



To Read or Not to Read, That Is *My* Question: Genre Analysis of Book Reviews

Tobey Klungseth

A big reader from an early age, Klungseth uses book reviews frequently. She looks at book reviews almost every time before buying a book. The more-than-you-thought complex genre known as the book review is used by many, and people use it frequently in the book buying process. Book reviews have a huge impact not only on readers, but also new and existing authors. As Klungseth analyzes the genre, she realizes that eighth graders use it less than she thought. Using research and surveys, Klungseth investigates the genre of book reviews.

“A bad [book] review is like baking a cake with all the best ingredients and having someone sit on it.”

-Danielle Steel-

What’s more maddening than digging into a ten or fifteen-dollar book from Barnes & Noble, and realizing it wasn’t meant for you? With the help of the genre called book reviews, this situation can be easily avoided. However, to know how a book review helps you with a situation like this, you first need to understand how the genre of the book review works, the kind of people who write it, and what exactly the genre is. For my research, I was very interested in how book reviews affect the way Advanced English eighth graders choose their reading selection, if at all.

Why Choose a Book Review?

Here's your assignment: Pick a topic you would like to write about for the Grassroots Writing Research Journal. Pick something you would like to focus on for several months. This was a question I pondered for a while before finally coming up with a decision I do not regret. I know that book reviews heavily affect my decision to buy a book. Book blurbs don't always tell you everything. Since I am an avid reader, I wanted to choose a genre to research that is closely related with my topic of interest. After pondering the many genres that went with the "genre" of "reading," I chose the topic of book reviews, which was hard to research, but it was extremely interesting. My first question was "Where did book reviews originate?"

Book Review Basics

For everything there is a beginning, even book reviews. And for everything there is also someone who started it, even book reviews. As I was researching to find out where book reviews came from, I came across a surprising piece of information in an article by Sarah Fay. In the 1840s, Edgar Allan Poe, a poet and reviewer, reviewed for *Graham's Magazine* (Fay 1). *Man*, have they changed over time. Fay also mentioned that until about ten years ago, the only people who ever reviewed anything were professionals (3). It was their job; they got paid for it. And the reviews were actually helpful. Today, well, it's not like that. Through many of our Internet websites, such as Amazon and *Kirkus Reviews*, anybody can write a review, and, well, they aren't always helpful.

Oh, no! Here I am chatting about book reviews, and I haven't even explained what a book review is. You always need to explain a genre when introducing or discussing a new genre. A book review is: "a critical description, evaluation, or analysis of a book, especially one published in a newspaper or magazine" (*Dictionary.com*). So in other words, a book review is an evaluation of a book, and usually they are published in a magazine or newspaper.

As most words do, a book review has several meanings. I realized this while doing research. I wanted to explain the two definitions, to show their differences. A book review is also something school students write to prove they have read a certain book (see Figure 1), and it is more like a summary than an opinion (Peha). In this case, my research (although difficult) mainly focused around the reviews common people and professionals write to share what they think about a certain book.

Book Review Form	
Name:	_____
The book's title and author are	_____

Something I liked was	_____

The most memorable part was	_____

I would recommend the book because	_____

Figure 1: A book review template an elementary student might use.

The Convoluteness of Secondary Research

Why isn't Google finding what I need? I don't want to learn about some history book! All I want is a little bit of information behind book reviews! Ugh!

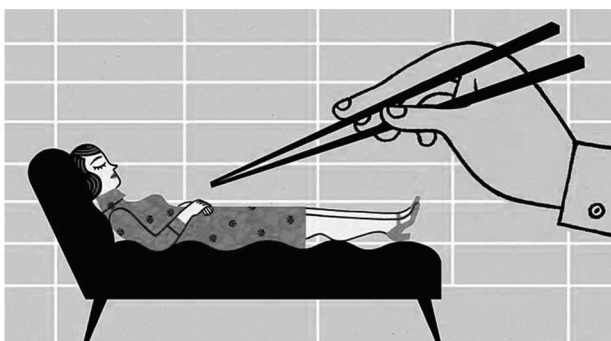
This is what I thought as I searched Google, failing search after search. I typed “the history behind book reviews” into Google, and pressed enter. As results popped up at me on the screen, *nothing* that I wanted or needed came up. I saw results for “History Book Reviews” and two websites on what I actually wanted. Ugh, Google. The first one I clicked on looked super confusing. I scrolled down the page and found another website, but it, too, was confusing. Secondary research is difficult. **Secondary research** is when you look up the information you need yourself—your information comes from somebody else’s research, and your sources come from websites and articles.

