

Reviewing by Magdalena Ball

**HUNTER
WRITERS
CENTRE**



There are many reasons to become a book reviewer. While you probably won't make a fortune writing reviews, you can earn some money doing it, it is an excellent way to hone your writing skills, increase your understanding of what makes for good writing, it adds depth to your own pleasure to evaluate what you would be reading anyway, and there are, of course, the review copies. For a reader, getting hold of pre-release copies of any book you want, interviews with your favourite authors, and the opportunity to promote your own work, is a pretty tempting reason to get into reviewing.

It is both enjoyable and valuable from a publicity point of view to have an impact on the choices other people make. If you're a top reviewer, you will be the 'go-to' resource for information on what is and what isn't worth buying, and therefore gain credibility and visibility for your other projects.

I've been running my review site **The Compulsive Reader** for nearly eighteen years (think of them as dog years in the Internet world), and during that time, I've developed a pretty good idea for what works and doesn't work in the world of reviewing, so here are my best tips for becoming known as a book reviewer:

Follow Through

If you agree to review something, or request a review copy, you have to produce the goods or you will rapidly lose credibility. Even if the book is awful, or virtually unreadable, or the product difficult to use, you must produce some form of review, or at least return the item with a polite note, clearly explaining why no review will be forthcoming. This doesn't apply to items sent to you on spec. If you haven't agreed, or requested an item, you aren't obligated to review it, although a polite response is always appreciated.

Speed

Reviews generally need to be timely. In most cases, they relate to recently released books and if a review isn't produced shortly after release, your readers may not be as interested and the value tends to diminish. No one wants to read old news. That said, there is always a call for reviews of classic or quality material.

Quality

Regardless of what you are reviewing, a review is a piece of writing in itself. It needs to be clear, concise, entertaining, informative, critical, and well written. You have to

be able to accurately assess the value of an item you are reviewing and that may include digging deeply into the work in a way that involves creating your own elegant prose.

Critique

The element of criticism is the key component of a review. If you are too nice to say anything critical, or reluctant to probe, your reviews won't provide readers with the information they need to determine whether a work is for them. However, I always think a review should be constructive and tactful. *Always* read the entire book first. A review that pans a book that hasn't been fully read is not helpful to anyone. If you can't finish a book, you should decline the review.

Organisation

Good reviews are structured carefully, with a logical flow that moves from introduction, through to a deep critical analysis of the quality, meaning, and significance of what you're reviewing and ending with a vivid conclusion. A review is not a retelling or plot summary. It's fine to provide a very quick overview of the storyline in the introduction, but this should not form the body of your analysis. Strengths and weaknesses of the writing should be analysed, along with how well the purpose of the book has been achieved. Always include evidence to support the judgment – eg quotations (300 words or less), especially if you're making a negative comment. Other things to explore include the effectiveness and consistency of narrative voice, the originality and power of language, plot, characterisation, theme, style (intellectual, emotional, aesthetic, symbols), and dialogue.

The demand for reviews is growing (along with global output of books). If you love to read and write well, the rewards for becoming a reviewer can be reasonably high – not so much financial, but in terms of your platform, getting to readers, getting lots of books in your genre, getting to know publishers and their styles – all critical for writers. Getting started is easy (just set up a blog – check out Ruth Cotton's factsheet for hints on how to do that), and you will be courted by publishers and authors pretty quickly! That's a nice thing for an author because it's unlikely that you'll be courted for your novel or poetry books :-). Good luck!

*Magdalena Ball runs The Compulsive Reader www.compulsivereader.com and is the author of the novels **Black Cow** and **Sleep Before Evening**, the poetry books **Repulsion Thrust** and **Quark Soup**, a nonfiction book **The Art of Assessment**, and many other anthologies and collaborations. Find out more about Magdalena at <http://www.magdalenaball.com>*

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