REVIEWING WITH THOUGHT

Eric Posner’s New Rambler Review Brings Academic Skills to Bear on Book Reviews

By Robin I. Mordfin
Journalists write most book reviews these days. It makes sense—they tend to be good writers and are often already on the payroll of the magazines, journals, and blogs that publish reviews of new books. But Eric Posner thinks there is a better way.

“Academics are an underutilized resource. They know more about their fields than other people do, and they often will write for free because they consider such work part of their professional obligations,” explained Posner, Kirkland and Ellis Distinguished Service Professor of Law. “I think it is important to get more academic voices into public debates.”

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To make those voices more accessible Posner, along with Adrian Vermeule of Harvard Law School and Blakey Vermeule of the English department at Stanford University, started The New Rambler Review (newramblerreview.com). Launched in March, the editors publish two new reviews, written by faculty at colleges and universities across the country, each week. The books are largely nonfiction and range across a wide variety of fields, from religion to film studies and from law to linguistics. The site holds the promise of books in even more areas—reference books and classics, for example, are still empty categories—but with the enthusiastic efforts of those involved, they are not likely to remain barren very long.

“I wish we had more literary fiction reviews—we have had a couple and a few more are coming—but it is a little bit harder. It would be great to get another editor; my areas of knowledge overlap a lot with Adrian’s, and Blakey does what she can in this area, but another editor is my main ambition. Of course, since we don’t pay anything, it might take a while,” Posner added.

The editors of The New Rambler all enjoy reading book reviews and believe that they are an important way to get academic ideas into public circulation. However, with the departure of Leon Wieseltier from the New Republic (where he had spent decades creating a book review section similar to that of the New York Review of Books), even fewer review conduits are available to cover books like Conflict in Ukraine: The Unwinding of the Post–Cold War Order, reviewed in The New Rambler by Professor Daniel Abebe in July 2015.

Consequently, The New Rambler the editors created their site with the intention of saving more well-researched, well-conceived books from being overlooked. David Strauss, Gerald Ratner Distinguished Service Professor of Law, who contributed a long piece on The First Amendment Bubble by Amy Gajda of Tulane, heartily supports the site and its intentions. As he put it, “I think there are not enough places like this where academics and other people with specialized knowledge write for a more general audience. I hope that audience gets a lot out of these reviews, and I am sure it is good for the authors of the reviews have to think about how to say things in a way that will speak to an interested but nonspecialist audience.”

With a press release from the Law School and mentions on both Posner’s blog and those of several academic friends, The New Rambler Review has gotten off to a strong start. The site is named after The Rambler, a series of short papers published by Samuel Johnson from 1750 to 1752. Posner acknowledges that Johnson, a famous stylist and perhaps the most revered book reviewer in history, would not find all the writing on the website up to his high standards; he explains that the editors chose the name because Johnson believed in public debate and in bringing ideas to the public. Funding came in the form of a loan from the Law School to get the project off the ground and a donation by Gifford Combs who supported the mission of the website.
The review made a big splash because it raised serious questions,” Posner said. “We got a lot of publicity from it, but we are pleased because it was an important review.” Lubet had chosen On the Run himself to review, which the editors appreciate, but other books are assigned. Alison LaCroix, Robert Newton Reid Professor of Law, had previously written a long paper on Hilary Mantel’s Wolf Hall and Bring up the Bodies, historical novels about Thomas Cromwell and the Tudor court, for a conference on Crime in Law and Literature that she organized with Martha Nussbaum and Richard McAdams in February 2014. In that work, she discussed the Tudor revolution in government and the historiography of the period. When Posner asked her to adapt her research for The New Rambler, she refashioned her paper to look more at the character of Cromwell as a man and as a government official. “I really enjoy writing for The New Rambler because the form is more open and I can reach a wider, educated audience,” LaCroix explained. “And I am doing it again. I walked into my office yesterday and found another book on my desk awaiting my review.” And, as the world of academia is not quite so broad, the site has thinkers whose books are reviewed and who have also reviewed books. For example, Cass Sunstein of Harvard Law School wrote about Richard H. Thaler’s Misbehaving: The Making of Behavioral Economics and Chris Taylor’s How

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study in a poor black community in West Philadelphia. Lubet stated that he did not believe two events described in the book and pointed out that a third implicated Goffman herself in a crime. His review, which was adapted for the New Republic, was also mentioned (along with the site) in The New York Times, Slate, New York Magazine, and a score of other sites and publications.

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Star Wars Conquered the Universe, while Kai Spiekermann of the London School of Economics reviewed Sunstein’s book, Wiser: Getting Beyond Groupthink to Make Groups Smarter.

While the site is mainly intended for new books, the editors would like to cover some classics. They have a writer lined up to rethink one of the books by Walter Bagehot, an influential nineteenth-century British journalist, businessman, and essayist. However, as Posner pointed out, they don’t want to create any artificial constraints such as topic or length. Which is just what the writers want.

“I’d say what is distinctive about writing a review for the New Rambler is that there is a great deal of freedom to decide what to write on, whether a book is more or less recent, and to decide on content,” noted Michelle Karnes of Stanford, who wrote a review of Kazuo Ishiguro’s The Buried Giant. “There’s no ideological agenda for the journal, and so you can write what you really think without worrying about offending anyone.”