I tried so many other search engines: Kiddle (the little kid version of Google, which, believe me, wasn’t any more helpful than Google itself) and Ebscohost (too confusing and too hard to understand how to navigate the search engine). I even tried the Library of Congress website, and it took a lot of time for them to respond to my request. When they finally replied, they had provided me with two websites. One was a website that I had already had, and another was one that had a lot of advanced language. I found a few really good websites, but, because I had such difficulty, my primary research was the biggest part of my research.

As I searched Google more and more, searching more “advanced,” I came across a website. It was an article in the *Huffington Post*. I read it through, and I couldn’t believe it. I had finally stumbled across this website, and it was *amazing*. This article talked about how sometimes book reviews can be bad for authors, and dishonest book reviews can have bad effects. I’ll talk about bad effects later on. On the website was a link. I clicked on it, unsure if I wanted to leave this website. This was an article on a site called HelloGiggles, which kind of talked about the same thing. It, too, was really great! I killed two birds with one stone. I’ll explain all about HelloGiggles later. But there’s different kinds of reviewers. What kinds of reviewers are there, and what are their differences?

The *New York Times* vs. “The Fluffy Bunny”

I look at book reviews a lot on Amazon. I don’t actually ever look at the *New York Times*. There is a considerable difference between someone who writes book reviews for a living and somebody who wants to share their views and opinions with the world through social media, e-mail, and other online things like that—in other words, the common man, or “The Fluffy Bunny.” (It’s a weird name, I know, but it’s just an example of an Amazon username.) Fluffy Bunnies are everywhere. (This is a happy thought. Fluffy Bunnies for *everybody*.) There is also a difference in the writing. The book reviews look totally different, and the style of writing is different as well (see Figures 2 and 3). Professionals aren’t enjoying that their whole career is being duplicated by some common man (Ciabattari). To have your book reviewed by the *New York Times* is the goal of most authors. However, a bad rating from the *Times* could lower the amount of money made off of your book.



Mind Control

While his wife is preoccupied with creating beauty, an analyst sleeps with his patients.

BY MICHAEL CUNNINGHAM

In this uncertain world, of one thing we can be sure. It is never a good idea for a psychoanalyst to have sex with his patients.

That’s exactly what the unnamed narrator does in Rikki Ducornet’s eighth novel, “Netsuke.” He does it repeatedly, and without remorse or doubt. He assures each of the patients he seduces that she

a precise and pristine aesthetic, to perfect views and masterly carvings, versus his compulsion to have annihilating sex with people whose lives have already carved them into various distressing shapes.

The analyst sees his patients in one or the other of two small offices on his property. The office in which he sees his sexier patients is called Spells. The other patients, the ones with whom he is not interested in sleeping, are relegated to an office called Dream.

And, yes, some therapists do have sex with their patients. It’s not as if Ducornet’s analyst is taking liberties never before taken by any practitioner in the history of psychology.

Yet, any analyst who does what the man in “Netsuke” does is committing serious assaults. And everyone who assaults others does so for his or her own reasons. These Ducornet does not explore in much depth.

To her credit, Ducornet understands,

is too much, and how little we try to fully account for every motive, dread and delusion through their pasts for all and pottery fragments of the risk overexplicating the a certain animating mystery of humanness. If we pass too quickly them, though, they’re little phers. Subterranean chain effect are also part of humankind, rightly enough, that destructive sexual perversion light hand in terms of exp thing resembling a theory analyst so carelessly harm would have been disastrous are not theorists, nor should be.

