today’s highly competitive academic environment forces individuals and departments to carefully consider where they invest their scholastic energies. Do scholarly book reviews carry any weight? The answer is particularly relevant for PhD students and untenured faculty who need to know whether writing a book review is a valued activity. Third, as publishing companies and journal editors seek to develop best practices, they could use more information about the desired qualities of single-book book reviews. How can book reviews be better tailored to today’s reading audience? Fourth, as a microcosm of academia, geographers have an opportunity to provide insight into an issue that journals in countless other disciplines across the social sciences and humanities are facing. Do scholarly book reviews of individual books still matter?

Background

A scholarly book review is “a thorough description, critical analysis, and evaluation of the quality, meaning, and significance of a book, often in relation to prior research on the topic” (University of Southern California 2017). Writing a book review is fairly straightforward, yet mastering the skill requires inspiration, perspiration, and practice. Many book review editors describe the process as a fine art (Simon 1996; Lee et al. 2010). Unfortunately, few people have received ample instruction on how to write an effective book review (Berry 1994). As a new PhD student, I was issued a copy of Calef’s Some Canons of Reviewing (Calef 1964; revisited by Berry 1994) because it was considered required reading for all graduate students.

According to Calef (1964), effective book reviews contain three major components: a description, an analysis, and an appraisal. A typical book review begins with a full description, including the book’s length, its physical qualities, a short overview of its content including intent or purpose, and any other pertinent descriptive material (e.g., tone, intended audience, supportive material). A book review’s second part (analysis) hinges on the book’s stated objectives. A well-crafted book review gives credit where it is due and points out deficiencies only in terms of the author’s stated purpose. Calef (1964) encouraged reviewers to be fair, explicit, and honest; it is not the proper venue to show how clever, well-read, or erudite the reviewer is. The final section of a book review is the most difficult and, therefore, often omitted. It is also the most important to the advancement of new knowledge, however. In the appraisal, a reviewer compares the book with existing literature and articulates how the book adds to existing research.

Calef made it clear that book reviews should be given serious attention. He reminded us that members of a scholarly discipline are more than simply a collection of academics working in the same subfield. Instead, acting like teammates, our coordinated efforts help advance new knowledge down the field. This is best accomplished when each member of the team publishes scholarly work and the quality of that work (both successes and failures) is critiqued through fair and objective appraisals by other members of the intellectual community.

When we embrace Calef’s advice, book reviews play a vital role in the continued intellectual strength of a scholarly field. It is through the thorough analysis and appraisal process that the contributions of scholarly books are publicly understood and appreciated or their deficiencies and errors are recognized and criticized (Beer 2016). It has been more than fifty years, however, since Calef shared his insights on the value of book reviews. Do book reviews still play a pivotal role in the age of e-mails, Internet, and social media? Do members of the community still value book reviews as a scholarly activity?

The literature on the value of single-book book reviews is scant at best. My systematic search of existing literature revealed fewer than ten scholarly articles. There are, however, numerous opinion pieces (e.g., blogs and commentaries) by self-proclaimed experts. Of the scholarly publications I
discovered, the majority are descriptive pieces that highlight the pros and cons of book reviews in general. Book reviews are an obvious benefit to publishing companies because they advertise newly published works and help production editors improve the quality of future products (Simon 1996). Librarians rely on book reviews to decide which new volumes to purchase (Lee et al. 2010). Authors use book reviews to document the merits of their work and the contribution(s) their book makes to the field. At some institutions, favorable reviews are a key to advancing one’s career (Worsham 2012).

For members of the academic community, the verdict is still out. Some articles assert that writing a book review has limited utility and diminishing returns. Writing one or two book reviews each year is acceptable, but the time and energy spent could have been better invested in one’s own research (Kelsky 2014; Beer 2016). On the other hand, some contend that writing book reviews helps advance one's own research agenda by exposing the person to new literature and forcing him or her to distill and synthesize new information that could lay the groundwork for a new research project (Beer 2016). It is also a great way to get a publication (albeit soft) in the process (Simon 1996). The take-home message is that there is little consensus on the value of writing book reviews. Within existing literature, book reviews are largely regarded as a service to the discipline and writing a review each year will not harm a person’s career, but it might not help it (Toor 2012; Kelsky 2014). Is this perspective shared ubiquitously? Are there academics at some institutions where scholarly book reviews hold greater value?

