

The Art of Book Reviewing

15 December 2021



Rebecca Ruth Gould

Most recent reviews for The Poetry Foundation's Blog *Harriet, Middle East Eye*

The screenshot shows the Poetry Foundation website interface. At the top, there is a search bar and navigation links for 'About Us', 'Newsletters', and 'SUBSCRIBE'. Below this is a main navigation bar with categories like 'POEMS & POETS', 'HARRIET', 'ARTICLES', 'VIDEO', 'PODCASTS', 'LEARN', 'EVENTS', and 'POETRY | MIDDLE EAST EYE'. A secondary navigation bar includes 'News', 'Opinion', 'Video', 'The Big Story', and 'DISCOVER'. A teal banner below the navigation reads 'Opinion | Culture'. The main content area features a grid of four book review cards and a featured article. The cards are for 'Fire is Not a Country' by Cynthia Dewi Oka, 'speculation, n.' by Shayla Lawz, 'Boomerang/ Bumerán' by Achy Obejas, and 'The Gleaner Song' by Song Lin. The featured article is 'Mohammed El-Kurd: Palestinian poet distils lessons from injustice' by Rebecca Ruth Gould, dated 20 October 2021. A large image of a book cover with the word 'RIEDA' is partially visible on the right.

Search by Poem or Poet

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News Opinion Video The Big Story **DISCOVER**

Now Sudan coup Syria War Occupation

Opinion | Culture

Fire is Not a Country
Cynthia Dewi Oka
poems
REVIEWED: NOVEMBER 2021
BY CYNTHIA DEWI OKA
WOMEN AUTHORS

speculation, n.
SHAYLA LAWZ
WINNER OF THE 2020 AUTUMN HOUSE POETRY PRIZE
"Some books you read and never forget. This is one of them."
—JIA KAMINSKI, author of *Deaf Republic* and *Dancing in Odessa*
REVIEWED: NOVEMBER 2021
BY SHAYLA LAWZ
WOMEN AUTHORS

Boomerang/ Bumerán
ACHY OBEJAS
POETRY
POESÍA
REVIEWED: NOVEMBER 2021
BY ACHY OBEJAS

The Gleaner Song
SONG LIN
SELECTED POEMS
Translated by Dong Li
REVIEWED: NOVEMBER 2021
BY SONG LIN
TRANSLATED BY DONG LI

Mohammed El-Kurd: Palestinian poet distils lessons from injustice
Rebecca Ruth Gould
20 October 2021 12:43 UTC | Last update: 4 weeks 1 day ago
Despite his young age, Kurd speaks as a mature poet who has absorbed the brutality of occupation and lived to tell the story

RIEDA

Reviewing in the broad sense: Most of my essays for the *London Review of Books* blog, *Current Affairs*, etc. are in one way or another commentaries on other books, past and present

Lecture in Four Parts

- Why Review Books?
- How to Review Books
- The Ethics of Book Reviewing
- How to Publish Book Reviews (& get paid for them)

Why Review Books?

Why Review Books?

IMPROVE YOUR CRAFT

- Become a better writer. Reading books is the best way to improve your writing. Reviewing books makes you a better reader.
- Make possible the type of work you want to write. Shape the discussion around issues or authors whose works matter to you. Set the stage for your own eventual contribution.

Why Review Books?

PRACTICAL USES

- Reviews can be reworked into longer pieces, including books.
- Contribute to the community. Form lasting literary connections (but don't be afraid to criticize!) based on your readings of others' work.
- Make a side income.

How to Review Books

Kinds of Book Reviews

- Poetry, fiction, non-fiction (each requires a different approach)
- Micro-reviews. Between 100-300 words. (*Harriet* blog reviews, *Publisher's Weekly*, and *Kirkus* are some examples.)
- Review essays (brings two or more books into conversation) are great way to build a reputation as a subject expert. Usually 1500 words +.

