

## Critical reviews: on books, readings, and critical readers

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*“Above all else, I paint painting.  
And above all else I write you hard writing”*  
(Clarice Lispector <sup>1</sup>, p. 13).

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What is the place of a critical book review in the publishing world? The answer to this question is related to two others that should guide any exercise in the elaboration of an academic text: what do we want and about what do we wish to write, research, and communicate? What stance do we take when we intend to publish the results of studies or produce knowledge in the form of original articles, opinion articles, theoretical essays, and critical book reviews (the latter for our purposes here)?

Through its editorials, CSP has provoked us to reflect on and debate the processes that involve knowledge production and science dissemination in the field of Public Health/Collective Health <sup>2,3,4</sup>. The current editorial serves two purposes: (1) to acknowledge that CSP has provided little clarity to authors about what we consider relevant in a critical book review and (2) to value the author's role and the updated academic dissemination that a critical review can provide. A beautiful exercise for cultivating and encouraging new authors is thus to value books, to foster interpretative and critical capacity: the authors of critical reviews should be creative and analytical, reading and interpreting rather than merely producing and reproducing a culture of plagiarism and pastiche. Critical review as a style of academic text produces a virtuous circle of reading, offering, and rewarding both authors and readers. It acknowledges both the book's author and the authorial work; at the same time, the reader becomes an author and critic through the review, reaching, enticing, and provoking other possible readers, fostering the desire to read and write.

In a quick search for periodicals in the field of Collective Health/Public Health and Human and Social Sciences, we identified a gap on what a critical review in academic format should address. Perhaps we still assign little value to this academic style and need to stimulate and value the initiation of new readers in the exercise of interpretation, analysis, and critical discussion.



Alves Filho & Alves <sup>5</sup> describe the author as one who assumes and is acknowledged as the authority who holds the power of interpretation of a work. In a historical revisit to the use and meaning of the term, three dimensions have converged over the course of the centuries for recognition of the author's social role in publicizing ideas and voices, namely: (1) the author allows the continuation, growth, and role of spokesperson through authorship; (2) the author creates, invents, and promotes ideas; and (3) the author possesses authority, combining sovereignty and power with his/her authorship.

In the case of reviews in the field of linguistics, "*the work's richness is linked to the author's authority, so it is not the work that makes the author important, but the author that makes the work important*" <sup>5</sup> (p. 103). The authors quoted above – situated in academia and the field of linguistics – highlight the author's role as superior to that of the work itself and view the text from the perspective of discourse analysis. Reference to the author often appear as deference, a recognition in which praise and extolment prevail. After all, when we read a book and propose to engage in an exercise beyond that of readers, we become authors in dialogue with the work, because something in the work touches us, mobilizes us, and makes turns us into writers.

Authors of critical reviews must take a stance, shedding light on and critically analyzing the work. In relation to the reviewed book, which may have a single author or be organized with multiple voices, it is worthwhile to refer to Foucault <sup>6</sup> in emphasizing four aspects associated with the author's role in the text: (1) ownership of ideas and academic responsibility for them; (2) argumentative content and clarity in expounding ideas; (3) style; and (4) heterogeneity, expressed in the creative act's plurality.

One indication of a review's authorship is the recognition that the review has a title, besides the references cited to support the analytical dialogue. The discussion of review as a genre in the article by Alves Filho & Alves <sup>5</sup> distinguishes between academic reviews and literary reviews. Based on this distinction, we assume that academic reviews are the focus of our interest in CSP.

In CSP, manuscripts submitted for inclusion in the *Book Reviews* section may present two major initial problems: (1) the book or text being reviewed fails to meet academic criteria and/or (2) the review lacks an authorial tone, limiting the review to a description of the chapters and reproducing an acritical presentation of the book.

For the first problem, it is necessary to approach a publication and be able to recognize the difference between a book – with an editorial board, a commercial publishing house belonging to the Brazilian Association of Science Editors, affiliated with a university publishing house or one acknowledged by the field of studies – and a reference work, which may lack the previous characteristics but still has value as an authorial work. In the latter case, a published work may act as a document, including various positions by international agencies, intellectuals from the field, activists, and/or policymakers. A book may appear in the former format, as an e-book, or as a reference book published by an international agency, national agency, or civil society organization.

In relation to the latter problem, which indicates refusal and compromises publication, its counterpoint, explained pedagogically here, should include some key characteristics such as critical reading, precise analysis framed in the field, capacity for synthesis, mobilization of authors, and contextualization of central concepts according to their limits and scope, valuing interpretation and dialogue with the work's central lines. When the theme intersects with public policies, it is also appropriate to mobilize a certain state of the art

as initial support for the text. In some reviews, when the work has a single author and/or a renowned author in the field, the review may include a brief discussion of the author's background and arguments. It may be important to include a brief biography of the author, which would be challenging in the case of a work organized with multiple authors. Concerning the second point, a good review should seek to identify the work's weaknesses and how the author dealt with them.

In our opinion, this approach requires an authorial construction, an argument, a guiding thread, acting as an antidote to a mere description of the work in question, the trap of presenting the work through a cold reproduction of its sections and chapters. Although a brief introduction is appropriate, it should be included within an analysis, with an adequate number of references. The review's main content should focus on the development of the work's critical analysis.

A critical review does not replace reading the book itself, but it should urge interested individuals to become readers, enticing them, embracing them, and inviting them to visit the book by reading it. An author who offers spontaneously (or is invited by the Editorial Board of CSP) to write a critical book review becomes a keen reader who establishes a critical dialogue with the book. A critical review published in CSP plays the role of fostering up-to-date knowledge of the literature and maturity in the field of Public Health/Collective Health.

In the epigraph to this editorial, we quoted Clarice Lispector <sup>1</sup> as an embrace, as the stream of life, the author who calls on us to remember, a heartfelt call to produce art, whether paintings or writing, experiencing pleasure and company. In these daunting times of the pandemic, reading and writing, revisiting books, can fuel the resistance we need to persevere, to issue invitations to new readers and authors.

### Additional information

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