As I dug deeper, I learned that there is considerable debate as to who should be writing book reviews and whose reviews are most valued. A popular refrain asserts that freshly minted PhD students and younger faculty make excellent reviewers because they have the strongest command of current literature (Simon 1996; Brienza 2014). The dissenting opinion holds that senior and newly retired faculty are best positioned to write book reviews because they are experienced authors who possess a big-picture perspective that is more likely to produce thoughtful appraisals (Worsham 2012). One of geography’s preeminent scholars, Wilbur Zelinsky, wrote no fewer than eighty-five book reviews over the course of his career (Wood 2015). Did Zelinsky write his most effective appraisals early or later in his career?

There are two types of scholarly book reviews: descriptive and critical (Lee et al. 2010; University of Southern California 2017). Intuitively, descriptive reviews focus on the content and structure of a book. This is exactly what Calef (1964) and Berry (1994) railing against because it provides limited utility in advancing new knowledge. Critical reviews follow Calef’s prescription by evaluating and appraising a book in relation to the larger body of literature. Today, descriptive reviews are most common because they are easier to write and better fit word limit constraints (the average is 750 words; Worsham 2012). Yet, we know little about what scholars want in a book review. Do they value pithy descriptions or critical, analytical reviews? Answers to these questions will guide book review editors in the types of reviews they aim to publish.

In recent years, a good number of scholarly journals have pared down their book review sections or migrated the content to online formats only (e.g., AAG Review of Books; Worsham 2012). Many reasons are articulated. First, there are so many books published each year that choosing which ones to review is vexing, time-consuming, and onerous (Worsham 2012). Second, book review editors have found it increasingly difficult to identify willing writers (Toor 2012). Editors report that individuals are too busy or the time spent writing a review is not worth the effort. Third, many editors question, but have little data on, how many journal subscribers actually read the book reviews (Worsham 2012). Finally, it is asserted that the Internet and social media have replaced the need for book reviews; today information about newly published works is readily available and shared among colleagues.

I hope that the information gleaned from this study will aid a variety of people. First, book review editors will better understand what scholars want and can work toward meeting those desires. Second, younger faculty members and graduate students will learn whether time spent writing book reviews will help or hurt their careers. Finally, it will help guide the decisions of administrators at various types of institutions as they weigh book reviews as part of the annual evaluation, tenure, and promotion processes.

**Methods**

In full disclosure, for the past sixteen years I have served as the book review editor for a major geography journal. In recent years I have become curious as to how important and valued book reviews are to geographers. What better way to arrive at an answer than to ask them?

In January 2018, I contacted the chairs of nineteen specialty and affinity groups of the AAG that fall under the umbrella of human geography. I omitted specialty groups that focus on physical geography and geospatial techniques because, as Eric Sheppard (2012) identified, they tend to place less emphasis on publishing books. With help from the chairs, I posted a call for survey participants on the AAG’s Knowledge Community Messaging System that provided a link to a dedicated Web page administered by SurveyMonkey.com. In early February 2018 I sent out a reminder to the same specialty and affinity group members. The survey contained sixteen
Table 1: List of survey research questions

1. What value do book reviews hold for you personally? (n = 374)
2. Overall, how useful have you found most of the book reviews you have read in the past three years? (n = 374)
3. In what publication outlets do you regularly read the book reviews? (n = 354)
4. What percentage of the book reviews do you typically read in each issue? (n = 354)
5. What, in your opinion, is the most important purpose of a book review? (n = 374)
6. What type of book reviews do you find most useful and best meet your needs? (n = 354)
7. Considering the book reviews you have read over the past three years, have you found at least 75 percent (overwhelming major-
y) meet your needs? (n = 354)
8. Is writing a book review something you find enjoyable/rewarding or unpleasant? (n = 323)
9. When an editor asks you to write a book review do you typically accept or reject the offer? (n = 323)
10. What is the main reason for rejecting an offer to review a book? (n = 323)
11. On average, how many book reviews do you write each year? (n = 323)
12. Does the name and reputation of the book reviewer affect the credibility and value you derive from the book review (e.g., young
gun or old guard)? (n = 354)
13. Under what category does writing a book review fall within your job description (teaching, research, or service)? (n = 323)
14. How important is writing book reviews in your annual evaluation? (n = 323)
15. How important is writing book reviews in decisions about promotion and tenure in your department? (n = 323)
16. If one or more of your books (authored or edited) has been reviewed, please comment on the experience. (n = 323)

Source: 2018 Survey, administered through SurveyMonkey.com, of human geographers who are members of the American
Association of Geographers.

Research questions (see Table 1) that asked respondents to provide both ordinal or open-ended responses.