Structuring a Book Review

- Construct your review around quotes (at least 2 but generally not more than 3). Poetry books offer a special path here.
- Cultivate the art of paraphrase (rather than direct quote)
- Discuss the book on its own terms, esp. at the beginning. Focus first on any contribution it makes & its distinctiveness.
- Situate the book within a wider context and tradition
- End with a brief assessment (should be evaluative)

Structuring a Book Review in 5 Parts: Nonfiction

1. **FIRST SENTENCE:** This sentence introduces the book's topic, author, their profession, and their previous works. What are the book's goals or guiding ideas?
 - introduce the author and any previous books (“Smith (Once Upon a Time), a professor of horticulture,...”)
 - say what the author does, in order to achieve what overall-book goal (“sifts through centuries of Scottish manors’ household ledgers to unearth a lost tradition of radish cultivation...”)
 - characterize the book overall, with an adjective and a noun (“...in this whimsical kitchen history.”)
2. **SECOND SENTENCE:** This sentence summarizes the book's thesis.
 - summarize the book's thesis/conclusion/main claim. Feel free to employ a quote from the author.
3. **MIDDLE (LONGEST) CHUNK:** This part describes the book's contents.
 - The most important thing: elaborate the thesis, either with explanation or examples—if the book is about various people or events, give brief précis on 3-5 of them; if it's essays, give a few examples of their arguments.
 - Explain what the text consists of/how the content is told/what the structure is (e.g., chronological chapters alternating with letters, excerpts from diaries alongside literary analysis, interviews with anonymous subjects...)
 - What is the quality of the author's prose? Dry? Erudite? Humorous? Profane?

Structuring a Book Review in 5 Parts (Continued)

4. **SECOND-TO-LAST CHUNK:** This is the moment for the most direct evaluation and judgment. How comprehensive was the author's research or reporting, and how clearly is it sourced? Are the relevant primary sources there or only secondary sources? If the book is argumentative: are those arguments well-supported and logical? If the book is narrative, is the narrative gripping, well-paced, repetitive? Do the main characters come through as multidimensional and sympathetic?

Optional question: How does this book compare to the author's previous work and/or to other books on the subject or in the genre?

5. **LAST SENTENCE:** The quotable take-away that characterizes the book and predicts how readers will react.

Every Reviewer Should Ask Themselves

What makes your point of view unique?

Identify your unique angle through:

- subject matter expertise
- life experience
- having read other books on that topic

Then organize the review as a movement from the other (the book being reviewed) to the self (your unique angle)

How to Reveal New Angles

Reveal angles that might not be visible to the publisher or even the author (draw on your own expertise and experience)

You should have something to say about the book but no need to be an expert in the subject

Reviews of Isabel Wilkerson's *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*

- 1) Anupama Rao, from a South Asian perspective (*Los Angeles Review of Books*)
- 2) Hazel Carby, from an African diasporic perspective (*London Review of Books*)

Vol. 43 No. 2 · 21 January 2021

The Limits of Caste

Hazel V. Carby

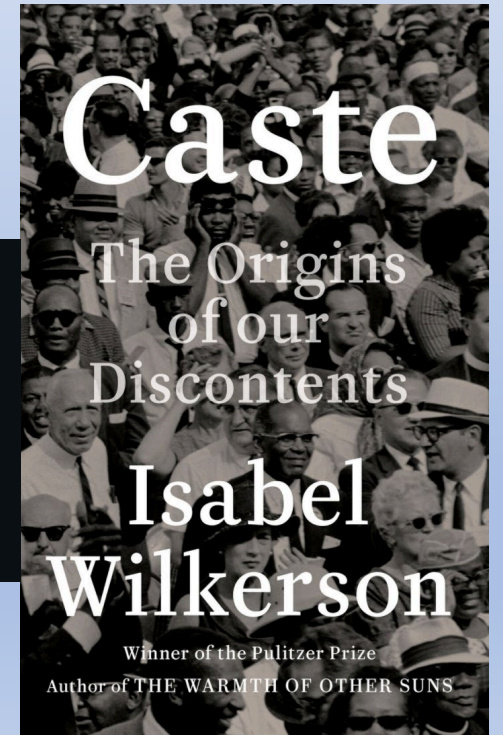


3078 words

CASTE: THE ORIGINS OF OUR DISCONTENTS
by Isabel Wilkerson.
Allen Lane, 476 pp., £20, August 2020, 978 0 241 48651 1

The Work of Analogy: On Isabel Wilkerson's "Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents"

