

## THE REVIVAL OF BOOK REVIEWS IN SOCIAL MEDIA: BOOKTOK, BOOKTUBE AND BOOKSTAGRAM AS COMMUNITIES FOR LITERARY EVALUATIONS

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How might one encourage young people to engage more with literature? The matter of promoting reading has emerged as a significant policy concern over the past decade. During this period, a decline in the reading habits of the youth has been observed, with traditional literature facing fierce competition from easily accessible and more fast-paced audiovisual forms of amusement and entertainment. Within this discourse, considerable optimism has been directed towards reviews produced and disseminated on digital platforms and social networking sites. The anticipation is that by engaging with peers' content on books and perhaps even producing content by themselves, young people will rediscover the intrinsic pleasure of reading. Notably, optimism has been stirred by the reviewspheres on visual platforms such as Instagram, video-sharing platforms like YouTube and TikTok, and the book community site Goodreads.

On BookTube, ordinary people interested in books publish vlogs on YouTube, the video-sharing platform by Google started in 2005, where they describe, interpret and judge books they have selected. BookTok videos on TikTok, established in 2018, are shorter and often more affected by the meme-like expression of the platform. On Instagram, the image app owned by Meta since 2012, there is an equivalent community of reviewers within or closely related to the book community of Bookstagram. The major three online book communities are affected by services that have been originally designed for sharing reading experiences. Above all, the Amazon-owned community reading and social cataloging site Goodreads, established in 2006, hosts amateur reviews and encourages social or shared reading methods such as buddy reading where like-minded people can reach out to each other for making more out of their reading experiences. Many social media book reviewers travel between all these platforms. All reading communities are online lifestyle communities where people not only want to verbalize, make visible and share their experiences of reading but also intend to become visible as readers, while acknowledged by the community members.

In my recent research anthology *Reviewing culture online: Post-institutional cultural critique across platforms* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022) I wanted to place the different communities of reviewing onto the same conceptual map, pointing out their differences and interconnections. Reviews produced by professionals and amateurs – as well as semi-professionals and professional amateurs – are very different in their form, function and production contexts, but among audiences they may fulfill similar functions. Audiences of book and literature reviews want to know whether the new books in the market are worth investing one's time and money in. Alternatively, audiences want to keep updated about the newest books in order to feel connected to the social world where topical books are discussed and bookish lifestyles are maintained.

Reviewing and reading have a lot to do with learning. A sequel for my book, the forthcoming research anthology *Pedagogical opportunities of the review genre: Learning in cultures of evaluation* (Routledge), discusses reviews and reviewing as processes of teaching, learning and reflecting. With an attempt to unleash the pedagogical potential of the genre, I am addressing the pedagogical dimensions in analyzing and producing reviews in informal, non-formal and formal learning contexts. While reviews are typically taught as argumentative, persuasive and evaluative texts at school with the professionally produced journalistic and aesthetic reviews as the ideal, in libraries and cultural organizations reviews can be seen as a channel and incentive for participation and co-design.

For libraries, this can mean more than just following and making visible TikTokers and their BookTok reviews; libraries could also take the initiative to facilitate and support the production of book reviews in local settings. Supporting review production related to books by local or prize-winning authors, or maybe niche and marginalized or less known authors, can make a significant contribution to the literary discussions. In workshops and on similar occasions, libraries could facilitate not only the reflection and writing processes of reviews but also the critical process of selecting books for review and contextualizing them, possibly with other books and previous production by the same author.

### Understanding genres and formats

As intriguing as the idea may sound, we need to keep in mind that librarians are not – and are not supposed to be – teachers or supervisors of media production processes. Libraries can make a difference by hosting production nests and, perhaps, hiring professional facilitators. Still, the biggest hindrances for harnessing the potential of BookTube, Bookstagram and especially the newest community, BookTok, may lie somewhere else.

For those who are familiar with the institutional concept of book review, the genre as it is encountered in quality newspapers and cultural magazines, it may be challenging to understand the new development of the genre in social networks. Namely, a quick plunge into the algorithmically defined environment may deliver a picture of individuals behaving strangely: talking loud and quickly, laughing and grimacing, holding books for material artifacts, like part of home decoration or atmosphere-creating props in Insta-friendly image constellations, rather than intellectual achievements. The ways of expression are versatile, and following what reviewers have to say is often expected to be fun – reviewtainment.

If we dismiss the crucial role of the format in which reviews are delivered, we may dismiss and misunderstand the entire phenomenon of vernacular reviewing. The genre lives another life in BookTube, Bookstagram and BookTok than in the institutional environment where it has a relatively constant and stable form, pre-defined by the publisher and manifest in the design of the outlet. In social networks, genres are accumulations of small flexible formats that emerge, develop and alternate. When someone starts a trend, such as crying in front of the camera because of the end of the story, constructing a judgment of the book's content in a one-minute “burst” – both examples of existing formats in videos in social networks – the others follow. The most popular creators are often inventors followed by less subscribed or followed creators.

Reviewing can also be combined with larger categories of expression. For example, it is rather common in the sphere of ASMRtists to review books or other cultural products by whispering or speaking in a very soft voice, tapping book covers or making other kinds of relaxing noises with the help of the physical features of books. ASMR, derived from the concept of “auditive sensory meridian response,” is a video genre where creators make relaxing videos based on the effects of soft sounds. In these types of videos, the production of a relaxing audioscape with “tingles” that are moments of pleasure in the listeners' brain, may be the primary purpose, but ASMR review videos may also contribute to increased interest in several books or literature.

The bookish online communities not only produce formats and ways of expression of their own based on the affordances available on the platforms, but also produce bestsellers and are able to affect book sales and borrowing rates at libraries. Popularity of a book within a bookish community may also produce platform-derivative bestsellers, as authors write books in interaction with the communities. The popularity of Colleen Hoover, an author who experienced a surge of popularity with her young adult fiction because of BookTok, is one compelling example.

It is thus necessary to understand how genres work at digital platforms, in particular those of the “free” multipurpose social media such as Instagram, YouTube and TikTok where there are no predefined templates for reviewing but individuals are free to adjust, repurpose and re-invent this format. After that, we can curiously take a look at how the genre continues to live its life beyond its institutionalized forms – in the hands of future generations of readers and authors.

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