In total 374 unique individuals responded to the survey and 85 percent of the people (n = 316) completed all of the survey questions. Except for the name of each individual’s institutional affiliation, I gathered no personal data; all responses were anonymous. The average length of time to complete the survey was eight minutes. All 374 responses are maintained on the SurveyMonkey.com Web site.

An overwhelming majority of individuals who responded to the survey expressed interest in the results. Among the 316 people who self-declared, 16 percent were full professors, 13 percent were associate professors, 17 percent were assistant professors, 8 percent were instructors or adjunct faculty, 35 percent were graduate students (nearly all PhD), and 2 percent were retired faculty. The educational background of the respondents tended to be skewed toward individuals with a PhD in hand or nearing completion: 63 percent possessed a PhD, 31 percent had earned their master’s degree, and 4 percent had earned a bachelor’s degree.

A question of interest is whether the probability of a response to one of the items in the online questionnaire depends on the person’s current rank or position or the highest degree offered in their department (PhD, master’s, or bachelor’s). This was answered by performing a contingency table analysis where a Pearson’s chi-square test statistic can be computed. When the results are statistically significant, the probability of a response to a questionnaire item depends on rank or position or highest degree offered. Thus, contingency table analyses were performed on all sixteen survey questions testing whether the probability of a response to a questionnaire item depends on rank or position or highest degree offered in the individual’s department of employment. One of the important assumptions for the Pearson’s chi-square test statistic in a contingency table analysis to be accurate and valid is that the expected number of counts in each cell in the two-way classification table should be greater than five. For this reason, I disregarded rows and columns in the two-way classification tables where either frequency row totals or frequency column totals were less than twenty. The discussion that follows addresses those two-way contingency tables where I found the results to be statistically significant.

Results and Discussion

The number of scholarly books published each year is staggering. Drawing on the latest data available, Humanities Indicators (2015) reported that 68,121 scholarly books (a.k.a. academic monographs) were published in North America alone in 2013. Eighty percent of those books were written by scholars based in the humanities (e.g., literature and history), and most of the remaining titles had research themes grounded in the behavioral and social sciences (e.g., psychology, sociology, and geography; Esposito and Barch 2017). What role do single-book book reviews play as academics try to keep tabs on the content and quality of all those books?

I begin by reporting on information gleaned about who reads book reviews and for what purpose. The discussion then turns to an analysis of the findings related to who writes book reviews. Finally, I discuss what value human geographers place on engaging in book review writing. Does the scholarly activity help advance a person’s career or not? Throughout this section, I provide contextual introductions for each of the subtopics.
Who Reads Book Reviews and for What Purpose?

As indicated earlier, prior to the World Wide Web, there were limited means to keep track of the latest works being published. Reading book reviews was the most effective method to achieve that goal. Today, however, there are abundant ways to learn about newly published books. Each month university presses and publishing companies distribute both printed catalogs and mass e-mails that announce the newest monographs. Likewise, a quick search of most reputable search engines reveals a long list of new publications and today most search engines allow scholars to enable direct push notifications based on specified research interests. Even online sales companies provide ample information about newly released or forthcoming scholarly books. In this research environment, do people still read scholarly book reviews and, if so, for what purpose?

Overall, geographers today continue to read scholarly book reviews on a fairly regular basis. Well over half (63 percent) of the 374 individuals who responded to the survey indicated that book reviews are still an effective way for them to learn about newly published books (Table 2). Respondents also indicated that book reviews help them understand the context of newly published research (56 percent) and reading them helps them synthesize existing literature (46 percent). When asked about the overall quality of the book reviews being published today (Figure 1), 68 percent of respondents indicated that the majority of the book reviews they have read in the past three years are of “some positive value.” An additional 18 percent of the respondents said that they were of “great value,” and only 2 percent indicated that they were of no value (“worthless”). From these results, it is clear that human geographers still use book reviews as an important tool to keep track of newly published books and the reviews they read are providing positive value.

I then asked geographers to identify where (in what publication outlets) they regularly read scholarly book reviews. As indicated in Table 3, the three most popular journals that geographers consult

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“Book reviews ...”</th>
<th>Percentage of individuals who responded with said statementa</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increase my awareness of newly published books</td>
<td>63.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help me understand the context of newly published research</td>
<td>55.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help me synthesize existing literature</td>
<td>45.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide me with an opportunity to read “expert” opinions about new research findings</td>
<td>45.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Save me time in determining what books to read</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help me select book for teaching purposes</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

aThis question allowed responders to identify as many responses as they wished.