September 1, 2020 · By Anupama Rao

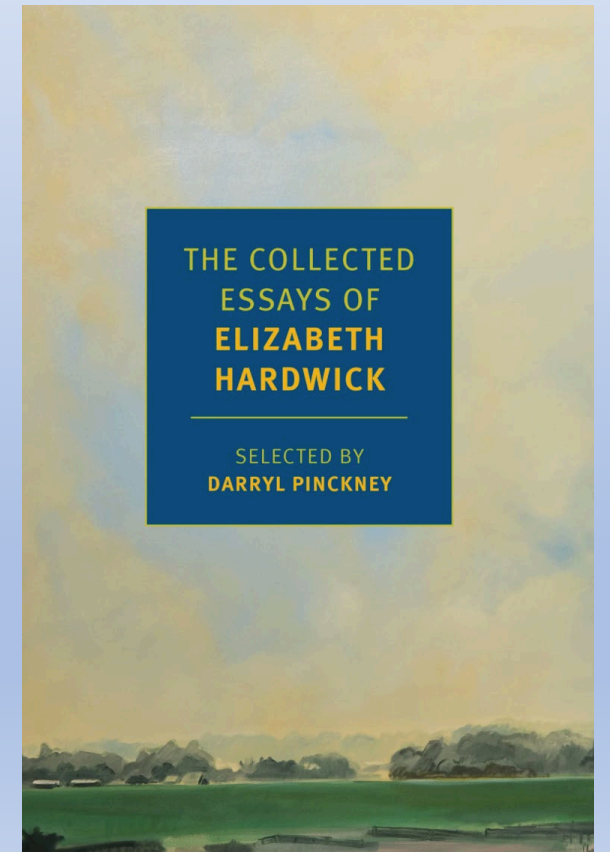


Make a Personal List of Reviewers you Admire

There is shame in emulating those you admire—the content will always be yours.

Try to map how they structure reviews and follow that structure.

- Adam Shatz (*London Review of Books*)
- Elizabeth Hardwick (*New York Review of Books*)
- James Baldwin (on Richard Wright)
- Vladimir Nabokov (idiosyncratic but influential)
- John Updike (*The New Yorker*)
- Helen Vendler (*The Nation*)
- T.S. Eliot
- Jorge Luis Borges



Resources for Writing Reviews

- Robert Pinsky, “How Not To Write a Book Review”
<https://slate.com/culture/2011/07/three-golden-rules-for-book-reviewing-what-are-they.html>
- David Beer, “In defence of writing book reviews”
<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsereviewofbooks/2021/06/04/in-defence-of-writing-book-reviews/>
- Jay A. Fernandez, “13 Common Mistakes in Book Reviewing and How to Avoid Them” <https://lithub.com/13-common-mistakes-in-book-reviewing-and-how-to-avoid-them/>

The Ethics of Book Reviewing

Avoiding Conflicts of Interest

USE A VEIL OF IGNORANCE TO THE AUTHOR WHERE POSSIBLE

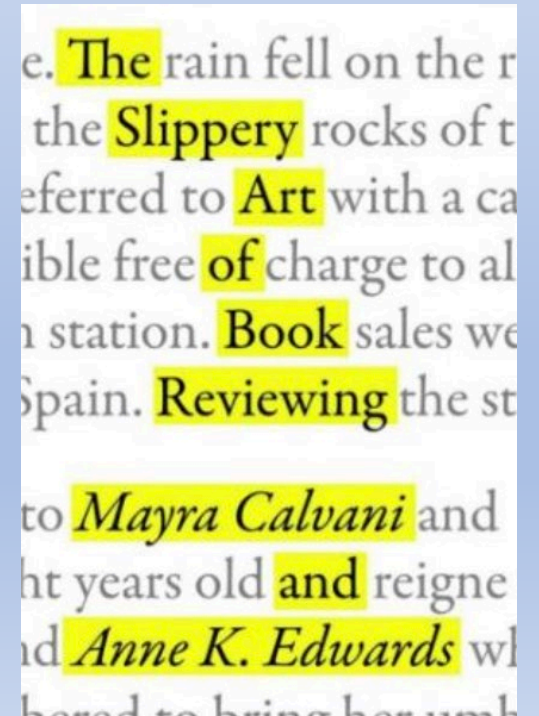
- Try to write the review without Googling the author (biographical information can be added after you finish the draft).
- The less you know about the author, the easier it will be to trust your first impressions, since this is how your readers will encounter the book

When Should You Not Review a Book?

