

**A BOOK REVIEW OF PHILLIPA K. CHONG'S *INSIDE
THE CRITICS' CIRCLE: BOOK REVIEWING IN UNCERTAIN
TIMES***

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In this academic book, Phillipa K. Chong aims to investigate the rarefied domain of journalistic review of books, distinguished from essayistic and academic criticism, emphasizing on the process of evaluating fiction and the way critics perceive their work. The book is structured in three sections that explore the way in which epistemic, social, and institutional uncertainty affect the way book reviewers come to a literary judgment. Chong presents an in-depth view of the profession of book reviewing that offers a remarkable look at the world of critics.

Chong uncovers the process of selecting books for reviewing as well as the way of matching reviewers with books. Besides, she reveals the process of assessing books with their own criteria of evaluation. In Brief, she discusses the anatomy of reviewing books. In addition, she explains the considerations underlying in producing a favorable or unfavorable review, and the uncertainty induced by the absence of a standardized framework of professional practices for reviewers.

Chong's prime objective, having realized this uncertainty, seems to question certain book critics what they are up to, although she does not suggest so. Instead, she suggests that she grounds her study of uncertainty on the experience of agents of assessment bring about a phenomenologically precise image of assessing work, and a greater appreciation of the way uncertainty and its contingencies form action. She, therefore, tackles her subject out of a social sciences point of view, and her style in the book guarantees to inform the readers so.

In the first section of the book, Chong reflects on what she refers to as "epistemic uncertainty", in the context that epistemic is linking to knowledge indicators that are

appropriate for evaluating fictional works. Such indicators are highly intangible because aesthetic evaluation is not always treated as an objective fact but as idiosyncratic. If the epistemic uncertainty is limited, Chong proposes that it is better to deal with an entity which has an uncertain quality, but essentially “knowable”. However, when an entity is dramatically uncertain, its significance could be unknowable.

The second section shifts to the “social uncertainty”, a subject full of complicated matters. It is complicated since social uncertainty indicates that critics cannot foresee how relevant other reviewers and authors will react to their reviews. However, not just that, reactions will inevitably come from the literary community. What makes matters more complicated is what Chong terms “switch-role reward” system of review, which reveals the situation that reviewers are usually themselves writers requested by editors to switch for a limited time from book publishers to reviewers and after finishing the review they turn to their essential roles as authors.

Chong elaborates in “switch-role reward” system i.e. people who publish literary works yet review books. This is why many of her generalizations in the matter of critics’ playing nice depend on the notion that they simply avoid being adversely reviewed mostly by their old victims. In addition, they understand and sympathize with the agony of having a bad review. She infers that the majority of reviewers are novelists. This could be common in the USA; however, it is less evident in other countries. And the majority of the prominent reviewers (who are often fearless) are not members of the community of novelists.

The final section focuses on what is identified as “institutional uncertainty”, or the weak execution of processes, protocols and structures that coordinate the activities and experiences of critics as reviewers. This becomes clear in the light of how this lack affects the self-perceptions of critics whether they make sense or not as a critic. This is attributed to the apparent lack of established standards or procedures for delineating whether someone is qualified to work as a book reviewer or not. There are no specific processes by which individuals be constrained from entering the circle of book reviewing. With the strong position of reviewers as both “cultural consecrators” and “tastemakers” – a situation which is more critical to journalistic than academic book review – it seems conceivable that Chong underlines critics’ vulnerability and anxiety in case they result in wrong review.

Chong also argues that reviewers of journalist books are more vulnerable to the increasing prevalence of the amateur reviewers, like the reviewers on Goodreads. This is because the reviewers are not needed to present academic credentials for writing journalistic reviews

unlike the reviewers of academic criticisms. She discusses how book reviewing affects reviewers' roles as authors and as representatives of a "larger literary community". In addition, she discusses how aware the reviewers are of the sensitive balance that they need to achieve between writing valid reviews and maintaining their own prospects of a positive review in the long term.

To conclude her book, Chong points to the problems presented in her book of not only criticism, or what it is in the contemporary publishing world, but the feeling of confidence or danger that reviewers may experience in the context of their assessments. Though there are occasions where Chong becomes a bit repetitive and even wordy, her overall criticism on book reviewers is well structured and insightful. It is a must-read for those involved in book reviewing.