

Author Interview: Q and A with Dr Phillipa K. Chong on Inside the Critics' Circle: Book Reviewing in Uncertain Times

In this author interview, we speak to Dr Phillipa K. Chong about her recent book, *Inside the Critics' Circle: Book Reviewing in Uncertain Times*, which takes readers behind the scenes of fiction reviewing, drawing on interviews with critics to explore the complexities of the review-writing process within a broader context of uncertainty.

Q & A with Dr Phillipa K. Chong, author of *Inside the Critics' Circle: Book Reviewing in Uncertain Times*. Princeton University Press. 2020.

Q: In *Inside the Critics' Circle*, you draw on interviews with 40 critics to explore their experience of fiction reviewing. What can we gain from better understanding the process of writing book reviews?

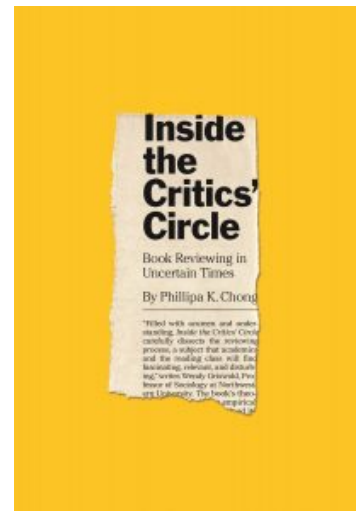
A typical book review is maybe 700 words and tells you what a critic thinks about a book. But it doesn't really tell you anything about *how* that critic arrived at such conclusions. This is an important part of the story because what the average reader confronts in the final 'print' version of a book review is the product of a longer chain of decisions and judgments that go beyond whether an individual critic likes a book.

Let's start from the beginning: when review section editors are deciding whether a book should be included for review in their pages. Readers may be surprised to learn that these decisions are not primarily driven by identifying high-quality books, but more prosaic concerns like the buzz surrounding an author or whether an editor can think of a suitable critic to review the book. Similarly, while critics do consider the strengths or weaknesses of the books they review, they revealed that what they put in their reviews is also guided by a sense of professional self-preservation and ideals of good cultural citizenship. Much of the story of book reviewing is what doesn't get included as much as what does appear in reviews. And you only get that from probing the broader process of reviewing before you get to the final form.

Q: You describe book reviewing today as taking place within a broader context of uncertainty. What do you mean by this and how does it manifest for reviewers?

Many words have been used to describe professional book reviewing. 'Decline' and 'demise' come up frequently in conversations about the rise of amateur book reviewers and dwindling book coverage. But I describe book reviewing as characterised by *uncertainty* to emphasise how so much of how critics operate, the reactions reviews provoke and the future of book reviewing are unsure and unpredictable. The book details how reviewers proceed in spite of, and in response to, these uncertainties.

The first two chapters examine how critics undertake the crucial task of book reviewing, which is determining whether a book is worth reading. Critics describe a fastidious process which includes multiple readings: many critics approach the book as a regular reader would (what one critic called a 'civilian' reading), before subjecting the work to a more critical analysis in a second round of reading. Critics also emphasise the imperative of being able to justify their assessments using conventional evaluative criteria and representative excerpts.



Yet, every critic I interviewed had the experience of seeing their carefully considered judgments publicly contradicted by other critics' reviews. This is tied to the accepted subjectivity of taste. One reviewer wrote a scathing review of a book that went on to win the Booker Prize. Another reviewer praised a book that was so universally loathed by other reviewers that it causes him embarrassment to recall it more than ten years on. To say reviewing is uncertain doesn't mean that critics feel out of their depths or insecure in their judgments. Indeed, many critics feel very sure of their literary assessments – even after reading reviews that may go against their own. But this *feeling* of certainty does not change the fact that how the critical consensus will judge the final quality of a work may diverge from your own opinion. It is because of critics' inability to predict the final quality of a book that I characterise reviewing as high in *epistemic uncertainty*, just one of several types of uncertainty that critics must navigate in their work and that I explore in my book.



Q: You found that reviewers experience particular anxiety when it comes to writing negative reviews. What are some of the concerns that reviewers have and how do they navigate these?

I truly believe that critics *want* to like the books they review. Think about it: ideally you would read a book that you think is just magnificent, then you get to write about this great book and share this enthusiasm with other readers through a positive review, delighting the author and their publicist. Everyone wins: the critic, the reading public and the author under review.

But disappointing books are unavoidable and reviewing them presents multiple challenges. Critics must slog through the book, which they might just put down if they weren't being paid to read it. Critics take up precious review space telling readers about a book they do not think is worthy of readers' attention. And they risk alienating themselves from the author-under-review and even burning professional bridges with those affiliated with the project.

Many reviewers are themselves working authors. I describe the situation of critics as a *switch-role reward structure*, where the reviewer today can easily be the reviewee tomorrow. The consequences of this are laid bare by one critic who reflected that: 'giving a bad review to a fellow fiction writer is [risky]. If that fiction writer is ever on a panel, a jury for an award—they're not going to vote for your ass.' It is true, of course, that negative reviews can be respectfully done and even spark productive discussion. And many authors and industry professionals take them in stride. Still, critics encounter additional reputation and professional risk and uncertainty when they write negatively about someone's work.

