

# On Book Reviews

J.L. MACLEAN  
ICLARM



The purpose of a review is to describe the contents and quality of a book to help the reader decide whether to read or buy the entire book. Sounds simple, but many reviews are not like that. For example, some reviews are aimed at the publisher or the author, making the general reader feel like a mere bystander at a debate. The general reader might wince at the thrusts and biting satire of the reviewer but be none the wiser about the book after he or she finishes reading the review. Other reviews become long summaries of the contents without critical evaluation. After reading these reviews you do not need to read the book anyway.

A good review ought to place the book in question in the perspective of its discipline, point out its positive as well as negative features and end with a recommendation.

## A Low Status

One author advised aspirants to book reviewing to put their important comments at the beginning because if the review is too long, the editor will cut out the last part first! So it is with the place of reviews in a journal. The book review section is always at the back, implying an

undeserved low stature. It helps to reinforce the perception that no one reads book reviews.

Sadly, the publishers of the most cited fisheries journal of all, the *Canadian Journal of Fisheries and Aquatic Sciences*, announced in late 1987 an end to their book review section. The reason was staff cuts. This is a great shame and it lends credence to the "no one reads them" myth.

The fact is that surveys show book reviews to be the main factor in scientific book purchases, more so than magazine or direct-mail advertising. Therefore, journals have a real responsibility to offer sound advice about new literature.

## Importance of Reviews

The following extracts from a review in the scientific journal *Aquaculture* illustrate the importance that a review can have: "The text book on fish culture by the late Marcel Huet (died 1976) in its 2nd edition (1986) is hardly the book one would wish to see in the hands of students. The book, launched in 1952 (in French) and translated into English in 1972, has outlived its usefulness. Many

good textbooks have been published since then, as readers of *Aquaculture* will know from the book review section."

"The first English edition (1972) was reviewed in *Aquaculture* (vol. 2, pp. 93-94) by Deelder (1973): to quote 'it gives a good idea of fish culture in grandfather's time...it is misleading to be studied, as important modern developments have scarcely been dealt with or are completely omitted...'"

"It is to be regretted that the book has been put on the market again...I cannot recommend buying the book."

Considerable "damage" seems possible because the earlier (1973) review went unheeded by all. Indeed, a cheap Philippine reprint of the 1972 edition is still popular in local bookstores. We hope the "new" edition is not likewise reprinted and have sent the above review to the Philippine distributor concerned. However, the book in its various editions has been distributed worldwide.

## Types of Reviews

The message in most reviews is not as clear-cut as the one above because reviewers tend to be shy, especially of potential legal repercussions. This is why

the casual reader might get the feeling that there are no bad reviews (the exception above proving the rule?). Look for tell-tale phrases such as "it is unfortunate that...", "missed an opportunity to..", "the author could have...(but didn't)", and so on. Another signal is the use of the word "lacking" several times. Some reviewers write only very short "dismissive" reviews as a way of showing their disdain towards a book (or author; undercurrents of peer rivalry can sometimes be seen if you know the players).

The process of review is worth recalling here to further explain reviewers' shyness. Book publishers send free copies of their latest products to various journals together with a glowing blurb about the book's contents. The journal editors generally select a knowledgeable author in the same field who is given the book and blurb and sometimes a fee to write the review. If you are one of those who feel that it would be looking the gift horse in the mouth to then have the nerve to write a negative criticism of that free book, then better send back the book, blurb and fee.

Incidentally, an editor can tell when his/her counterparts take the easy route and reproduce part of the publisher's blurb; more than likely they all received the same blurb. Thus, we can say that such uncritical reviewing does take place. If you have ever read one, you will know they are biased towards the positive. After all, who is going to punch holes in their own boat as it is being launched?

According to the movies at least, a Broadway play is made or flops following the publication of its review in newspapers the day after opening night. But the specter of the reviewer's sword does not exactly hang over the heads of fisheries authors or publishers -- alas. On the contrary, the fisheries market is fair game for commercial publishers who know to the nearest 50 or so copies how many they will sell of each title.

Why is this so? Probably because: (1) fisheries reviews are rarely unequivocal; (2) a staff member may simply tell the purchasing officer to buy a book with a catchy title he has heard about; (3) the

bulk of sales are to well-funded libraries and individuals who can afford to make protective or speculative book investments; (4) the fisheries market is not flooded with books, so choosing between titles is a rare event; or (5) the only parts of a book review that are remembered are the title and where the book can be bought -- some reviews are that unmemorable.

**Overall, the situation appears to be that uncritical publishers are soliciting or accepting works that vary from the sublime to the ridiculous and are selling them to an uncritical clientele, largely through uncritical reviews.**

Art critics have become the butt of many jokes, no doubt spread by their victims, for theirs is the perilous position of telling the public what it should like and dislike. Eminent scientist and science fiction author Isaac Asimov was moved to observe of critics: "His poetry seems to please the critics, and because it is plain-spoken, rhymes and scans, it pleases human beings as well."

The scientific reviewer, however, has the forces of logic and the scientific method as his unassailable pillars. In fact, the real danger in scientific book reviewing is not in failing to recognize the poor text but in failing to recognize the excellent one. "Is the good the enemy of the best?" was the title of an essay directed at journal article referees, but the message is equally valid for books -- genius is sometimes not recognized and such authors may suffer undue criticism from their peers in reviews.

### Reviews in Naga

Naga and its predecessor, the ICLARM Newsletter, have included 81 book reviews from 1980 to 1987. The



pages we have devoted to these reviews would make a small book in themselves. What if that book were to be reviewed? A western reviewer might take us to task for focusing too much on value for money and quality of production. This is because researchers in the developing countries served by Naga have very small budgets. Some scientific books coming out of European publishing houses cost more than a month's salary for these researchers. When these books are also clearly unedited and of poor typing quality we call "unfair!"

Some might also criticize us for our strong criticisms of both content and referencing. Well, unlike the average case of a reviewer who probably reviews only one or two books in a lifetime, ICLARM both publishes and buys a lot of books as well as reviews them. **Our small group of reviewers is acutely aware of the uncritical publishing of monographs and proceedings that are out of date, incomplete, redundant, inaccurate, inappropriate and/or misleading in their content. We feel obliged to point out these problems in the hope of improved editing and more responsible publishing.**

Here is what we thought about the 81 books that occupied our book review pages. Five were awful and should not have been published; 23 were just so-so, that is, a luxury rather than an essential; 39 were good or worthy of shelf space; the remaining 14 were excellent or essential to any collection. So, only 65% were considered worthwhile. Think of the great many trees felled to produce the millions of wasted pages -- the ultimate aquatic pollution!

These results are not likely to cause tsunamis in the fisheries publishing world because those who "have" will probably continue their uncritical buying and those who "have not" will not be affected anyway.

### An Exhortation

Let us take seriously the problem of non-useful books and, in developing countries, not enough cash. Most journals and magazines index their book reviews. It is in your interest to find out whether the book you are considering is worthwhile or is simply contributing to aquatic pollution. Not all books are sent for review. The alternative for magazine editors and teachers is to request from the publisher or distributor a specimen or sample copy. ●