Source: 2018 Survey of human geographers who are members of the American Association of Geographers (n=374).
when reading book reviews are the AAG Review of Books (online only; 40 percent), Progress in Human Geography (30 percent), and Antipode (online only; 23 percent). Yet, it should be noted that geographers read scholarly book reviews in a wide variety of other journals. When asked what percentage of the book reviews they typically read in each issue (Figure 2), 52 percent of respondents indicated that they read between 1 percent and 20 percent of the book reviews in each issue. Only 2 percent of respondents indicated that they read all of the book reviews in each issue. These data suggest that individuals who read book reviews do so selectively. The open-ended comments revealed that individuals pick and choose which reviews they read. It appears that most scholars tend to skim the book reviews in many journals to see which appraisals are most relevant to their research interests.

As one individual reported:

Of the book reviews that I think will be of interest to me, I tend to read most of those. While there is a broad & diverse scope to research in geography, I don’t read reviews of books that fall outside my research interests. (An example would be the book pertaining to how military officers practiced bird watching in their colonies. The book serves a purpose for some, but doesn’t catch my interest.)

Table 3  Responses to “In what publication outlet(s) do you regularly read the book reviews?”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of journal</th>
<th>Percentage of respondents who listed said journal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AAG Review of Books (online only)</td>
<td>39.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progress in Human Geography</td>
<td>30.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antipode (online only)</td>
<td>22.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment &amp; Planning D</td>
<td>17.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geographical Review</td>
<td>15.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Geographies</td>
<td>13.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal of Cultural Geography</td>
<td>12.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal of Historical Geography</td>
<td>10.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical Geography</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal of Latin American Geography</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Area</td>
<td>7.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geographical Journal</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population, Space, &amp; Place</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Material Culture</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No specific journal/random searching</td>
<td>7.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>20.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Other journals receiving at least three mentions: Political Geography (6), Gender, Place & Culture (4), Journal of Asian Studies (4), Journal of Peasant Studies (3), and Urban Geography (3).

Source: 2018 Survey of human geographers who are members of the American Association of Geographers (n = 354).
At the same time, some people indicated that they read nearly all of the book reviews in specialized journals (e.g., *Journal of Latin American Geography, Journal of Peasant Studies*) because overall they are a good fit with their research interests.

Between the two main types of scholarly book reviews (descriptive and critical), which type do readers find most useful and best meet their needs? Do scholars prefer a quick description of a book or do they prefer book reviews that are more analytical and couch the work in existing literature? To arrive at an answer, I asked individuals to indicate the most important purpose of a book review (Table 4). The responses were nearly evenly mixed; 45 percent of individuals said that book reviews should contribute to scholastic discussion about new research findings and 41 percent said that a book review’s purpose should be simply to increase awareness of a newly published book.

To dig a bit deeper I asked, what type of book review readers find most useful? Do scholars prefer a quick description of a book or do they prefer book reviews that are more analytical and couch the work in existing literature? To arrive at an answer, I asked individuals to indicate the most important purpose of a book review (Table 4). The responses were nearly evenly mixed; 45 percent of individuals said that book reviews should contribute to scholastic discussion about new research findings and 41 percent said that a book review’s purpose should be simply to increase awareness of a newly published book.

To dig a bit deeper I asked, what type of book review readers find most useful? An amazing 66 percent of respondents said that a combination of both descriptive and critical reviews best meet their needs (compared to 12 percent for descriptive only and 22 percent for critical only). Despite answers being split on the purpose of a book review, most respondents found a combination of description and critical analysis to be most useful. To further ferret out the purpose of book reviews and whether they meet people’s needs, I asked individuals to consider the book reviews they had read in the past three years. Did they find at least 75 percent (overwhelming majority) of them to be useful (Table 5)? Three-fourths of respondents (75 percent) said that they either “strongly agreed” or “somewhat agreed” with that statement. At the same time, only 7 percent of respondents said that the overwhelming majority of the book reviews they have read in the past three years were of little use and did not meet their needs. For book review editors, this is encouraging news; scholars are indeed reading book reviews and the reviews being published are useful. The next section focuses on who tends to write book reviews.

### Table 4
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Percentage of individuals who responded with said statement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increase awareness of a newly published book</td>
<td>40.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contribute to scholastic discussion about new research findings</td>
<td>45.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critique a fellow scholar’s work and point out inadequacies of their research</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amplify gaps in knowledge and demonstrate additional information</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A tool for publishing companies to market a new book</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: 2018 Survey of human geographers who are members of the American Association of Geographers (n=374).*

### Table 5
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Percentage of individuals who responded with said statement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
<td>25.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat agree</td>
<td>49.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither agree nor disagree</td>
<td>17.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat disagree</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: 2018 Survey of human geographers who are members of the American Association of Geographers (n=354).*

At the same time, many individuals who enjoy the process are still frustrated at how little they are valued. For example, one person lamented:

> Far and away, writing book reviews are the most pleasant publishing tasks I have. And, I think some of my best, and most valuable contributions have been book reviews.

