prepared for: *The American Journal of Psychology*
Running head: Life

My Life as a Book Reviewer

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2,816 words of text
(excluding references)

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Keywords: books, reviews

I should like to put it on record that I have never been able to dislike [the author].

- *George Orwell, 1940*

Having written and published 40 book reviews over the last two decades, it is time to take stock. Why have I done this? Why do I keep going? Why does anybody? It is easy to be somber about the role of book reviews in scholarly discourse. If books are considered second-rate or derivative publications by many research scientists, then book reviews are mere after-thoughts to other authors' summaries or non-peer-reviewed opinions. Why bother? Academic psychologists get little credit for the books they publish, unless, perhaps, they are already famous. Recognizing these impediments, many senior faculty members discourage their junior colleagues from 'wasting time' in the book business. What is true for books is even truer for book reviews.

Authors are not dead

The somberness and suspicion with which many researchers encounter books notwithstanding, there *is* a lively book culture in psychology. With many talented science journalists contributing to the genre, psychology books have been one important way to tell the public what is going on in field and lab. In my own reviewing, I have gravitated toward authors whom I know and respect, although there have been exceptions. I have also gravitated toward books that develop interesting, creative, or provocative arguments, but there have also been exceptions. It all started with a review of Robyn Dawes's *Everyday irrationality*, which I published in the *Skeptical Inquirer* in 2001. The book that I would have liked to review, had I been older, was Dawes's (1988), *Rational choice in an uncertain world*, an award-winning introduction to the psychology of judgment and decision-making. A decade later, I had the opportunity to review, with my students Tony Evans and Gideon Goldin (2011), a later edition of Hastie and Dawes, which is a different animal. Excellent as it is, this latter-day book is less coherent than Dawes's original text, and it is not – by necessity – a text written in one voice.

Speaking of different voices and the joys of aggregation, I fondly recall James Surowiecki's *The wisdom of the crowd* (reviewed in 2005) because Surowiecki demonstrated that a science

journalist can expertly distill research findings into a coherent and stimulating argument. History proved him right. The wisdom-of-the-crowd concept is now a highly regarded element of a flourishing research program (Hertwig, 2012; Krueger & Chen, 2014).

In 2008, I published my first review in the *American Journal of Psychology*, to which I have remained loyal, partly because of the thoughtful editing my reviews received and partly because the *AJP* allows reviewers to develop a scholarly argument as opposed to limiting them to summary and evaluation. That first *AJP* review was of Philip Zimbardo's *Lucifer effect*, a volume that is – in my opinion – tragically flawed. Reviewing *Lucifer*, I realized for the first time that some books reveal more about the author than the author may have intended. I had a similar experience when reviewing Martin Seligman's *Flourish* (2012) and Richard Thaler's *Misbehaving* (with F. Kutzner, 2017). All three books read like a kind of apologia; the authors were at the time, each in his own way, under siege from critics (Zimbardo), sensing their influence slip away (Seligman), or simply feeling misunderstood or underappreciated (Thaler). My job as a reviewer, as I saw it, was not to add to these perceived indignities, but to note that allowing oneself, as a writer, to let personal hurt bleed into the story is a dangerous game. In my opinion, apologias are most effective if they are unapologetic, that is, when the goal of rebutting critics and gainsayers is assertively made explicit.

Barthes (1967) pronounced the author dead, in the sense that readers (and reviewers) should not waste time trying to figure out the author's intentions. It's the text and nothing but the text, so Barthes. I have found Barthes's claim difficult to accept (Krueger, 2020). Sure, there is the danger of the fundamental attribution error or other misperceptions that give the author more credit (positive or negative) than they deserve, but let's remember that most authors do publish under their own name for various rational or egocentric reasons. I understand this, and in my own way, I have always attempted to honor the authors by taking them seriously as human beings acting in the world, even if my reviews turned out to be more critical than laudatory.

The reviewer's role

If, according to Barthes, the book author is – or should be – hidden, then this is true *a fortiori* for the book reviewer. Sure enough, no one has become famous writing book reviews. The present essay will not bring me fame or notoriety either, but I hope to shed some light on the process and the motivations at play. What is the role the reviewer takes *vis-à-vis* the author? I like the idea of the *alter ego*. Few read a book as thoroughly and as intently as a reviewer does. The reviewer's primary obligation is not to misrepresent the author's argument. This is the do-no-harm rule. The secondary, and more difficult, obligation is to understand the author's claims better than they themselves do. This may sound odd given the intuition that no one is more steeped in the relevant literature and the narrative presented in the book than the authors themselves. We know, though, that people, and this includes authors, are biased in how they encode, retain, and reproduce information. Here, the well-known confirmation bias (Nickerson, 1998) comes into play. Authors must create a coherent narrative, and the forces of assimilation and exformation (leaving out inconvenient material) can have a distorting impact. The reviewer, particularly if he or she does not approach the work with competing theoretical commitments, can assume the role of the author's super-ego, calling out minor or major transgressions. This obligation will sooner or later conflict with the do-no-harm obligation, and hence, writing a fair review requires more delicacy and diplomacy than writing a book. Being human, I have surely violated the do-no-harm rule. As a protection, the *AJP* and some other publications sometimes allow book authors to respond and the reviewer to rebut (e.g., an exchange with Iris Berent, in press). This is a healthy format, although it may stretch the patience of the readership.

