Reviewing Our Book Reviews: Fifty Years and Counting

Frank J. Whittington, Rachel Pruchno
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The editorial team of The Gerontologist has been committed to providing its readers with up-to-date information about recently published books focused on gerontological science and practice since the inception of the journal in 1961. The initial issue of the journal included a list of recently published books. The first formal book review (of You Can’t Count on Dying, by Natalie Harris Cabot) was written by Joseph T. Freeman, MD, and appeared in the September 1961 issue. Early reviews were sporadic, brief, and featured a single book. By the 1970s, several issues of the journal included multiple book reviews, each written by a separate reviewer. In August 1974, a “Book Briefs” section was initiated in which several books of a similar genre were reviewed together.

The June 1979 issue of The Gerontologist introduced S. Donna Lind, PhD, as its first book review editor. Recognizing the voluminous magnitude of materials emerging about aging, The Gerontologist sought to provide broad coverage and usable information to its readers. The journal used multiple formats, including brief overviews, conventional book reviews, and in-depth critiques. In the early days, the size of the gerontological community was so small that it was difficult to identify reviewers who were not best friends and/or competitors of the book authors.

By the end of her term as book review editor, Lind noted that the explosion of new books on aging made it impossible to review all of them. She described forming a book review panel of about 20 gerontologists who agreed to receive publications and evaluate them for review consideration. She observed that “it is easy to write bland uncritical reviews—less so if criticism seems warranted in the reviewer’s opinion. But it does take some courage and one does run a risk when criticizing a so-called senior scholar.” (December 1981).

Subsequent book review editors (Elizabeth Markson, 1983–1986; Robert Applebaum, 1986–1989) continued to present review essays of related books, conventional book reviews, and a “Briefly Noted” section of short reviews. The “Books Received” section was categorized and presented by topic. In their jointly authored editorial, Applebaum and Markson (October 1986) reported that the journal received approximately 300 books per year of which there was space to review only about 45. Prior to 1988, book reviews were published by the Journal of Gerontology as well as The Gerontologist, with careful coordination on the part of the editors to avoid duplication. In 1988, the Journal of Gerontology stopped publishing book reviews. Subsequently, The Gerontologist became the sole GSA-sponsored journal to review books.

The June 1989 issue of The Gerontologist marked the beginning of Robert H. Binstock’s close to 20-year stint as book review editor. He introduced a new approach to book reviews that encouraged the development of scholarly essays on the state of the subject matter of the reviewed books. These review essays in themselves have enriched the literature in the field immensely while conveying the substance and importance of the books being reviewed. Books were grouped thematically for simultaneous review in an essay, helping to maintain The Gerontologist’s policy of reviewing the largest possible number of scholarly and professional books in the field, within the space allotted to the Book Review section.

Frank Whittington became book review editor in February 2008. Informing our readers about new books, including research monographs, handbooks, and textbooks, remains a central and vital part of
Knowledge regarding the content of recently published books is important, and having a colleague’s thoughtful assessment of new books is especially useful as the number of books about aging continues to grow. The rising cost of books combined with limited individual and university library funds make decisions regarding which books to purchase more difficult than ever.

The book review section of The Gerontologist is dedicated to providing both an assessment of a book’s scholarly value and identifying its place within its field of study or practice. We carefully select and instruct our reviewers not only to tell us what the book amounts to but also to place it within a scientific or professional context that will allow the reader to learn about a body of work beyond the volume under review. We continue to use the format developed by Binstock where typically two or more books on the same (or related) subjects are reviewed in one essay, though sometimes a book is unique and important enough that it is reviewed alone. These invited review-essays are longer than a typical book review (10–12 pages), carry their own title, and make definitive evaluative statements about a body of work, and we consider them original contributions to gerontological scholarship.

The book review editor solicits books about gerontology and aging from all publishers. Some publishers actively market their works, sending all their aging-related books for consideration. Other publishers may send us the occasional new book, whereas still others fail to respond to our requests for copies of books to review. Nevertheless, when we hear of the publication of a book that has not been received, we write directly to the publisher for a review copy. Authors can help their book’s chances of being reviewed by asking their publisher to send a review copy directly to Dr. Whittington.

Decisions regarding which books to review are difficult ones. We receive about 90 books in an average year but can review only between 25 and 30. [We are not sure why the book supply has dwindled since Markson and Applebaum’s report. It is possible that the economics of publishing has limited the number of books on aging being published, curtailed the practice of sending review copies, or both.] We try to provide reviews of books that will appeal to the varied interests of The Gerontologist’s readers. Some books are clearly so important that they must be reviewed; a few are just as clearly marginal to our field and therefore not candidates for review. But the majority falls in the middle ground: They appear important, probably interesting to a swatch of our readership and with wider exposure could contribute to our collective understanding of aging. Although we try to “package” similar books if they are published within the same time frame (usually within 6 months or a year of each other), this is not always possible. So, regularly we assign a single book for review, though due to space limitations, many otherwise worthy books cannot be reviewed.

Selection of reviewers is somewhat more transparent, though still difficult. The pool of candidates is necessarily limited by the topic of the book(s) and, to some extent, the expertise and experience of the reviewer. Many potential reviewers tell us that they have no time for a “new” obligation/deadline that, in most academic departments, carries little promotion or tenure value. Nevertheless, most of those who are asked to review books readily agree. These people clearly recognize book reviewing as a necessary and important contribution to the field; many even find it pleasurable.

Seeking to develop the next generation of gerontologists, we publish essays not only by recognized and esteemed experts but also by emerging scholars. We especially seek graduate students and other newly minted professionals to serve as reviewers and have published at least two such reviews in each of the past two years.

We encourage authors to inform The Gerontologist when a new book is published. Authors who would like their book to be considered for review in The Gerontologist should be sure that a copy of the book is sent to Frank J. Whittington, PhD, Book Review Editor, Dean’s Office, College of Health & Human Services, George Mason University, 4400 University Drive, MS 2G7, Fairfax, VA 22030. Reviews are assigned and prepared at the request of the Book Review Editor, and submission of a book is no guarantee it will be reviewed in the journal. All books received, however, are listed in the journal’s catalogue of “Books Received” appearing in each issue. Unsolicited reviews are not accepted, but people who are interested in becoming a book reviewer are encouraged to send an E-mail and copy of their CV to Frank Whittington, at fwhittin@gmu.edu.

Books remain a central and vital part of our work. We urge you not to miss the Book Review section at the back of each issue—and we and our reviewer–partners will continue to do our best to keep you aware of new books that inform and redefine our field.

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