DUCORNET has erred on the side of discretion in her world, of course, abundant characters. It is the nature of the thing to complicate such people, if not to redeem them. Undersexiness is what we get from her. By delving into a character, a writer fulfills one of fiction’s potentialities—the ability to read into a character, most repellent of them. Fiction readers what it’s like to be different from themselves drawing-in is discomfiting.

The pure malice of Ducornet is not alleviated by her reluctance much by way of the injuries on his patients. Ducornet’s analyst’s patients as offhanded analyst himself. The book of arid heartlessness begin parched feeling in the reader. In creating her conscientious, and depicting his patiently, Ducornet has written feels, by its conclusion, as

Figure 2: Example of a *New York Times* Review.

150 of 175 people found the following review helpful

★★★★☆ **WARNING: Does not work if you are more than one!**
December 1, 2011

By **Mike R.** (United States) - [See all my reviews](#)

This review is from: **Microwave for One (Hardcover)**

I live alone so I bought this helpful book a few months ago. It has truly been a blessing by saving me from having a bad case of "The Doubts" each time I microwaved anything from popcorn to soup. Never once did I have to worry if I was "doing it right."

Then one day, a friend came over and I decided to microwave for two. I looked through the book and discovered that no where in this book (not even in the lengthy footnotes) was there ANY mention of microwaving for two. NOT ONE WORD! So I got out my trusty calculator and I doubled the cooking times in the book. Bad idea! My popcorn came out burnt and crispy. I won't even go into describing what my soup came out like except to say that not only would you not eat it, but neither would your cat! (My cat just ignored the overcooked mess.)

So buyer beware: The instructions in this book will work fine for one. BUT NOT FOR TWO!

Help other customers find the most helpful reviews

Was this review helpful to you?

[Report abuse](#) | [Permalink](#)

Figure 3: Example of a “Fluffy Bunny” Amazon Review.

To Change or Not to Change? Now That Is the Question

Speaking of bad reviews and their effects on us, the HelloGiggles article discussed how, sometimes, reviews can change your opinion on a good book. Grace Cox, the author of the article “Do Online Reviews Take The Chance Out Of Book Buying?” discusses how she read a book that she loved. Cox checked Amazon to see the reviews after she read the book, and noticed that the book she loved had a lot of one-star reviews. Cox realized that if she would have checked Amazon before buying the book, she wouldn’t have bought it.

Even though looking at book reviews can help us avoid books we may not like, sometimes it’s useful to go shopping without looking at book reviews. Let me give you an example. Several years ago, I bought a series by Lauren Child. The books were great, and they were funny. In these books, the main character had a literary heroine named Ruby Redfort. Well, apparently, Lauren Child had just written the book starring Ruby Redfort. My mom found it at Barnes & Noble and I immediately fell in love. Same as Cox, I checked the book reviews on Amazon, and some of the reviews said that the book was boring. A few people even said it had “lousy binding” and that they’d prefer the Kindle version more. Since I do own a Kindle, this is what I would have done. However, sometimes I like reading the paper version, and sometimes I like reading the electronic version. I asked my peers if this kind of situation had ever happened to them, and, according to my surveys, some eighth grade Advanced English students think differently than I do (see Figures 4 and 5).

Two responses from one of my surveys are shown below:

You read a book and really love it. Then you check Amazon book reviews and are surprised to see how many 1 & 2 star reviews there are. (Has this ever happened to you?)

(40 responses)

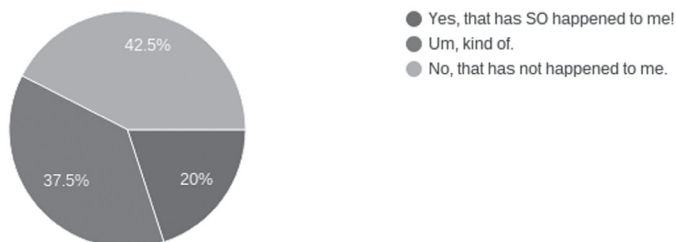


Figure 4: Participant responses to the question, “You read a book and really love it. Then you check Amazon book reviews and are surprised to see how many one- and two-star reviews there are. (Has this ever happened to you?)”