Critics revealed ways they make writing negative reviews slightly more palatable. This includes critics inserting details about the plot or the broader context or career of the author into the final review to crowd-out more overt evaluative statements about the book. Some critics choose to emphasise what other readers might appreciate about the book, even if they did not particularly enjoy the novel themselves. While some critics felt no qualms about writing a 'hatchet job', the vast majority I spoke with expressed a preference for muting their criticisms to reduce the potential harm to both the author under review, in the form of hurt feelings, and themselves, in the form of future retribution!

Q: In the book you discuss the lack of diversity in publishing, which perpetuates gender, racial and other inequalities in coverage and reception for both authors and reviewers. Is this something that critics considered and felt able to challenge through their own practice?

In general, I think most critics recognised that reviewing could improve when it comes to diversity and inclusion. But it wasn't clear how and if individual reviewers should figure into that improvement. For the majority of reviewers, the push for greater diversity in publishing felt beyond the scope of their work. Critics are hired on a freelance basis to write about a single book. And their focus remained trained on reading that specific book and ensuring it is evaluated fairly. In essence, these critics don't see their actions as connected to big structural issues like diversity.

In contrast, other reviewers see the outsized attention given to some authors and used this to steer their reviewing practices. Specifically, I found that some critics (primarily women) explicitly asked not to review books written by women – especially first novels. Why? Because these critics know how difficult it is for women to get published, to get reviewed and the impact it can have on their career. And they didn't want to be put in a position where they might have to write a negative review of a woman's book in light of these challenges. These critics may have noble intentions, but de facto create a situation where there are fewer willing reviewers for books by women, which, ironically, can make it harder for women's books to get reviewed.

Both groups of reviewers recognise that there is a problem in reviewing (and publishing more generally). But neither had a straightforward understanding of how they could contribute towards a solution – including whether they had the power to effect any change, or if it was their responsibility. The point I make in the book is that these are not really individual responses at all. They are a consequence of the informal way book reviewing is organised, which inhibits a sense of group identity and efficacy.



Q: Given the pressures surrounding book reviewing today, do you believe it will remain a resilient practice?

Book reviewing has survived digitisation. Still, there are lingering questions about the cultural place of reviewing. What is the value of professional reviewers? And what counts as a review? The words 'review' and 'criticism' do a lot of work. In the book, I distinguish between four distinct types of writing about books that can be grouped under the umbrella of reviewing. Each has different audiences and concerns. And even within the single genre of journalistic newspaper reviewing, reviewers report a mix of goals: providing a summary of the book; reporting on noteworthy books; publicising books; recommending books; and even entertainment (i.e. providing a good read), among others.

But there are so many other ways that these goals can be achieved. If a reader is looking for book recommendations, they might benefit more from consulting the profiles of readers with similar tastes via Goodreads than a single review in the *Guardian*. If a publisher wants to publicise a book, then a solid social media campaign could be effective. And if someone just wants to read about literature, they might be better served by long-form essays in a literary magazine rather than a typical 500-word review.

In this context, I think a major challenge book reviewing faces is clarifying and grappling with what it uniquely brings to the discussion of books. I personally think that there is unique value that comes from book reviewing's organisational ties to news journalism.

Q: In light of that, did your research reveal any tensions between the demands of academic reviewing and more journalistic approaches?

It's funny you ask because I just accepted my first academic book review assignment. And as I am working through it, I can't help but hear the voices of all the people I interviewed for the book in the back of my head. I'm not sure if that will make the final review I produce better or worse. But the process is very meta.

I think there's a lot of value in comparing academic and journalistic approaches. It wasn't a focus of the book, but I plan to compare and contrast each phase of my experience writing an academic book review with what my critics told me on Twitter. Interested readers can follow it here: [@chongsoc](https://twitter.com/chongsoc)

Q: Given the uncertainties and anxieties bound up in book reviewing, are there strategies book review editors could adopt when it comes to supporting reviewers?

Since the book has come out, a few review editors have come to me asking how they can help make their pages more equitable. And I'm thrilled to offer my expertise to anyone interested in reflecting on their practices. Towards that end, my new work traces diverse authors' (in terms of race, gender, sexuality and region) perspectives on each stage of the publishing process. This includes how individuals decide they want to be writers, how they come up with a book project, working with editors, getting reviewed and – for some authors – become reviewers themselves. It is my hope that once I have come to grips with the diversity of experiences of publishing, I'll be able to offer more wide-ranging insights back to the industry.

Regarding review anxiety, I think it's useful to normalise and accept that anxiety is intrinsic to the review process for many. It's tough work. And I don't think that anyone who works in book reviewing will find anything truly surprising in the book. It puts in black-and-white what many critics have likely discussed informally or know implicitly. But what the book does offer is an empirical portrait of how critics' attempts to cope with the epistemic, social and institutional uncertainties of reviewing can directly shape their reviews. And the question that remains is which types of anxieties, or uncertainties, we think should be shaping our review coverage. It is my hope that the book can provide a shared vocabulary for review editors and individual critics to reflect on this question.

Note: This interview gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics. The interview was conducted by Dr Rosemary Deller, Managing Editor of the LSE Review of Books blog.

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