Commented [MOU1]: Must the book reviewer be void of competing theoretical convictions?

JK: not necessarily. But I wanted to focus on this case.

I consider a book review a success if it offers the reader a clearer exposition of the core arguments than the book itself does. Authors, being human, care about all the chapters they have written. Everything matters to them, if only for the dissonance-reducing attachments felt after years of toil. A reviewer is freer to organize and re-organize the material to help the reader identify core constructs and follow the internal logic of the narrative thread. Many authors write their forewords

with these goals in mind, but they have to be wary not to give too much away. Afterwords also help, but one cannot expect authors to be self-critical. An independent book review, being external to the book, has unique freedoms. It need not be apologetic or worry about sales. It can distill, to the best of the reviewer's ability, what the author really meant to say, and Barthes be damned.

Book reviews are thus essential. They could be pre-empted perhaps if authors themselves included a review of their own book in the book. I have never seen such a thing, but it strikes me as an interesting possibility. Suppose you have finished writing a book and you take a little time off to let it sit (over the likely objections of the publisher) and then re-read it putting on the glasses of the interested and unprejudiced reader. This possibility, intriguing as it might seem, faces psychological barriers. How well can an author succeed assuming a neutral stance? Psychologists never tire exhorting the public on the blessings of perspective-taking (Epley, 2014; reviewed 2016). Taking the perspective of another person opens the mind to a broader range of information and evaluation, but the ego casts strong anchors. If an author were to go down this road, he or she would need to either make a commitment not to revise the book after having reviewed it, or to use the perspective-taking exercise to improve the book, in which case negative reviews might be anticipated and disarmed. The idea of self-review is not quite as outlandish as it may at first seem. There are certain exceptions. Books that have become classic texts go through multiple editions with the authors adding another preface to each. When done well, these prefaces include reflections on the original work and how and why it needed updating.

The reviewer's pleasure

If I have hinted at the author's egocentric motivations and limitations, I should note that reviewers have their own. There have to be some pleasures in reviewing books if the external rewards are few to none. For me, a commitment to prepare a book review makes me read a book very closely. Hence, I expect to experience deeper learning, coming not only from reading the text more carefully and sometimes repeatedly, but also from having to elaborate my own thoughts, arguments, and counterarguments. This benefit of deeper learning follows from the obligation to see in the text what

the authors themselves cannot see. Some book review projects present a challenge. I have found in a few cases that my instinct told me to toss a book away after a first read. I could not, I told myself at that point, produce anything of interest in a review essay. So far, however, I have always come around to write a review, which in the end I found rewarding. Mumford and Higgs's edited volume on leadership skills is a case in point. I found this book uninformative to the point of dullness. The challenge was to figure out what exactly the deficiencies were. A mere pronouncement of dullness would not do. In the review (2020), I attempted to explore the validity of the authors' core assumptions and to clarify what I thought an effective book on the topic of leadership and cognition might look like.

Besides enhanced learning, there is playfulness. Much as a good book is the result of a creative process and not just the drudgery of typing, so is a good book review. Again, a review that exhausts itself in providing a summary is a poor review. To me, the creative spark is most gratifying if I find a way to turn a feature of the reviewed book back onto itself. As a case in point, I offer my review of Daniel Kahneman's famous *Thinking, fast and slow*. Kahneman, it will be remembered, sought to reconstruct the psychology of judgment and decision making in light of the then-popular two-systems metatheory of cognition, which Kahneman to his credit himself considered to be more metaphorical than 'real.' Once I started on the review, it dawned on me that my own reviewing might be reconstructed as a result of System 1 or of System 2 thinking. The result was *Reviewing, fast and slow* (2012). Essentially, I prepared two reviews in one essay. Relying in System 1 thinking, I enjoyed Kahneman's book very much. Recruiting System 2 for a more reflective review, I had to curb some of that enthusiasm. One wonders what Kahneman's book itself would have looked like had he written two versions of it.

Francesca Gino's *Rebel talent* explored the role of creativity in the context of leadership. It was all about strategic nonconformity. I thought Gino, with her generous talents, could have taken a larger dose of her own medicine. Upon reflection, so should have I in my review, the main creative contribution of which was its title *Controlled eccentricity* (2019).

