In the world of Goodreads, do we still need book reviewers?


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In the world of Goodreads, do we still need book reviewers?

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Throughout history, book reviewers have sometimes been comically off the mark in their assessments.

A New York Times reviewer described Vladimir Nabokov’s Lolita as “dull, dull, dull in a pretentious, florid and archly fatuous fashion”. While a hater of both Charlotte and Emily Bronte, in his review of Wuthering Heights, found consolation in the idea that the novel “will never be generally read”. 

Nabokov's Lolita received numerous vicious reviews. Chris Lott/flickr, CC BY-SA
Regardless of occasional misjudgement, reviewers have played a crucial role in shaping literary taste and creating a sense of expectation for a newly published book or emergent author for centuries.

There is an incredible volume of fiction published each year. Reviews highlight books that follow styles and traditions that readers already enjoy and flag new movements that they might not have previous considered.

The grip of traditional print media is being loosened in the digital age. As a result, does the opinion of the professional book reviewer still carry as much significance as it once did? In a world in which anyone can publish a review for an international readership, has the separation between the professional and the individual reader with an opinion been dissolved?

Fan communities, in particular, can usurp the place of the book reviewer in providing a trustworthy opinion from someone with familiarity with similar kinds of books. Moreover, fan and review sites can give a depth of coverage to genres that are often excluded from literary review pages.

Sites such as Goodreads, for instance, include an extensive number of reviews of fantasy, science fiction and Young Adult fiction.

But do fan reviews fulfil the same function as those of traditional book reviewers? Jorge Gracia suggests that a book review must not only “articulate and present an understanding of the book’s thesis and argument” but must “make a judgement as to its value”.

Ideas about “value” differ depending on whether a novel being considered is a work of literary fiction or a teen Gothic novel published in a series like Twilight. Nevertheless, regardless of the perceived literariness of a given book, reader reviews are often more concerned with the pleasures of reading rather than issues of intellectual or aesthetic “value”.

This approach to reviewing can see a classic like Jane Eyre lumped with a one-star rating for being “boring and unbelievable”.

Nevertheless, the dispersal of reviewing power from the control of a handful of critics to a wide community of readers online also allows for the idiosyncratic views of individuals to be moderated by the consensus of the majority. While “Gabriella” “never bought the romance between Jane and Mr. Rochester”, over a million ratings and twenty-thousand individual reviews still sees Bronte’s classic novel receive a score of 4.08. It reassuringly edges out Stephenie Meyer’s Twilight at 3.53.

The decline of the book reviewer and reviewing culture has been lamented since long before anyone owned a home computer. Yet the recent explosion in the volume of published opinions about books in some ways only magnifies the need for informed judgements by those whose job it is to critique.
Reviewers will not always be correct in their assessment of what a novel’s “value” is, as scathing reviews of many enduring novels attest. However, they can place a book within the culture of the time and the literary history of the past in the way that a fan reviewer usually cannot.

Significantly, we also know who professional reviewers are. Fake book reviews full of glowing praise are prolific on sites such as Amazon. One British crime writer, RJ Ellory, even used the Amazon review platform to laud his own books and lump his rivals with gleeful one-star reviews.

At present, book lovers enjoy the best of both worlds. They can measure the advice of an avid reader who has written hundreds of reviews for pleasure with the thoughts of a critic who is paid to read and evaluate books. The pressing question is how might reviewing change when the last of the traditional media outlets to fund professional reviewers disappear and the likes of “Gabriella” are our only guide.