### Who Writes Book Reviews?

Despite the dearth of research on the value of book reviews, there are a surprising number of publications across all disciplines (from chiropractic studies to history) that discuss how to review a book (Lee et al. 2010). By and large, however, all of them echo the same sage advice that Calef (1964) provided more than five decades ago: Begin with a thorough description followed by a fair and honest analysis and end with an insightful appraisal. A book review is not terribly complex, but it does take considerable time and effort to write an effective review. When asked whether scholars find writing book reviews to be an enjoyable or unpleasant aspect of their job, 45 percent of respondents declared that it is “highly enjoyable” or “somewhat enjoyable” (Table 5). By comparison, only 12 percent see it as an “unpleasant” chore. As one person indicated:

> Despite the dearth of research on the value of book reviews, there are a surprising number of publications across all disciplines (from chiropractic studies to history) that discuss how to review a book (Lee et al. 2010). By and large, however, all of them echo the same sage advice that Calef (1964) provided more than five decades ago: Begin with a thorough description followed by a fair and honest analysis and end with an insightful appraisal. A book review is not terribly complex, but it does take considerable time and effort to write an effective review. When asked whether scholars find writing book reviews to be an enjoyable or unpleasant aspect of their job, 45 percent of respondents declared that it is “highly enjoyable” or “somewhat enjoyable” (Table 5). By comparison, only 12 percent see it as an “unpleasant” chore. As one person indicated:

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At the same time, many individuals who enjoy the process are still frustrated at how little they are valued. For example, one person lamented:
Book reviews are very time-consuming for very little acknowledgment or credit from peers and institutions.

If nearly half of all individuals find writing book reviews to be a pleasant part of their job, I was curious whether people tend to accept or reject an editor’s offer to review a book. Throughout his long, illustrious career, Homer Aschmann crafted fifty-five book reviews. A prodigious reader, Aschmann saw the arrangement to his advantage; in exchange for writing a review he received a free copy of a book he wanted to read anyway (Pasqualetti 1997).

Survey responses indicate that 51 percent of individuals either “always accept” or “sometimes accept” an offer to review a book (Figure 3). This information is not consistent with the conventional wisdom held by book review editors. They assert that finding willing individuals is one of the most difficult parts of their job (Worsham 2012). Perhaps an explanation rests in why people reject an offer. Almost 40 percent of all respondents indicated that the main reason they reject an offer to review a

![Figure 3](source: Survey of Human Geographers who are members of the A.A.G. (n=323))
book is because they simply do not have enough time given their other responsibilities or the time frame to complete the review is too short (Table 7). The next most common reason given (26 percent) is that the book is a poor fit with their research expertise. All three of these issues should be relatively easy for book review editors to address. First, they need to give reviewers ample time to review a book and, second, they need to carefully screen the content of each book so that they can offer the opportunity to properly vetted reviewers. Regardless, when individuals are asked to write an excessive number of book reviews each year, it is easy to see how the task could become burdensome.

Survey results indicate that most respondents (80 percent) write fewer than two scholarly book reviews each year, with 39 percent of all individuals writing one per year (Figure 4A). According to the open-ended comments, many scholars said that they write one book review every two or three years, thus averaging less than one per year. To dig a bit deeper, I examined the statistical relationship between an individual’s rank or position and the number of book reviews written (Figure 4B). According to the survey results, individuals who are in tenured and tenure-track positions tend to write more book reviews than other individuals, but the majority of them write only one review each year. Furthermore, statistically speaking, assistant (52 percent) and associate professors (51 percent) tend to be more engaged in writing book reviews than full professors (47 percent). Perhaps this is because assistant and associate professors are at a stage in their career where writing a book review is a good fit with their scholarly activities. Evidence from the open-ended comments says that individuals who are earlier in their career tend to devote more time to writing book reviews. Many individuals indicated that in the past they wrote more book reviews, but as their career has progressed, they tend to write fewer book reviews. One individual remarked:

Now [later in their career] I have limited time, so when I am asked to review manuscripts [journal articles], I give this service [duty] more priority than writing book reviews.

