

BOOK REVIEWS: REVISITED

Dear Editors,

I have had your letter of January 25th sitting on my desk prominently since its receipt, hoping for several moments to sit down and write a thoughtful statement paralleling Professor Brunvand's on the subject of folklore book reviews. If I wait until I have adequate time to express my full thoughts on the matter, I apparently will wait forever, therefore I have decided simply to do the lesser job and write you a brief letter.

I think everyone is dissatisfied with book reviews in nearly every field of scholarship today. One of the reasons for this is that book reviews stand on a considerably lesser level of scholarly attainment when scrutinized by tenure committees and promotion boards. It is unfortunate that this is so, but nonetheless most book reviewers take their job far less seriously than they take the task of writing an article. Archer Taylor is no doubt correct in saying that reviews are useless except as a means of getting the title of a book into circulation, but he omits mentioning one of the other primary reasons why people write reviews: to get their own names into circulation. This being the case, those of us who would like to insure that members of our field have access to succinct and thoughtful reviews must cope with the realities of the scholarly arena. I think I disagree, therefore, that length ought to be one of the primary considerations (of course your journal never argued that length in and of itself was a virtue); I do incline toward Brunvand's assertion that thoughtfulness ought to go onto our list far above discursiveness. In some respects I think that some journals could do without their book reviews altogether; as editor of Northwest Folklore, I very seldom accept or encourage book reviews, since our main task is not to get people's names into print or to advertise books, but to publish even the most modest attempt at collecting and studying the lore of this part of the country. As newly appointed book review editor of Western Folklore, I have had to put another hat on. My biggest complaint as a book review editor is that most reviews come in written and typed in such a way as to insure that their author would fail freshman composition had he passed his efforts in at that level of scholarly attainment. I am mentioning this because I am beginning to find out that a book review editor if he can get anything even closely approximating a readable and logically sounding statement is doing very well indeed. If he were to wait until a completely thoughtful, well-worded, witty and informative review were received, he might die of old age before he fulfills any of his duties of office.

If this sounds somewhat on the bitter side, I certainly do not mean it so; I simply think that in order for us to reform our book reviews, we must reform first our concept of their value to ourselves and to others. Instead of encouraging graduate students to try their wings with a review or two before they publish their massive articles, we should be in the business of suggesting that there are very few things as helpful to the scholar as a brief but reliable review of a book which he may want to know the value of for his own scholarly concerns. The book reviewer must realize that he is in a position of responsibility and importance, and book review editors must somehow make certain that they do not solicit reviews on books simply to fill up slack pages in journals. I would like

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to see all of us engage in some kind of constructive dialogue on these theoretical points, and I suggest respectfully that if your journal wishes to continue this very fine service of discussing a matter of such importance to us all, it might consider a continual column in which such matters may be argued out, and might start lobbying for a panel meeting which might be convened at local folklore societies, as well as the national meeting, on this very subject. If there is any way that I can be of help in these matters I shall be more than happy to do whatever I can.

Thanks very much for soliciting my opinions.

Yours truly,

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