Has this ever happened to you?: You read a book and really don't like it. Then you check Amazon book reviews and are surprised to see how many 4 & 5 star reviews there are. (Has this ever happened to you?)

(40 responses)

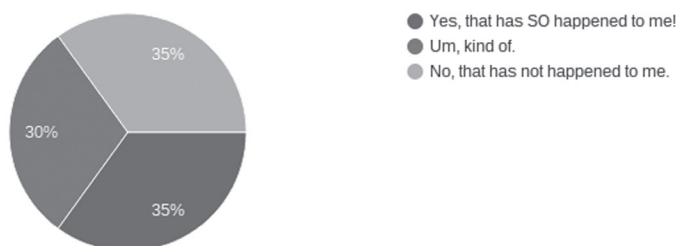


Figure 5: Participant responses to the question “You read a book and really don't like it. Then you check Amazon book reviews and are surprised to see how many four- and five-star reviews there are. (Has this ever happened to you?)”

The Bad Effects Reviews Can Have on Books and Their Authors

It's simple: “[i]f you haven't read the book, don't leave a review” (Wooten). Seriously. Don't leave a bad review, or even a spectacular review, if you haven't read the book. Why ruin someone's career with your thoughtlessness? I was reading through an online article by Penny C. Sansevieri, called “Can Book Reviews Hurt a Book's Sales?” As I was reading through the article, she discussed how a few one- and two-star ratings can bring a book's average rating from five to about four-and-a-half (Sansevieri). If several people lie about their opinion of a book, it will probably affect the author. This is an example of a CHAT (cultural-historical activity theory) factor called reception. **Reception**

is how a reader understands a piece of writing, and what they think about the writing. Reception can be applied to two places in the process of a book review. When you read a book, you tend to have some feeling about it. You liked it, or you didn't. You thought it was hilarious or dull. Or maybe you found a lot of errors, which made your reception, as well as your opinion, different. These are all examples of reception, for sure. It also applies to the book review itself.

Say someone writes a review of a certain book, saying the book was really bad. If another person reads it, their reception is most likely going to be: "This person did not like this book, so maybe I shouldn't read it." Even though most people don't know it, reception is used a lot in the everyday world. Reception is something every author should think about. It plays a big role in the book market. Unfortunately, America is easily swayed by other people's opinions. What I wear, what I eat, what I think, how I feel . . . and what I think about the book I'm holding in my hand. If a book has an average rating of three or four, people may immediately think it's a horrible book. Do they actually look at why people didn't like it? Probably not. Most likely they put the book back on the shelf (or click the back button online), and move on. For the author, this is unfortunate. I'm not saying you should leave amazing book reviews if the book is horrible, either. It can have the same effect. If someone thinks the book is going to be great because of a lying review, they will be upset. They may leave a bad review. *Leave honest reviews!!!* Even though sometimes book reviews aren't helpful, a lot of the time, they *are!* But they can't be helpful if they aren't truly honest.

Book Reviews Are Helpful, Too!

I always look at book reviews when buying books now. I bought a book a few years ago that disappointed me. It covered a topic that I don't exactly approve of, and it didn't say anything about the revolting topic on the back of the book. After reading the book, I was horrified, and told my parents about the topic that I had been reading about. They were also horrified and disappointed that the topic wasn't mentioned on the back. Now, whenever I go shopping, my dad has his phone ready to look up the book I want to buy. I skim the bookshelves of Barnes & Noble, and then I read the back of the book I have chosen. If it appeals to me, I hand the book to my dad, he looks it up on Amazon, and he reads the review. He tells me what he discovers, and what other people thought about the book. If it sounds for the most part that other people liked it, I'll buy it. If it doesn't, I keep skimming the shelves to find something more appealing and/or appropriate. This little process has saved me from some books that I wouldn't have liked otherwise. However, according to my primary research, some eighth grade Advanced English students do not use reviews.