When it comes to graduate students, survey results indicate that 60 percent of all graduate students have not written any book reviews (Figure 4B). My experience tells me that many younger scholars would be willing to write book reviews if an editor would only ask them. It is somewhat encouraging to see that 26 percent of graduate students have been

Figure 4 Responses to “On average how many book reviews do you write each year?”
given the chance to write at least one per year. Why are more graduate students not called on to write book reviews? Is there an inherent bias against younger, less experienced scholars?

To get at this question, I asked whether the rank or name recognition of the person writing the book review affects the perceived value of the review (Table 8). Survey results indicate that nearly half (47 percent) of scholars are only slightly influenced by the name and reputation of the person writing the book review. By comparison, 37 percent of readers find the name and reputation of the person writing the review to be “neutral” or “means nothing” to them. These data give preliminary support to the assertion that most readers believe that a good quality book review is more important than the name and reputation of the person writing the book review. It seems that well-qualified younger scholars could be writing more book reviews.

### Is Writing a Book Review a Valued Scholarly Activity?

Evidence from this study suggests that as individuals, scholars place considerable value on book reviews and the contribution they make to academic advancement. Many respondents to the survey, especially in the open-ended comments, indicated that book reviews are a useful and valuable scholarly activity. Not only is a well-crafted book review enjoyable to read, but they save time, help people decide what books to acquire, and add significantly to scholarly discourse. As one respondent remarked:

> I appreciate book reviews that are a concise version of the book itself with an explanation of the debates and conversations circulating around it. If I can walk away from a book review with a good understanding of the book’s purpose and contributions to scholarship, I view it as a valuable use of my time.

With that said, not everyone sees value in book reviews. One of the biggest complaints people have is the inconsistent quality among book reviews, even those appearing in the same journal. For example, as one person expressed:

> As with other writing, there are well-written and poorly-written analyses. Moreover, there is great diversity in terms of the length of [book] reviews. I tend to find longer ones more useful.

In other cases, individuals expressed frustration with the lag time of book reviews. One person asserted:

> Book reviews are published so long after the book [has reached print] that I find them of little use to a scholarly discussion.

Another common lament centers on the idea that book reviews are considered a soft publication and therefore of less value because they are not subjected to the peer review process. Does the type of institution at which one is employed (e.g., research focused or teaching centered) influence the value that people place on book reviews? Do book reviews count toward tenure or promotion or add to a person’s annual evaluation?

First, the data indicate that among the 323 individuals who responded, 63 percent said that book reviews fall under the research category (e.g., scholarship or creative activity) in their job description. On the other hand, 34 percent of individuals declared that book reviews are mainly a service responsibility. At a cursory level, this suggests that six out of every ten people who responded receive some sort of scholarly credit for writing book reviews. As one person wrote:

> I would like to think that they [book reviews] are viewed as having a certain importance, especially since people put a high degree of creativity and energy into writing them.

Curiously, when asked whether book reviews count positively in a person’s annual evaluation, a majority (53 percent) of respondents said that book reviews are “neither important nor unimportant” (Figure 5). Yet, one third of respondents (32 percent) said that book reviews count “somewhat” or a “considerable amount” as part of their annual evaluation. One individual wrote:

> [Book reviews] hold about the lowest amount of value associated with a scholarly activity, but not completely useless.

Given these results, it was interesting to discover that the most common open-ended response

### Table 8 Responses to “When you read a book review, does the name and reputation of the reviewer affect the credibility and value you derive from the book review?”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The name and reputation of the reviewer ...</th>
<th>Percentage of individuals who responded with said statement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Means a lot to me</td>
<td>16.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Means a little to me</td>
<td>46.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is neutral to me</td>
<td>26.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Means nothing to me</td>
<td>11.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: 2018 Survey of human geographers who are members of the American Association of Geographers (n = 354).
provided was “I don’t know,” or “I should ask.” It appears that not only do graduate students not understand the value of book reviews, but many assistant professors are uncertain as well.

Does this mean that writing a book review is a scholarly activity that is largely misunderstood and therefore undervalued by default? When looking at the open-ended comments, it becomes apparent that as individuals, people see writing book reviews as an important scholarly activity, but those same individuals receive the message from administrators that book reviews count for next to nothing; administrators seem to place little value on scholarly book reviews.

Along the same lines, I asked geographers to indicate how important book reviews are in decisions about promotion and tenure in their department. The results were very similar (Figure 5). The data indicate that 57 percent of respondents said that book reviews are seen as “neither important nor unimportant” as part of the promotion and tenure process. At the same time, nearly one third (30 percent) of individuals said that book reviews count a little bit (“somewhat”) or a lot (“considerable amount”). The open-ended responses provided a great range in comments. One person said:

Our guidelines are pretty fuzzy, but a book review might be worth something. Several together can help build a case for promotion and tenure.

