

A ROOM FOR REVIEW

Gail Stygall

... a viewless review is impossible.

—Steven Stowe

In his essay "Thinking about Reviews," Steven Stowe, associate editor and reviews editor for the *Journal of American History*, discusses the curiosity that almost all reviews editors have about the impact of their journal's reviews. Are they useful to readers? Do they have something important to say about our bit of space in the academy? Given the large numbers of books published each year, can we afford to do review essays? Should we also provide large numbers of brief book notes? Stowe chose to answer these questions by sending out a survey to his journal's subscribers. He received an 8 percent reply, only a little better than direct mail advertising, so it is difficult to know how to take his results. Of those subscribers who did respond, he found that the reviews were sometimes the *only* part of the journal that they read faithfully (593). He discovered subscribers who wanted deeper conversation about the importance of certain books and their challenges to current thinking. And he also found that reviewers who wrote in the specialized language of a subdiscipline were alienating groups of readers from work they might well have been applauding.

As the incoming reviews editor of the *Journal of Teaching Writing*, I am well aware of the complex demands readers may make of a journal's reviews section. Recent changes in *College Composition and Communication's* reviews, including experimentation with various formats, demonstrate many possibilities, especially the shorter, brief notes about new work. Yet, from my own sense of the histories of different disciplines,

I know that a review, even a review of a single book placed into a larger context, can have lasting impact on an audience. In linguistics, for example, the wave of change in the growing generativist movement arrived at least in part with a book review – Noam Chomsky’s 1959 review of B.F. Skinner’s *Verbal Behavior in Language*.

As Frederick Newmeyer describes it,

Chomsky first described generative grammar as a cognitive model in his 1959 review Pointing to the complexity of language and the amazing speed with which it is acquired, Chomsky concluded that children could not possibly be born ‘blank slates,’ as Skinner and other behaviorists would have it. . . . Chomsky’s review has come to be regarded as one of the foundational documents of the discipline of cognitive psychology, and even after the passage of twenty-five [now thirty-five] years it is considered the most important refutation of behaviorism. (73)

The review that Newmeyer is describing is a long review-essay. Without the vehicle of the longer review-essay, some important reflections on various initiatives in teaching and scholarship might never be raised.

In addition to the uncertainty reviews editors face with the tension between coverage (addressing the large numbers of new books published) and reflectiveness (thinking about how a handful of those books might have considerable impact), there is the question of who reviews and under what circumstances. Some journals have large pools of reviewers; Stowe and *JAH* keep a file of thousands of reviewers. But even with that sort of file, journal editors or reviews editors often seek out reviewers who follow particular trends or areas of new research and reflection. And unfortunately, those kinds of decisions can sometimes result in a kind of insularity in reviewing that doesn’t invite readers to sample the selection. Some people even suggest that reviewing is a good way to position the review writer to get started as an academic or achieve a better teaching job. Linda Simon’s “The Pleasures of Book Reviewing” in *Scholarly Publication* makes such an argument. Moreover, the

focus on *new* books means that we rarely reflect on how some books continue to inform us a decade or more after their original publication.

During my term as reviews editor for the *Journal of Teaching Writing*, I hope to continue the tradition, started under former reviews editor John Trimbur, of commissioning at least one longer review essay per issue. But in addition to that past practice, I will also be inviting brief reviews in the 500-word range, both for recently published books and as reflections from practicing teachers on books that have stood the test of time. In order to accomplish that end, I have asked the staff at the Puget Sound Writing Project to put their institute teachers to work reflecting on the most useful books in writing practice published during the last decade. I am also inviting the participation of other National Writing Project Directors. The first of these retrospective assessments is scheduled for the next issue of *JTW*. While both of these projects make use of established pathways, I am also interested in receiving proposals for reviews from readers outside of these established pathways. If you believe that there is a book (or books) that the profession has overlooked, then propose a review. Write and tell me why you think your selection should be reviewed and why you would contribute an effective review.

Finally, I want to move *JTW* to other media for teachers of writing. I want to encourage readers to propose reviews on writing software for classrooms and reviews of electronic discussion groups as well. University faculty tend to stay well within the bounds of the Internet, while commercial providers often have lively forums for teachers.

If you would like to propose or suggest books or other media for review in *JTW*, please contact me at either of the following addresses:

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I look forward to my term as reviews editor and begin with a review-essay by Frank Sullivan of Temple University on the continuing discussion about language, race and class, progressive education, and multiple literacies.

WORKS CITED

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