- If you completely hated the book and saw no merit in it
- If you couldn't make out what it was trying to achieve
- It is best practice to avoid reviewing books by people you know well, unless you have a unique angle to add

“The less you know about the author or publisher, the less chance of conflict of interest and the more freedom you have to be honest.”

(Calvani and Edwards, *The Slippery Art of Book Reviewing* [Twilight Times Books, 2008] p. 94)



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Resist the Culture of Uncritical Praise

ON THE VALUE OF NEGATIVE REVIEWS

Corey Van Landingham, “Something to Talk About: A Case for Negative Poetry Reviews,”
<http://westbranch.blogs.bucknell.edu/essay-something-to-talk-about-a-case-for-negative-poetry-reviews/03/2018/>

Jason Guriel, “Going Negative,”
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/69242/going-negative->

Kristin Prevallet, “Why Poetry Criticism Sucks,”
<http://jacketmagazine.com/11/prevallet.html>

How to Publish a Book Review (& get paid for it)

Get Commissioned for Reviews

- It's generally a bad idea to write the review before it is commissioned. Better to wait until a publication assigns to review to you.
- Pitch to a publication (one-off)
- Get to know book publicists to get advance notice of new books, and pitch on that basis
- Register with Edelweiss (<https://www.edelweiss.plus/>) and Net Galley (<https://www.netgalley.com/>)—they provide you with free galleys to interested reviewers (no need to have arranged a publication venue).
- Get a staff position as book reviewer (e.g. The Poetry Foundation). Volunteer opportunities are worth considering.
- Create your own blog and determine your own niche!

Pitching a Book Review

- *Timing matters, especially for short reviews.* Time your pitch so that it is several months prior to the book's stated publication date
- Keep the email brief (2-3 intro sentences + a short paragraph about the book and its significance)
- Use hyperlinks to external sources about the author/book
- Include 2-3 links to your own work
- If you have no clips as a writer yet, it's fine to link to your website/blog

Venues that Welcome Book Reviews

General

Publishers Weekly

Kirkus Reviews (currently accepting new reviewers for self-published books \$60/review)

Book List

Poetry & Literary Fiction

Barrelhouse

West Branch

Kenyon Review

Wasafiri

Current Affairs

London Review of Books Blog

New York Review of Books

The New Inquiry

Prospect Magazine

New Left Review

Boston Review

More Tips for Getting Commissions

- Consider regionally-focused or subject specific journals (e.g. *Middle East Eye*, journals focusing on Africa, South Asia, Europe, Latin America)
- Seek out opportunities to write reviews on old forgotten books. These need not be commissioned in advance as they can be “evergreen” and publishable by many venues.
- A few academic journals take reviews for most nonfiction books, but commissions generally will not pay and there may be a paywall attached to your work
- Consider reviewing self-published books
(<https://www.kirkusreviews.com/about/careers/>)
- Combine book reviewing with developmental editing

Professional Associations, Awards for Book Reviewing

National Book Critics Circle

- Emerging Critics Fellowship
- Nona Balakian Citation for Reviewing

<https://nbcc.submittable.com/submit>



Emerging Critics Fellowship

Applications for 2021-2022 Emerging Critics Fellowship Are Now Open

Apply via Submittable.

The National Book Critics Circle accepts applications in the spring of each year for our Emerging Critics Fellowship. The fellowship seeks to identify, nurture, and support the development of the next generation of book critics.

Books on Book Reviewing

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Inside the Critics' Circle

Book Reviewing in
Uncertain Times

By Phillipa K. Chong

"Filled with acumen and understanding, *Inside the Critics' Circle* carefully dissects the reviewing process, a subject that academics and the reading class will find fascinating, relevant, and disturbing," writes Wendy Griswold, Professor of Sociology at Northwestern University. The book's theoretical and empirical analysis should it