A Question of Courtesy

You, an author's editor, are editing a book review. The review is well written and speaks favorably of the book's author's research. In addition, describing the author's life work, the reviewer comments extensively on the author's background and motivations. This commentary is based not only on published materials but also on the reviewer's interaction with the author in professional settings. Given this, you wonder whether you should advise the reviewer to obtain permission from the author to include the commentary or whether at least the book author should have, as a professional courtesy, a chance to review the review before submission. How should you proceed?

Solutions

Under no conditions would I consider it acceptable for an author to review a review of that author's book. Nor can I conceive of this even being couched in terms of courtesy because it hardly would be courteous to the reviewer. Nikita Khrushchev once described this proposed process as setting the goat to watch the cabbage patch. The pressures it would put on a reviewer would be huge and corrupting. As it is, many reviews are insipid and neither enthusiastic nor seriously critical.

The author has the opportunity to write to an editor complaining about a published review. I've seen this done occasionally, and it is a good idea. There is no guarantee that reviewers will always be capable or unbiased. I think the current system is fairly good and cannot think of any way to improve its imperfections. An editor's judgment in selecting reviewers is an important part of the outcome.

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I can think of no circumstances in which it is appropriate for a book's author to see a review of his or her book before the review is published. Although reviews are subjective opinion pieces and have been upheld as such by a high court, editors and reviewers have alternatives to consulting the author directly and thereby compromising the review process.

The editor should be aware at the outset of whether a potential reviewer knows the book's author personally. Usually, a person invited to provide a review will disclose such a relationship. If not, the instruction and copyright-transfer form that the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) sends to book reviewers will reveal this information; like that sent to manuscript authors, the form requires disclosure of any "financial or personal connection or conflict of interest involving the book . . . its author(s), editor(s), [or] . . . publisher." Acquaintance with an author does not preclude review, especially if the relationship is strictly collegial—an institutional or specialty history might best be reviewed by a participant—but the editor (and reader) needs to know.

Personal comments in a review can be written and edited without consulting the book's author. Awareness of the potential for libel, however unlikely, is always good practice. The line for libel is crossed when the reviewer comments on the author personally rather than only on the content of the book. For instance, it is safe to say that the author does not mention a particular seminal event, but dangerous to state that the author has a selective memory. Complimentary personal remarks are probably acceptable, but the reviewer must make clear his or her connection with the author and whether information is from the book. Consider "The author describes Dr S as a veritable Osler on rounds" versus "I would add to the author's account that, as Dr S's resident, I found him to be a veritable Osler on rounds."

Generally, contact between reviewers and authors or publishers is proscribed. We have made an exception for reviews of new media; often the reviewer needs the personal help of the vendor's technical support service. As book review editor, I might in a particular case consult with the author when fact-checking after exhausting other sources, but this, too, is rare. Clarity and fairness fulfill the duty to readers and provide sufficient courtesy to authors.

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I would not want a book reviewer to clear a review with the author of a book nor seek his or her permission to say relevant things about the book and about the author even if the reviewer has learned some of it through conversation with the author, no matter who wants the author to exercise this review—the author or the reviewer. Authors who wish to control the content of reviews could write their own and attempt to place them in publications, although I doubt they would succeed. Reviewers who doubt the legitimacy of their own assessments should not write reviews. Implicit in this opinion is that review and permission are equivalent to the right of the author to dictate revisions or to the imposition of restraint on the reviewer beyond that imposed by normal standards of civility. The author should not have, any more than the subject of an investigative report has, the right to restrain the reviewer or revise the review. In fact, I believe that if the author were allowed to revise a review written by another, there would be an undisclosed conflict of interest. Questions of accuracy, taste, and reader interest are the responsibility solely of the book reviewer, book review editor, and publisher. This opinion does not hold if the review is written for the publisher of the book, but in that case the conflict would (surely) be disclosed (and the impact of the review necessarily diminished).

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New Question: A Question of Protocol
The authors of a book manuscript tell you that they would like to ask several people to read the manuscript and render a critical appraisal before the manuscript is sent to a publisher. They ask you the usual protocol for soliciting such advice. What do you reply?

Leaking Breeches: How to Avoid – Uh, Avert – Them

The writer, a former high official in the health bureaucracy, was describing his role with respect to a certain agency: “My involvement with this office”, he wrote, “was limited to such issues as breaches of confidentiality and inexplicable leaks of confidential material…”

The errors of word choice we see in manuscripts are usually less, shall we say, thought-provoking than that. But the confusion often arises when 2 words sound the same, as here, or merely similar. There are dozens of such confusing word pairs; a few crop up in manuscripts with some regularity.

“Our results demonstrate that the drug has the potential to avoid unwanted and unplanned pregnancy.”

To avoid is to steer clear of or shun. You can avoid potholes, bores (if you’re lucky), and responsibility. But a drug can’t be said to avoid pregnancy. When the desired meaning is to prevent—to keep something, usually unpleasant or dangerous, from happening—the word is avert.

“The long-term effectiveness of hepatitis B vaccine mitigates against routine monitoring of anti-HBs titers.”

Mitigate and militate, so similar in look and sound, are frequently confused. To mitigate is to lessen the harsh effect of something or make it less severe. To militate (from the Latin militare, “to serve as a soldier”) means to have force or influence and is almost always used with against. “By mitigating the dangers of surgery, this approach militates against a conservative strategy of watchful waiting.”

“Each chapter of this textbook is a masterful review of its subject.”

The use of masterful for masterly is a malapropism so common as to be almost the rule rather than the exception. “Masterful” means overbearing, arrogant, or domineering. Picture Clark Gable as Rhett Butler, carrying a protesting Scarlett O’Hara upstairs to the bedroom in the movie Gone with the Wind. Masterly, by contrast, means “done in the manner of a master, or artist, indicating thorough knowledge or superior skill.”

Authors sophisticated enough to know the difference and careful enough to preserve it might be said to have a masterly command of the language.

“Once the parameters of the project have been defined, work can begin.”

Parameter is a mathematical term with a particular meaning, unsuspected by 90% of those who use it. (A parameter, I’m told, can be an arbitrary constant or an independent variable, but don’t ask me anything more about it.) Because of its delightfully technical sound, the word has been widely appropriated to mean boundary, limit, or framework—in short, to mean perimeter. Admittedly, authors of scientific papers are more apt to use the word correctly, in a statistical context, than the public at large. Still, it’s a word that bears watching.

“Patients should be given written instead of verbal explanations of their treatment options.”

Preserving the distinction between verbal and oral may be the most hopeless of Lost Causes. Verbal, from the Latin verbum, “word”, means having to do with words, written OR spoken. It isn’t very helpful to speak of verbal explanations (or agreements or messages), since these are generally assumed to be in words, not semaphore or smoke signals. The word in the example above should, of course, have been oral, from the Latin for mouth.