

Part 4

You are going to read an introduction from a book of essays. For questions 34–40, choose the answer (A, B, C or D) which you think fits best according to the text.

Mark your answers on the separate answer sheet.

Writing Reviews

Frank Kermode examines the craft of review-writing from a practitioner's point of view.

Most reviews are written and circulated under conditions which ensure that they have a very short active life. There are deadlines, there are restrictions, normally quite severe, on their length; and when published they claim house-room only for as long as the newspaper they are printed in – a day or a week, at most a month. Moreover, the literary status of reviews tends to be settled by their ephemerality. It is usually supposed, not only by the public but, quite often, by the writers themselves, that reviewing is work that nobody would do if there weren't some reason – shortage of cash would be cited most often, though another good reason is that you can't work all day on a novel or a 'serious' book of any sort – which prevents them from occupying their time with something more valuable.

Yet reviewing is a skilled and multi-faceted job. It is one thing to be bright, brisk and summarily fair in the six or eight hundred words of an ordinary newspaper review, quite another to control, without looseness of argument, the six or eight thousand words sometimes allowed by international journals. And the fifteen hundred words of a leading piece in the weekly magazines present some of the problems of both short and long. Not that length is the only consideration. For one thing, the reviewer obviously needs to think about the probable audience, the weekend skimmer at one end of the scale, the person already interested enough in the subject to tackle a serious review-article at the other. Finally, a reviewer needs to know quite a bit about quite a number of things; and must be able to write prose that intelligent people can understand and enjoy. It follows almost infallibly that the reviewer will be somebody who writes other things besides reviews.

The American novelist John Updike, who rather looks down on criticism – 'hugging the shore' he calls it – nevertheless enjoys some coastal reviewing in the intervals between his transoceanic novel-writing. Understandably reluctant to allow even his less ambitious voyages to go without any permanent record, he gathers together his every review, however short, into volumes with mildly self-deprecating titles. It might be thought that lesser

persons should accept ephemerality as the penalty appropriate to their coastal caution; but it is hard to see why, if they can get away with it, they shouldn't be allowed to enjoy the measure of permanence, and the measure of vanity, proper to their station, especially if they believe that some of their best writing has been 'buried' in reviews. I admit to feeling this about my own work.

My own principal occupation has been academic, and most of my 'serious' books are recognisably academic products, the sort of thing professors like, and are expected to do as part of their jobs. However, the English-speaking world (I think fortunately) acknowledges nothing comparable to the sharp distinction people from other cultures make between reviewing and literary study – and so with us it is quite usual for the same people to do both. The days are gone when other academics reviled reviewer-professors for unseemly self-display, or waste of academic time, or betrayal of the dignity of their institutions. And complaints from non-professors, to the effect that the professors are taking the bread out of their mouths, are also less common than they were, partly because there is so much more reviewing nowadays that practically everyone can have some, partly, no doubt, because the bread is often such a meagre ration.

My own view is that these arrangements are good for both readers – since they can be fairly certain the reviewer has at least some idea what he is talking about – and professors, if only because the work helps to keep them sane. It also reminds them that they have a duty, easily neglected, to make themselves intelligible to non-professors. When talking among themselves they may feel some need to be impressively arcane, but when addressing intelligent non-professors they need to make sure they are communicating effectively.

Finally, it is clear that for a variety of reasons, and despite all that can be said to dignify it, reviewing must normally be a secondary occupation. It is something you can only do well enough if you are also doing something else well enough.

- 34 What does the writer say about reviews in the first paragraph?
- A Their topicality means that they are eagerly read.
 - B They may be considered an inferior form of writing.
 - C The best reviews tend to be written by novelists.
 - D They provide writers with a regular income.
- 35 The writer says that a good reviewer is someone who
- A bears in mind the different types of reader.
 - B has in-depth knowledge of the topic.
 - C concentrates on reviewing as a career.
 - D adopts a clearly defined style.
- 36 How does John Updike appear to regard review-writing?
- A He thinks it may help a writer to widen his readership.
 - B He is unwilling to write any reviews himself.
 - C He supports a writer's right to criticise the work of others.
 - D He considers it an unchallenging, unimaginative type of writing.
- 37 How does the writer feel about the less well-known writers who publish their reviews in book form?
- A They should leave reviewing to the great writers.
 - B Their best work is to be found in their reviews.
 - C They are entitled to some pride in their work.
 - D They do not deserve long-term success.
- 38 How have attitudes changed towards academics who write reviews?
- A Non-academics have agreed to share out reviewing work available.
 - B Their colleagues have come to regard it as an acceptable activity.
 - C Less resentment exists now that reviewing can provide a reasonable income.
 - D Greater understanding results from academic standards being less rigorously applied.
- 39 Why is the writer in favour of academics also working on reviews?
- A The general reader is able to rely on their knowledge.
 - B Review-writing is the most enjoyable part of a professor's work.
 - C Feedback gained from non-academics is useful for their research.
 - D Their level of language is appropriate for review-writing.
- 40 In writing this text, the writer's main intention is to
- A justify the academic status of reviews.
 - B defend a particular reviewer.
 - C improve the perception of review-writing.
 - D encourage other authors to take up review-writing.