DIY–Do It Yourself

Primary research played an enormous part in my research. **Primary research** is basically the research you do yourself. The information comes directly from something you did. Two good examples of primary research are interviews and surveys. As some of us have been taught in our younger days, Google is our “only source of information” and “if you don’t know the answer, search Google.” What *is* true is that, a lot of the time, Google does have the answer. However, when doing research as complex as this is, Google doesn’t always have the answer. Primary research is important when doing this kind of research. It is something you *must* do, period.

After determining the focus of my research, which was to find out what Advanced English eighth graders knew about book reviews, and how they used them. I knew interviewing about forty-three students individually would take far too long. So I sent out a Google Forms survey to the students in both English classes to see several things: what they think about book reviews, if they use book reviews, and how book reviews affect the way they decide to buy a book, or not?

I sent out a survey, which we will call Survey A, to the forty-three eighth grade Advanced English students. *All* of them responded, which was surprising, because usually, if twenty percent of the people respond, the sender of the survey is satisfied (Kieffer). *One-hundred percent* of the people I sent it to responded. This is GREAT! This is an example of another CHAT term, called socialization. **Socialization** is who you interact with, and why you are interacting with them. In this case, I interacted with my classmates to learn information. I sent them a survey, which believe it or not, is a genre. If they hadn’t responded, I would have had no information, so socialization is very important. On Survey A, I had several questions where they could pick more than one option, or it was a short answer response. Basically, what I did was take the results of Survey A, summarize the responses, and sent out another survey, Survey B. Forty out of forty-three students replied to Survey B, which I thought was wonderful. Ninety-three percent of the people that I sent it to. The results of the two surveys astonished me. My peers only pay attention to book reviews some of the time.

Do book reviews affect the way you, as a buyer, select your books?

(43 responses)

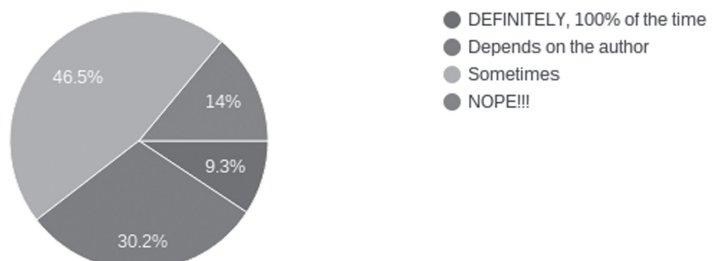


Figure 6: Responses to “Do book reviews affect the way you, as a buyer select your books?”

Do you look at book reviews before buying a book? (43 responses)

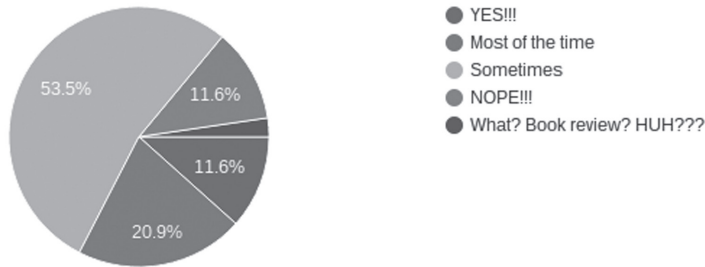


Figure 7: Responses to “Do you look at book reviews before buying a book?”

What is the most important part of a book review? What is going to influence you the most?

(40 responses)



Figure 8: Importance of Book Reviews.

What I realized is that eighth graders only look at book reviews sometimes, and book reviews affect them only some of the time (see Figures 6 and 7). An eighth grade audience is possibly an unintended audience for a book review. When doing my research, both primary and secondary, I realized that the genre of the book review is meant for people older than eighth graders. We eighth graders have grown up with technology, resulting in people not reading books as much. I am not this way, however, I know *many* of my fellow eighth graders *are*. I have noticed that our generation likes phones more than books. Therefore, the genre of the book review was, and is, not meant for us.

Speaking of phones and electronics and such, just because I was curious, I sent out a third survey. This included questions like: “How much time do you spend daily on phones or other electronics?” and “How much time do you spend daily reading?” (see Figures 9, 10, and 11). I sent it to the forty-three Advanced English students and thirty-three replied. That’s pretty good, about seventy-seven percent. Here are some of the not-so-astonishing results.

