



## How To Spot A Phony Book Reviewer

By Jim Cox, Midwest Book Review

I've been a book reviewer and a keenly interested observer of the publishing industry since the fall of 1976. My more than 20 years of experience as a reviewer, an editor of a monthly book review newsletter, a producer of radio and television weekly book review programs, and editor-in-chief of the Midwest Book Review (supervising the work of 37 volunteer book reviewers across the United States and Canada) has taught me a great deal about reviewing books, editing the reviews of others, and recognizing the needs and problems of the independent small press publisher with respect to being reviewed.

The main reason for a publisher to seek reviews is to collect quotes that can be used in publicity and promotional materials, which could result in increased sales for the book. The principal hazards facing the publisher with respect to reviews are being panned by an honest book reviewer and scammed by a phony book reviewer.

With respect to an unfavorable review by a legitimate reviewer, I can offer the publisher nothing but my sympathy. But I can offer some very practical advice on how to avoid getting "taken" by a dishonest scam artist posing as a book reviewer. This is important money-saving information for every tight budget, every-penny-counts, small press publisher because sending books to phony reviewers not only wastes books (along with the shipping and handling costs to send them), but it also steals the hoped-for publicity and promotional boost in a very competitive retail market. Furthermore, the publisher loses an opportunity to send that book (and expend the same limited postage monies) to a legitimate reviewer, thereby reaping the marketplace benefits of a legitimate review that would be read by potential buyers.

Book reviewers can be categorized much the same as the books they are sent for review: the good, the bad, and the mediocre.

The hallmarks of any good book reviewer begin with feedback to the publisher, usually with a copy of the review. Typically this is in the form of a tear sheet from their publication or a script from their radio or television program. This tear sheet or review script is usually accompanied by a cover letter giving any additional details, such as the date of publication or the time of broadcast.

The Internet and the World Wide Web have added a new dimension to book reviewing. When reviews are posted on the Internet, the reviewer's notification letter to the publisher will include the text of the review and will indicate what websites, newsgroups, online bookstores, or listserves (internet discussion groups) were posted so that the publisher can verify the postings accordingly.

A bad reviewer isn't the one who pans your book with an honest (albeit negative) judgment; it's the one who solicits a review copy of a publisher's book under false pretenses: someone who wants a free copy of your book with no intention of fulfilling their side of the bargain of furnishing an opinion for the publisher to use in publicity and promotional materials or for a potential book buyer to read. In short, a bad reviewer is someone out to get something for nothing, a scam artist, a thief.

The mediocre reviewer is simply someone of good intentions but poor performance. Never underestimate the ability of a given book reviewer to be basically inept and a failure at the trade and craft of reviewing, just as there are those well-intentioned authors who couldn't write their way out of a paper bag, or those well-meaning publishers who can't seem to proof a text, or design a marketable cover, or balance a publishing budget.

The focus of this article is to provide a list of tips, tricks and techniques in spotting a bad reviewer, or at the very least, the mediocre reviewer.

## **1. Don't Send Review Copies Based on Telephone or Email Requests**

Never accept a telephone request for a review copy of your book from someone you do not know or from the representative of a review organization that you have never heard of. When receiving such a telephone solicitation for a review copy, require the caller to submit their request to you in writing. No legitimate reviewer would ever argue with or refuse such a requirement.

As the use of the Internet spreads throughout our society, and as more and more publishers come online, we are gradually seeing more email (electronic mail) solicitations for review copies. The same rule applies to an email

review copy solicitation as to the telephone version: Require the email sender to submit a standard letter of request sent via the post office. The modicum of protection offered by U.S. Postal Service laws, which prohibit using the mails for fraudulent purposes, may deter the phony book reviewer.

## **2. Look for Essential Elements in Request Letters**

When a review copy solicitation letter arrives in your mailbox, be certain that it is written on letterhead stationery that includes the reviewer's address and a phone number. These two items give you (and the U.S. Post Master General) the information necessary to verify the legitimacy of the reviewer.

