

THE AIMS OF A BOOK REVIEW.*

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The Book Notices and Reviews section of the JOURNAL has been singularly free from reviews of questionable value and this is all the more remarkable when one realizes that this portion of the publication is the work of many writers. There is necessarily considerable variation in style in these short articles, but they should all rest upon certain uniform principles if they are to be of value to the reader. These principles might be termed the objects of the review. I take it for granted that book reviews of technical publications are in quite a different category from similar notices given works of fiction or dramatic productions. The latter types of notice or criticism are largely based upon the personal opinion of the reviewer or critic. The reader of such a review is fully aware that they are personal opinions and often enjoys the variations from fact or the "roasts" which some of these critics indulge in. The authors or producers may find such criticisms irksome but have the consolation that they attract public attention and may thus be a benefit instead of a detriment to their interests. They can always point to the fact that there are instances on record of a book or play having been condemned by the professional critics, but favorably received by the public.

Book notices of technical works are more difficult of preparation than reviews of fiction and a few words regarding the qualifications of the reviewer are perhaps in order. It is presupposed that the writer of such a review has a thorough and broad knowledge of the field covered by the book. He should also have had the broadening experience of teaching, writing and research before presuming to act as an arbiter. It is true that our dramatic critics seldom write plays but the successful ones are fully conversant with the mechanism of play-writing and presentation. A critic must be of a judicial turn of mind and must avoid the superposing of his own opinions upon those of the author to the extent permissible in a dramatic criticism. He should avoid personalities in mistaken efforts to make his review interesting, for those reading the review are not seeking entertainment. He must be ready to admit other viewpoints than his own, and should not be hasty in criticising variations from the usual treatment or presentation of the subject. He should be especially careful of expressing opinions based upon the reading of a mere part of a sentence apart from the context. Even the Ten Commandments read in such a manner would be capable of some startling interpretations. In short the one reviewing a technical book should be well informed and unprejudiced, and should write his review in an impartial and an impersonal manner.

The purpose of a book review is to acquaint the reader with the form, contents and scope of the work. The article should be preceded by a statement similar to that appearing in the book lists of publishers and including—title, author's name and title, number of pages, number and type of illustrations, publisher's name, publisher's address, date of publication and price. The author's introduction should first receive attention, and this part of the book will usually indicate the purpose and aims of the work. Introductions, as a rule, receive but casual attention from readers, but they often furnish the one reviewing the book with statements of value in his article. The table of contents next claims attention

* Read by title at the A. Ph. A. meeting in Portland, Me., 1927.

and at this point the reviewer must divest himself of preconceived ideas and approach the task with an open mind. He may find that the arrangement of material or the sequence of topics is different from that to which he is accustomed or that he, as an individual, thinks is proper. It is within the purpose of a review to call attention to this departure from custom, but sweeping condemnations are entirely out of place. As a rule the greater the experience of the reviewer, the more chary he is about broad statements. His review should include the titles given in the table of contents, and his comments should be made in a few well-chosen words and these untinged by too much personal opinion. As previously noted, the reader of the review is more interested in what the book contains than in the personal reactions of the reviewer.

In covering the body of the book several courses are open. One may read it in its entirety, noting errors, misstatements and discrepancies where such occur and calling attention to them. Again, the language of the review should reflect the spirit of helpful criticism and should not be an exhibition of puerile glee over the discovery of something amiss. If a thorough reading is impracticable the reviewer may select certain chapters or portions for detailed consideration. The haphazard procedure of picking out pages at random for review is unjust both to the author and the one reviewing the book. A good review of the body of a book, whether or not it be a favorable one, requires a great amount of labor and care in order to properly fulfill the purpose of the notice.

The number of illustrations in the body of the work should be noted and their character should be stated. If errors in the illustrations or captions are discovered, the reviewer should check up his opinion by reference or observation, and, if verified, should make his statement of error in a plain, judicial manner. In many technical works one or more tables or appendices are often included and these should receive as much attention as the body of the work, their titles being included in the review.

Considerable reference has been made in the preceding paragraphs to the style and language of the review, and it is not amiss to present some illustrations of what might be termed faulty reviewing technic. These examples are quoted directly from the Book Notices and Reviews section of the JOURNAL and are therefore not hypothetical instances. They are presented under four headings—general condemnations; personalities; misleading statements; general differences of opinion.

