

SYMPOSIUM: ETHICS IN REFEREEING

In a recent discussion on the SPORHIST discussion list, Steve Reiss raised concerns about the ethics of refereeing, referring to a specific instance where a supervisor published a review of the work of a student. To summarise these debates and to look for ways of dealing with similar situations, the ASSH Bulletin invited two academic sports historians to comment on the ethics of refereeing—Editor.

ETHICS IN THE REVIEW AND REFEREE PROCESS

Richard C. Crepeau
University of Central Florida
crepeau@pegasus.cc.ucf.edu

Recently I wrote in glowing terms about a book in my column for H-Arete. I pointed out that I had read the manuscript while it was under development and that I had been thanked by the author in the preface. I believe, and I think most people would agree, that given my level of association with the book prior to publication I should not do a formal review for either a journal or a newspaper.

Of course not everyone is in agreement on these matters as can be seen in the practices of some reviewers in the field of Sport History or in the historical profession generally. Some discussion of these issues was triggered by a note to the SPORHIST LIST by Steve Riess in which he pointed out that a review of a recent book written for a professional journal had been done by the person who had been the thesis director for the author of that particular book. It seems self-evident to me that this was inappropriate, but obviously it did not seem so to the reviewer.

The American Historical Association has a formal position that offers guidelines in the matter of conflict of interest. Two sentences seem pertinent here:

A conflict of interest arises when an individual's personal interest or bias threatens or appears to threaten to compromise his or her ability to act in accordance with professional or public obligations. . . . An individual should normally refuse to participate in the formal review of work by anyone for whom he or she feels a sense of personal obligation, competition, or enmity.

Clearly reviewing the work of one's student should never be done.

In general I would say that any prepublication reading or review of a manuscript for the publisher or the author should exclude you as a reviewer.

There are of course less obvious issues and situations. If you know an author, and we know most of the people in our field, should you review that author's book? Maybe, but maybe not. What is the standard to make that

determination? I have reviewed books of people I know, I have reviewed books where I have been mentioned in the preface but where I have had no involvement with the book prior to publication. I am not sure I should have done a review in the latter case as clearly it was someone I knew and someone who appreciated my work in some way.

As to reviewing the work of people you know, I think that is inevitable in a field as small as Sport History. However to review books of friends is another issue. Professional colleagues (in the same general field) and or acquaintances should not be excluded from the reviewing pool, but friends should. It is up to editors and the reviewers themselves to determine when the line between professional acquaintance and friend is crossed. Both Steve Gietschier and Ben Rader make the point that what is needed is full disclosure, both to editors prior to accepting a reviewing assignment and within the review itself.

That brings us to the matter of a blurb for the dust cover. This is a quite different case. As Ben Rader wrote: 'A review should represent a balanced, critical appraisal of the book. Blurbs are for the purpose of promoting the sales of the book and I doubt that most readers see them in any other perspective'.

If I am asked to do a blurb I will not review the book for a journal or newspaper. Endorsing a book for marketing purposes should preclude anyone from the reviewing process at any level. On the other hand if I do not like a book I will not send a blurb for the dust cover. Some argue that doing a blurb is ethically questionable, but here again I think that if you believe the quality of the book is there, then this should be no problem. But I repeat, this should preclude any reviewing of the book for a newspaper or professional journal.

In the end it is the editors and reviewers who must make the ethical judgement in each individual case, but these guidelines would seem to be a good place to start.