Another individual wrote:

I make a strong point of asking whether a candidate for promotion has a respectable number of book reviews on their CV. If not, then I say that person must not be considered an authority in their field if they don’t have any book reviews. If I ever found out that a candidate turned down invitations to do book reviews (without good reason), then I would be inclined to vote against their promotion. Anyone without five or six book reviews at each stage of promotion probably does not deserve to be promoted.

Again, the most striking response among the open-ended comments was “I don’t know.” Of the fifty people who provided open-ended comments, 42 percent said that they do not know whether writing book reviews plays a factor in promotion and tenure decisions in their department and yet, as indicated in Figure 4A, 39 percent of all individuals write at least one book review each year.

Because of the considerable uncertainty surrounding the importance of book reviews in annual evaluations as well as promotion and tenure, I examined the relationship between the highest degree offered in an individual’s department and a book review’s worth. Table 9 shows that individuals who are employed in departments where a PhD degree is the highest degree offered, a book review is worth little (“somewhat”) in 25 percent of individuals’ annual evaluations. By comparison, 55 percent of individuals in that same category indicated that book reviews are neutral (“neither important nor unimportant”) in their annual evaluation. In contrast, for individuals who are in departments where the highest degree offered is a master’s degree or a bachelor’s degree, the percentage of people who see book reviews as an important part of their annual evaluation goes up significantly (41 percent and 48 percent, respectively).
The value that book reviews hold in regard to decisions about promotion and tenure is only slightly different (Table 10). In departments where the PhD degree is the highest degree offered, 27 percent of individuals indicated that book reviews are “somewhat” important, and 57 percent said they are of neutral value (“neither important nor unimportant”). By comparison, for individuals in departments where a master’s degree or a bachelor’s degree is the highest degree offered, book reviews are “somewhat” important among 31 percent and 40 percent of the respondents, respectively. Overall, this indicates that individuals employed at institutions where classroom instruction is the prime focus might find some professional benefit in writing book reviews, whereas people at research-oriented institutions tend to benefit less from writing book reviews. This should help guide book review editors in where they search for potential book reviewers.

Finally, I asked individuals whether they have had one or more of their own authored or edited books reviewed. The survey indicates that among the 323 respondents, only 22 percent had such an experience. The purpose in asking this open-ended question was to draw on and share the experience of others. Overall, the comments ranged from positive to only somewhat negative. One person remarked:

The experience was generally positive. Some reviews perfunctory, while others more substantive. One [book review] was merely a descriptive review, not very satisfying.

Another person wrote:

To receive many positive reviews, as I did for my first two books, is immensely empowering and straightforwardly pleasurable, especially if one is near the beginning of a career. My third book, as I neared the end of a career, was reviewed in a six-person “author meets critics” format. This, too, was very positive, but the range of views offered a varied critical commentary, which was particularly instructive for me as author.

Two people provided comments that I found particularly useful:

The one [book review] I’m thinking of was a fair review. Some of the comments felt a bit critical of the basis of the book, seeming to make it [the book] theirs rather than what it was (in intent, approach, and audience), which I felt was unfair. But, in the end it was largely a fair review.

---

**Table 9** Relation between highest degree offered in a department and book review’s worth toward annual evaluation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Highest degree offered</th>
<th>Considerable</th>
<th>Somewhat</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Worthless</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PhD degree</td>
<td>5&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>24.6</td>
<td>55.2</td>
<td>17.7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MA/MS degree</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>40.5</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BA/BS degree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>48.0</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate’s degree</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>62.5</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>171</td>
<td>48</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup>Frequency of responses.  
<sup>b</sup>Percentage of responses.  
<sup>p</sup>value < 0.0001.

**Table 10** Relation between highest degree offered in a department and book review’s worth toward promotion or tenure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Highest degree offered</th>
<th>Considerable</th>
<th>Somewhat</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Worthless</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PhD degree</td>
<td>3&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>26.6</td>
<td>56.7</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MA/MS degree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>31.0</td>
<td>54.8</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BA/BS degree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>48.0</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate’s degree</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>87.5</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>184</td>
<td>43</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup>Frequency of responses.  
<sup>b</sup>Percentage of responses.  
<sup>p</sup>value < 0.0001.
The other person wrote:

If it [a book review] is positive, it is nothing to brag about; if it is negative, it is nothing to fret about. There is no such thing as bad publicity in a world awash in thousands of new books.