I would also advise that a street address be required (rather than merely a post office box). This is because "fly-by-night" scams are often easier to perpetrate through the use of post office boxes than through the use of street addresses. This advice is controversial amongst some, feeling as they do that it unnecessarily casts suspicion over legitimate businesses that use post office boxes honestly. My response is that these good folk are usually selling something, whereas the unknown book reviewer is asking to receive something -- for free. While it is possible to run a scam from a street address, it is far more commonplace among con artist operations to use a post office box to run their game until they are discovered. Then they pull up stakes, change their names, and rent another post office box.

## **3. Confirm The Book Reviewer's Credentials**

There are several excellent techniques to confirm the legitimacy of a prospective book reviewer who has made a request for a review copy.

Ask for a sample copy of the publication. If the reviewer works for a radio or television program, request a copy of their show. If he is a freelancer, ask for copies of reviews that he has done and a list of the media outlets or book review publications that have featured his work. Ask for professional references. Have other publishers used this reviewer in the past? Does she have a list of independent publicists, newsletter or newspaper editors, or radio or television show producers who have used her reviews? If so, call those references and check them out. If the reviewer cannot provide such a list, ignore the request.

Join publisher groups, such as SPAN and PMA, and internet discussion groups, such as PMA-L. As a participant in these groups, ask your professional colleagues if they have ever heard of, or had dealings with, the reviewer or book review organization.

#### 4. Be Cautious, It's Your First Time Together

If things seem kosher after you have checked out the prospective reviewer, send only one book for review consideration the first time around. This is not a problem with the very small publisher who only has the one book, but for a larger publisher with a multi-title list, or a lengthy, active back list, this limits the damage if the reviewer turns out to be a scam artist clever enough to get past your initial screening. When the reviewer proves legitimate and provides a review, more books can be sent for review consideration later on.

#### 5. Follow Up

Now that you've taken the chance and sent a review copy to the prospective book reviewer there is still one more thing to be done in order to insure that you are working with a good reviewer – **follow up**.

Some publishers send self-addressed postcards with the review book, requesting that the reviewer pop them in the mail to let them know if the book was received and perhaps even provide an estimated review date, but these don't often work well, even with legitimate book reviewers. There is another, better way to follow up on your review copy and at the same time enhance the chances of actually getting reviewed. Seven to ten days after popping your review copy in the mail, make a phone call to the reviewer and ask these three questions (and in the order I'm going to lay them out for you):

1. This is (your name here). With the mail being as uncertain as it is, I'm calling to confirm that you received (your book title here).
2. Can you tell me the current status of (your book title here) with respect to your review schedule?
3. Is there any further information or assistance I can provide you?

No legitimate reviewer will object to these three questions as I have stated them. Reviewers are well aware that sometimes things go astray in the mail or that books get damaged in transit. Reviewers also understand that publishers are very interested in whether or not their book will "make the cut" and get reviewed. There is also the occasional need for additional information -- an ISBN number, more author bio details, an 800 number, the availability of an email address or the presence of a website, and so forth.

If, despite all your precautions (and my good advice), you have indeed been taken in by a phony book reviewer, do one last thing before chalking it up to experience. Write to your publisher association's newsletter and/or make a

post to your publisher internet discussion group (PMA-L) and denounce the person who masqueraded as a legitimate reviewer so that other independent, small press publishers can be forewarned and benefit from your experience. We are all our brothers' keepers in the sense that we have an obligation to help one another keep from harm's way.

I've been reviewing books and advising publishers on getting reviewed for more than 20 years now. It is my firm belief that most people who ask for review copies are very well meaning and honest in their intention. The scam artists are few and are not at all difficult to spot if you know what to ask, what to require, and what to look for. While there will inevitably be a few bad apples in any apple barrel, the overwhelming majority of the apples will still make good eating. And even a bad apple can be turned into satisfying fertilizer with a little cooperative effort!

James A. Cox is the editor-in-chief of the Midwest Book Review, which produces four monthly book review library newsletters and two monthly book review online magazines ("Internet Bookwatch" & "Children's Bookwatch")

**TGS PUBLISHING**  
**[HTTP://WWW.TGSPUBLISHING.COM](http://www.tgspublishing.com)**  
**22241 PINEDALE LANE**  
**FRANKSTON, TEXAS 75763**  
**903-876-3416**