General Condemnations.—"Rather unusual book, unusual in the number of its defects;" "poorly conceived;" "unwise, it seems to the reviewer, to put this book in the hands of an unsuspecting beginner." Statements of this sort may give zest to a review, but they at once lead the reader to suspect an animosity, which is entirely out of harmony with the spirit of coöperation generally prevailing amongst learned men of this age. They hark back to the controversies which ranged among the botanists of the early part of the last century and compare very favorably with the utterances of a few newspaper critics who command attention through their iconoclastic attitude.

Personalities.—"Has paid little attention to facts;" "knows this is not true;" evidently does not mean what he states." It is hardly conceivable that an author, no matter how ill-informed he may be, will deliberately include in his work statements warranting criticisms of this sort. Furthermore, reputable publishers usually submit manuscripts to an outside critic before undertaking publication. As previously noted, there is always the possibility of errors escaping scrutiny, but these can hardly be termed errors of commission as implied by the above quotations.

Misleading Statements.—These faults generally arise through the reviewer hastily glancing through the printed page and basing a statement upon what has caught the eye. This is a most

serious fault because of its utter disregard for context and because it might almost be construed as deliberate misrepresentation. Fortunately there are very few instances of this in the *JOURNAL*, but occasionally it does appear, as evidenced by the following quotations. The first quotation is the language of the review while the second is from the text under review. Review—"safranin colors lignified walls blue." Text—"aniline water safranine stains suberized walls yellowish and lignified walls blue. Wash in acid alcohol and then in alcohol until washings are colorless," (cf. Zimmerman, *Botanical Microtechnic*, page 152). Review—"he calls wood and bast fibers conducting tissues instead of supporting tissues." Text—"In tracing the origin of plant tissues we learned that two types of conducting tissues were developed in the pterome region and that each of these was associated with a fibrous or supporting tissue. *One of these supporting tissues was termed xylem fiber or wood fiber and the other phloem fiber or bast fiber.*"

Differences of Opinion.—It has been said that this would be a dull and uninteresting world without differences of opinion. If these be honest differences and each respects the rights of the other, the very fact that there are such differences is a stimulus to progress. The reviewer may not agree with the material he is reviewing, but he can state his dissent in such a way as to show that he has due regard for opinions other than his own. A catholicity of spirit in his statements regarding differences goes far toward making the other fellow see his side.

We may summarize these opinions regarding book reviews in the following brief sentences. A book review, to fully serve its purpose, must give those reading it a clear idea of the contents, arrangement and scope of the book. It must be sufficiently complete to enable the reader to form his own judgment as to its usefulness or the desirability of purchase. While proper construction and good language are essential, the review is not a literary creation for the entertainment of the reader. The person called upon to review a book should be critical but not carping, judicial but impersonal, and should approach the task with an unprejudiced mind. His criticisms should be free from a spirit of animosity which is entirely incompatible with, and foreign to, the present-day attitude of educated men to one another.

EDITOR'S NOTE: See page 100 in January *JOURNAL*, A. PH. A. for 1928.

VIRGINIA JOINT MEETING.

Dr. Stuart McGuire is deeply interested in the proposed joint meeting of the State medical, dental and pharmaceutical organizations which has been approved by all three of these societies. He writes:

"The physician, dentist and pharmacist all work in the broad domain of medicine, and the field of one frequently overlaps the field of the other.

"It is, therefore, necessary that the members of the three professions work in harmony, and this cannot be done unless there is personal friendship and mutual coöperation.

"The plan of teaching medicine, dentistry and pharmacy in the same institution has been found to be conducive of good results. The contact of the students with each other promotes good fellowship, and gives them a wider knowledge of professional problems than

would be the case if they were taught separately.

"Just as personal friendship and professional understanding are promoted among students by contact in college, so will sympathetic coöperation be promoted among members of the three professions by contact in meetings such as the one proposed to be held.

"There are, of course, certain details of arrangements which have not yet been perfected, but in general the plan will be for each society to hold separate sessions for the transaction of business and the reading of technical papers, and for all the societies to unite in a general meeting for the discussion of subjects of common interest.

"I trust and believe the proposed meeting will be so successful that similar gatherings will be held in the future every three or five years."