Daily, about how much time do you spend on phone (or other electronic)?
(33 responses)

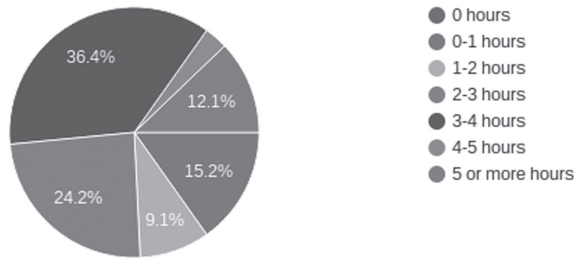


Figure 9: Responses to “Daily, about how much time do you spend on phone (or other electronics)?”

Do you read books more, or do you spend more time on your phone NOT reading books (or any other kind of electronic)?
(33 responses)



Figure 10: Responses to “Do you read books more or spend more time on your phone not reading books (or any other kind of electronic)?”

Daily, how much time do you spend reading? (33 responses)

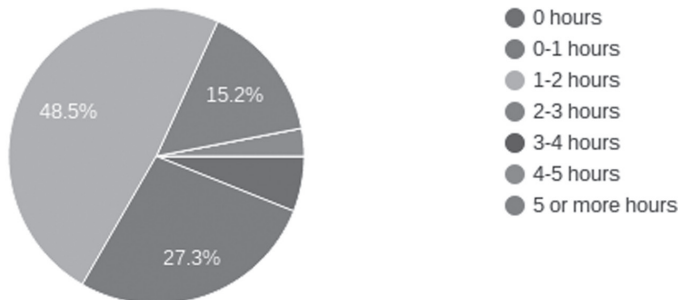


Figure 11: Participant response to “Daily, how much time do you spend reading?”

According to my first two surveys, a lot of eighth graders check books out at the library, so if they don’t like the book, they can just return it (see Figure 12). They don’t lose any money because of it. I look at book reviews most of

the time. I do not like to check books out from a library (I feel like it's too much responsibility). So they don't use the genre of the book review to determine their reading selection, but the genre of the book cover. I don't look at book reviews if it's an author that I know well, or if it's a series I know well.

Where do you get your books from MOST of the time? Pick ONE. (40 responses)

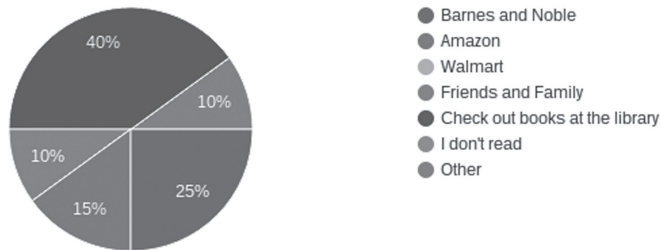


Figure 12: Participant Responses to “Where do you get your books MOST of the time? Pick one.”

We are also at that age where our parents still provide us with some things, sometimes books, so it doesn't matter if the book is good or not. It isn't our money. I, again, do not think this way. When I buy books, I buy them with my own money. So I am careful to check reviews to make sure it is something that I would like. Doing this saves me money. Because, like most people, if the cover is interesting, then I want the book. Looking at book reviews is helpful, believe me. But sometimes, like I said before, they can also damage our opinion. Look at reviews, or try something new. It's your choice.

The Pressure's on YOU!

Think carefully next time you buy a book. Do you look at book reviews, or are your eyes your biggest judge? In other words, do you judge a book by its cover? To you, is the review printed all over the front cover, with pictures and titles? Is it really that hard to just take two minutes to read a book review? Would you rather part with fifteen dollars unnecessarily? Book reviews are a quick way to see if you'll like the book or not. Of course, sometimes, it's good to take a step back from looking at reviews, and find that hidden gem (Cox). It's like a game of truth or dare, sort of. Find a kinda-sorta truth online, or be daring, and try a book without the help of “The Fluffy Bunny.” Listen. Listen to “The Fluffy Bunny.” You don't necessarily have to agree, or even trust them, but listening is enough. Just listen.

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