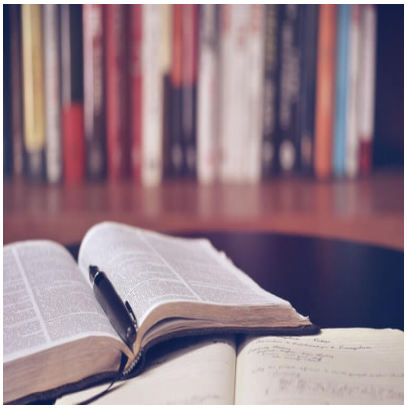

Description

Almost every week I read scholarly book reviews in Chemical and Engineering News. Fairly often in journals I read reviews of scientific articles previously published. Both reviews have some common element but differ considerably in their purpose and style.

Academic Book Reviews

A scholarly or academic book review has two goals: to critique the book for accuracy and style and to inform the reader as to whether he might want to read the book or not. About half the scholarly book reviews I come across are laudatory; the reviewer loved the book and has good things to say about the author. Perhaps he was a little long winded or simplistic in style but there was nothing wrong with his arguments or the completeness. In the remainder of the cases the reviewer takes exception to some parts of the author's arguments, praising some, quibbling or dismissing others. All this is part of the critical process. But a book review goes further to advise a potential reader as to whether he should invest the time in obtaining and reading the book in question. Perhaps it is a valuable but highly technical work which will only be of interest to specialists in the field. Or it may be a simplified account of a complex problem intended for the general population and not for the researcher in the field. None of this might be apparent from the title and is valuable information.

Article Reviews

In contrast, article reviews are typically more focused. They are intended to set the record straight. The author disagrees with the conclusions of an article and presents a counterargument and a criticism of the original paper. I well remember one of these from my grad school days. One article came out claiming the first synthesis of a tetracoordinate square planar silicon compound, one of the goals of my research. However, the authors' evidence was not a crystal structure determination but a space group determination that they argued indicated the correct symmetry for the novel structure. In the next issue of the journal a review of the article appeared arguing that a space group determination was useless for determining molecular symmetry. Published alongside the review was the authors' response which maintained that the reviewer, instead of countering their argument, had furnished powerful support in favor of it. I forget their reasoning on this point. But this is the usual pattern of a scholarly review of an article—a critique of the original article, followed by a response from the authors. Point, counterpoint.

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Laudatory article reviews are occasionally published but they are rare and in my opinion, serve little purpose. Although a review article might put in a complimentary word for an author, an article review should stick to the subject of the piece.

Category

1. Manuscripts & Grants
2. Reporting Research

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