In addition to deeper learning and creativity, book reviews give the reviewer opportunities to indulge certain pet ideas. For me, the impossibility of free will, in its libertarian form, is one such *idée*, and perhaps a *fixe* one. On occasion, writers, even some with training in biology, present admirable expositions of their science only to then seek refuge in metaphysical notions of free will. Ken Miller and Barbara Ehrenreich are among those whose books I reviewed, respectively in 2018 and 2019. They gave me the opportunity to call out the quasi-religious bases of the belief in free will. As I admire both Miller and Ehrenreich for their many accomplishments, I remain puzzled by their flight into the supernatural. Unless I am eventually corrected on this point, I take the dualism I found in their books as examples of the text hiding itself from the author.

Teaching and learning from the best

I would like to end on a note of humility. I am grateful to all the authors whose books I have had the pleasure and the privilege to review. I recognize that although book reviews can add value to the conversation, they are ultimately parasitic. A book review feeds on the hosting book like a fungus feeds on the hosting tree. Then again, like a fungus, a thoughtful review can protect the host from other infections. So perhaps there is some kind of symbiosis.

Most students have little insight into the conversational nature of science and scholarship. They are apt to evaluate arguments as either fact or fiction, but fail to see a field's evolving narrative, of which books and reviews are a part. One time, I experimented with a workshop format in which students reviewed the papers collected in Gerd Gigerenzer's *Simply rational*. If it was not the most exuberant seminar I ever hosted, the students learned that critical reading and thoughtful evaluation is a skill that can be acquired, a skill that can take them out of their default mode of the rote consumer and into the mode of a partner in conversation. Inspired by my students, I later (2016) published my own review.

Students, and other readers, might benefit from an introduction to the finest published book reviews. But what and where are these? A quick internet search produced a list of 'most read book reviews of 2018,' which signals a quality ranking of book reviews and perhaps the reviewed books.

Commented [MOU2]: Latter and former are hard to follow

Commented [KJ3]: **I am experimenting with the possibility of not referencing all the books and reviews. Instead, I am linking my faculty home page where a list can be found.**

Commented [MOU4]: Did the review reflect this experience somehow?

Commented [MOU5]: Should the search be most read book reviews of nonfiction or science books?
The search was just for book reviews, but then this top-ten list came up, which is interesting. It's worth noting that the Greene book on human nature made the list.

The distinction is blurry. This top-ten list opens a window into the reading public's mind, and what we see lies on a spectrum from the shallow to the trivial. Yet, there is one book of interest to psychologists, namely Robert Greene's *The laws of human nature*. So let's add hyperbole to shallowness and triviality. A book promising a list of laws is an immediate turn-off. Many of the laws we have in psychological science are psychophysical and many of these laws are descriptive rather than explanatory, from Weber's law all the way to the value functions of prospect theory. Greene, of course, promises the reader a "first-rate comprehensive and in-depth information about how to deal with our fellow human beings," according to the New York Journal of Books as cited on the promotional website at Amazon.com. That's a classic manipulation of the audience. Frailties are always found in our fellow humans, never in ourselves. The Publishers Weekly (2018) chimes in, cheerily declaring that Greene has "created" his laws – a perception that might be surprisingly close to the truth.

What to do? I recommend to the interested reader the book review section of the *American Journal of Psychology*, along with the Book Review section of the New York Times and the New York Review of Books. If this is elitist, I won't blush. Readers should strive to learn from the best. To me, the most astonishing book review ever published is George Orwell's (1940) review of a (flattering) English translation of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. One cringes at the thought of reviewing that book, and as a native of Germany I cringe twice. Orwell, I am sure, knew the challenge of writing a review without dignifying the author with a point-by-point analysis of his arguments. He rose to the challenge like only Orwell could. His key insight was that Hitler knew his audience. The relevant section is worth quoting in full. Hitler "grasped the falsity of the hedonistic attitude to life. Nearly all western thought since the last war, certainly all "progressive" thought, has assumed tacitly that human beings desire nothing beyond ease, security and avoidance of pain. In such a view of life there is no room, for instance, for patriotism and the military virtues." This is book reviewing at its best. Orwell excavated a core idea from the text that the author may have grasped without fully comprehending its implications. Yet, equally astonishingly, Orwell did not "dislike" Hitler (see epigraph).

Commented [MOU6]: I think this understates the number and breadth of behavioral laws.

JK: I moderated the sentence

I aim to refer to your work on laws in a paper I am revising for Frontiers. It will fit super well there.

Commented [MOU7]: Not clear on reference and should this comment come earlier and not dilute the important case you are affirming.

JK: This goes back to the epigraph, where I hid the name Hitler to preserve the suspense. I think this is a wrap, and hope you agree. ☺

Understanding Hitler, Orwell rejected Barthes's dim view of the dignity of authors before Barthes had the chance to write it down.

A list of my book review may be found within the CV on my faculty web site. https://vivo.brown.edu/display/jkrueger. The reviews provide full biographical references to the reviewed books.

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