

MATHEMATICAL MUSINGS III

On Reviews and Those Who Review

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Abstract Loathe or love them, reviews and reviewers are considered a necessary evil by some and happily embraced by others, tolerated as an intrusion *en route* to publication or seen as providing a valuable academic standards safety net. Almost everyone has an opinion on them.

Having one's research and scholarly work assessed by one or more independent referee(s) is part of life as an academic. There are literally scores of articles and opinion pieces offering guidance on 'correct' ways to referee a paper (what to look for, how to best judge its worth, what criteria to use, how to express praise and criticism, *etc.*) and to put together a report.¹ Noting that some practices vary with subject, general rules are commonly accepted and this isn't the place to add to such a body of discussion. There is one piece of advice, however—set down by Alan Jay Smith a while back ('The Task of the Referee', *Computer* **23(4)**, 65–71 (1990))—that I would like to flag up as it strikes at the core of the referee mindset:

"It is important that you walk the uncertain line between being too permissive ("publish everything") and being too restrictive ("nothing is good enough to publish"). If you are not critical enough, you encourage poor research, recognize and honor those who don't deserve it, mislead naive and inexperienced readers, mislead the author as to what is publishable, encourage disrespect for the field, distort commercial development, hiring, promotion, and tenure decisions, and perhaps actually subtract from the general store of knowledge; . . . , unrestrained publication buries the professional under mounds of paper, only a very small fraction of which can be examined, let alone read.

If you are too critical, you block or delay good research from publication, waste the time of authors, damage careers, and perhaps leave journals with nothing to publish and conferences with nothing to present. It is particularly important not to reject new and significant work that runs counter to the prevailing wisdom or current fashion.

If you want to be taken seriously as a referee, you must have a middle-of-the-road view—you must be able to distinguish good from bad work, major from minor research, and positive from negative contributions to the literature. . . ." (p. 66).

When constructive criticism is offered and/or helpful suggestions made, the resulting improvement(s) to a submission give(s) the process a positivity and makes it worthwhile. Problems are almost guaranteed to arise, however, if the reviewer (a) is poorly chosen and not equipped to take on the task, or (b) is unwilling, though perfectly capable and suited, to give it due time and attention, or (even worse) (c) has some kind of 'hidden agenda' to play out,² any of which can frustrate and demoralise authors while lengthening the publication timeline (or curtailing it if the work is withdrawn); I have encountered all scenarios, not surprisingly, having become embroiled in some quite heated arguments around aspects of my papers at times. Editors, too, can demotivate appraisers themselves when informed, prudent and entirely rational requests are wilfully discarded—upgrading a justified and well argued 'reject' verdict to 'revise and resubmit', or the

¹Tips on engaging with a referee, and attending to recommendations, are also seen aplenty, though their quality and utility are variable.

²Disrupting or hindering the dissemination of work by individual competitors and/or rival groups is, driven by obvious and well documented incentives, not unknown in some of the chemistry/biology/physics/computing sciences when reputations and access to future grants might be at stake, particularly so when research is of public interest.

latter to ‘accept’, undermines the time and energy a referee has accorded the job (unless there are particular mitigating circumstances this type of event makes the exercise almost pointless), and I’ve read accounts of reviewers revoking their services after an experience such as this.³

Here we look briefly at some interesting words on the matter from two notable champions of mathematical research and writing from separate eras. American mathematician, educator and expositor Cassius J. Keyser (1862–1947) wrote a brief piece as part of a collection of essays brought together in a 1927 text:

“A JUST review is a difficult, rare, and highly praiseworthy achievement.

Readers of a serious book-review may rightfully expect to find in it two portraits, one of the book and one of the reviewer. A reviewer may fail to portray the book but he cannot fail to portray himself—he is pictured by his performance.

If he portrays the book, he thereby portrays himself as having intellectual and scholarly competence and an imperious sense of honor including loyalty to the author, loyalty to the editor, loyalty to the public, and loyalty to truth. His picture is that of a worthy citizen of the commonwealth of science and letters.

If he fails to portray the book, he thereby portrays himself as one lacking intellectual or scholarly or moral competence or two of these or all three of them. All such portraits are spiritually ugly. Of all of them the ugliest is perhaps that of a reviewer who uses the book merely or mainly as a trapeze upon which to mount and display himself. It is the picture of one who is vain, deceitful, and cowardly—intellectually a knave, morally a fool.

A periodical *Review of Book-Reviews* could render a very great and precious service. Its chief function would be, on the one hand, to signalize and commend competent reviews and reviewers, and, on the other, to signalize and denounce incompetent reviews and the nasty little scoundrels who perpetrate them.” [1, pp. 36–37];

Keyser certainly has a point here, nearly a century ago highlighting in this specific context both commendable and distasteful traits which we observe today still, such is human nature of course.