Unfortunately, only a handful of people wrote lengthy, insightful comments that were worth sharing.

Implications

This article represents the results of a survey completed by 374 members of nineteen AAG specialty and affinity groups that align with human geography. The overall categories include who reads book reviews and for what purpose, who writes book reviews, and what scholastic value book reviews hold. Given that the geographers who responded to the survey maintain scholarly links to every other subfield within the discipline, much was learned.

First, there is no doubt that as individuals, scholars place considerable value on book reviews. Although they tend to be selective in the ones they read, scholars consult book reviews to stay abreast of the latest publications. More important, however, respondents indicated that book reviews help them understand the context of newly published research and reading them helps synthesize existing literature. The most polarizing issue related to the reading of book reviews is the platform in which they are published. From the open-ended responses it is apparent that some scholars are comfortable reading book reviews in both online and print formats. Other respondents, however, said that the conversion to online formats has negatively affected their likelihood of reading book reviews; it is just not as convenient for them.

When it comes to writing book reviews, as individuals, scholars see writing book reviews as an important and valued research activity that adds significantly to scholarly discourse. In fact, scholars place the highest value on book reviews that combine both a description of a book’s content as well as an appraisal of its quality. When readers feel dissatisfied with a book review, it is because the review focused exclusively on describing the book. Many individuals expressed pride in writing high-quality book reviews. They felt that the considerable time and effort they invested into writing the reviews was worthwhile because of the contribution the review made to academic advancement. At the same time, however, they expressed frustration at the fact that book reviews are largely disregarded and do not carry much weight in advancing their career.

Second, across the board, individual scholars tend to place a high value on book reviews. Those same respondents made it abundantly clear, however, that administrators (e.g., department chairs or heads and deans) place little value on writing book reviews. The disconnect between these two perspectives is alarming. This is especially true in departments where a bachelor’s degree is the highest degree offered. The take-home message suggests that administrators might want to reconsider their long-held position on book reviews, especially at institutions where classroom instruction is the primary professional activity.

Third, book review editors should regard the results of this study as a vote of confidence as they move forward. Overall, book reviews are seen as important and useful to today’s readers. To begin, most survey respondents indicated that they have found the overwhelming majority (at least 75 percent) of book reviews they have read in the past three years to be of positive value. It is important to note, however, that to maintain the relevance of book reviews, editors must ensure high quality among reviews, make sure that the reviews are published in a timely fashion, and contain both descriptions and critical analysis of the books being evaluated.

I wish to note one particularly interesting take-home message. According to survey respondents, the name and reputation of a reviewer is less meaningful than the quality of the appraisal. In other words, quality insights provided by younger scholars are just as valued as the insights provided by well-known, established scholars. Although old-guard individuals might have decades of research experience to draw on, the younger guns are also well equipped to review books because they are versed in the latest literature and can provide a fresh perspective. It is clear that most people (especially younger scholars) are willing to write a book review or two each year. So, if book review editors are having a difficult time finding reviewers, they should quit fighting the tide and give well-qualified graduate students, instructors, and assistant professors (who might be eager to get their name in print) more opportunities to write book reviews. Editors should keep in mind, however, that all reviewers need ample time to complete the review and make sure that the book is a good fit with the individual’s research interests.

The survey results point toward one area of future research worth noting. To improve the quality of book reviews, some editors have begun advocating for diversifying the format of book reviews. Three formats that are receiving increasing attention include book review essays, rejoinder reviews, and multidisciplinary reviews (Lee et al. 2010). Book review essays simultaneously review two or three books that focus on a central theme. Because these
essays are typically longer in word count and more difficult to craft, reviewers tend to receive more scholarly “credit” from their institutions for such publications. Rejoinder reviews feature the appraisal of a book by an expert in the field paired against a rebuttal by the author. Some have said that this format tends to produce better quality book reviews because the appraiser and author provide a more balanced perspective. Finally, in my capacity as book review editor, I have experimented with multidisciplinary reviews. I have sent copies of the same book to multiple reviewers and each of their appraisals are published in the same issue. This format allows readers to see how differing reviewers regard the merits and pitfalls of the same book. It is hoped that future research will shed more light on the value of these newer book review formats.

Finally, as a microcosm of academia, geographers have spoken out about an issue that countless journals in various disciplines are facing: Do scholarly book reviews still matter? Contrary to popular belief (Toor 2012; Worsham 2012), writing a book review is far from being a waste of time or a meaningless task. Scholarly book reviews are still a valued professional activity because they help inform fellow scholars about new works, provide authors with important feedback, and add significantly to academic advancement.

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