The enigmatic and opinionated Doron Zeilberger ((1950–); the Israeli-American mathematician is something of an iconoclast at Rutgers University in New Jersey) has had things to say about the business of reviewing on his absorbing and brutally candid ‘Opinions’ web pages, writing (see Opinion No. 156 of November 2016: ‘Academic “Peer-Reviewed” Journals Do No Longer Serve Their Original Purpose of Transmitting Knowledge, But They Will Stay (Unfortunately) With Us For a Very Long Time, Since They Serve an “Important” Human Need: “Inclusion-Exclusion” ’⁴)

“... Humans will be humans. They need their journals for *sociological* and *psychological* reasons. Some journals are more “prestigious” than others, but they all share the desire to improve their standing in the pecking order, and their editors, that by nature must have at least a small sadistic streak, (or they would refuse to do such a job), *love* to reject papers, because it makes them feel superior.”

Elsewhere (Opinion No. 63 (January 2005): ‘A Negative Review of Negative Reviews’), we see him opine thus:

“... If a book gets the honor of being reviewed, it should be because the editors consider it to be a good book, and hence it should get a sympathetic review, possibly pointing out some shortcomings, but of a positive rather than negative tenor.

The problem with reading a negative review is that it is provably subjective. Anyone who wastes his time writing a review of a book that he or she dislikes, is a frustrated

³As an aside, I once retracted a submission—and effectively banned myself from publishing in one particular journal—on complaining that its editor (not the referee) felt it acceptable to change my deployment of the word “whence” to “hence”. I pointed out that in some instances the meaning of a sentence had been altered, skewing my intended narrative, but to no avail. I had previously managed to get him to reverse similar semantic edits, but this one time he dug his heels in—it prompted a flurry of e-mail exchanges and, ultimately, my refusal to accept what I considered to be an unnecessary and unwarranted editorial imposition that degraded the paper. On the face of it this was a minor matter one might well say, but there was for me a principle here. Crazy stuff, and slightly ridiculous if I’m honest, exemplifying the sort of absurdity that can surface.

⁴Available at <https://sites.math.rutgers.edu/~zeilberg/Opinion156.html>.

mathematician, who has an axe to grind, and just enjoys being mean. Even a cursory reading of the negative review reveals that the author dislikes the subject, or missed the point, and uses the poor readers . . . (and especially the poor reviewed author) to dump his or her frustrations.”

In an early post (Opinion No. 3: ‘The Demise of the ‘Anonymous’ Referee’) of May 1995, Zeilberger questioned the right of reviewer privacy by default and proposed that it be abandoned:

“It is about time to abolish the immoral institution of ‘Anonymous Referee’. Even in the paper era, with its paper-mentality elitism, it was superfluous. A paper is either worth publishing or not. If it is not, you should have the guts to say it out loud, and if you are right, the author should thank you for saving him or her embarrassment. . . .”

Reviews come in all styles—ranging from the systematic, mechanistic and laboriously dull to the liberated, insouciant and rousingly readable. Perhaps the most biting book review I have ever read is that of the irrepressible and outspoken Italian-American mathematician Gian-Carlo Rota (1932–1999) who, on appraising John Arthur Passmore’s *Recent Philosophers: A Supplement to A Hundred Years of Philosophy* (Duckworth, London (1985)), produced this uncompromising one-line summary in Chapter XXI of his monograph *Indiscrete Thoughts* (Birkhäuser, Boston (2008 reprinted edition) (1997)): “When pygmies cast such long shadows, it must be very late in the day.” (p. 257)—searing and chastening in equal measure, and marvellous with it.

As an afterthought, let us not forget that some referees gleefully grasp opportunities to trash the work of others because of their own personality shortcomings and vindictive nature. While the setting is different, a wonderful piece in Aldous Huxley’s 1928 novel *Point Counter Point* (Chatto & Windus, London (1929 reprint)) describes this kind of attitude beautifully—a weak and ineffectual young man, Walter Bidlake (working alongside a submissive colleague), takes his journalistic obligations very seriously:

“Between them, on the table, stood the stacks of Tripe. They helped themselves. It was a Literary Feast—a feast of offal. Bad novels and worthless verses, imbecile systems of philosophy and platitudinous moralizings, insignificant biographies and boring books of travel, pietism so nauseating and children’s books so vulgar and so silly that to read them was to feel ashamed for the whole human race—the pile was high, and every week it grew higher. . . . They settled down to their work ‘like vultures,’ said Walter, ‘in the Towers of Silence.’ . . .” (p. 225);⁵

this kind of person (“On paper Walter was all he failed to be in life. . . .”)—hiding behind the proverbial ‘cloak of invisibility’ but still, as alluded to by Keyser, revealing something of their self—is a destructive liability who adds nothing to honest scholarly endeavour by such a lack of support which simply brings to light a meanness of spirit.⁶

References

- [1] C. J. Keyser, Portraits of book-reviewers drawn by themselves, *Mole Philosophy and Other Essays*, E.P. Dutton and Co., New York, 36–37 (1927).

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⁵I am grateful to friend James Stanton for bringing to my notice this source of material.

⁶I do not include Rota in this company. Despite his sobering remarks about others and their work on occasions, he is excluded because of his established standing as a respected researcher and popular teacher/supervisor of students (which he prosecuted with kindness, generosity and (where necessary) well judged candour)—each grounded in a natural ebullience and vitality which fed into his conversations, relationships, technical commentaries/publications, and colourful wider narrative writing.