

## KEEPING UP WITH NEW LEGAL TITLES / GUIDANCE FOR REVIEWERS

“Keeping Up With New Legal Titles” is the book review column for *Law Library Journal*. This document discusses the goals of the column and provides guidance for reviewers who suggest and review books for the column.

### GOALS

We work to achieve several goals with the column. Our chief goal is that the column helps law librarians make more informed collection development decisions. While many books reviewed in the column will have already appeared in vendor approval plans and publisher catalogs, reviews in the column may alert librarians to books they had not noticed, and the additional information may help with deciding a close call. Librarians who read the column and review for it also exercise the thought processes used in collection development, and refresh, and perhaps rethink, the factors considered when evaluating books.

The column should also provide stimulating material for its readers and edifying experiences for librarians who review books for the column. For readers, the column provides concise discussions of recent legal titles. The column publishes reviews of books covering a variety of legal topics, so readers may learn of interesting books that are outside their specialties. For reviewers, the column provides an opportunity to read and critically evaluate books relevant to them, and then share their thoughts through the professional literature. While such an exercise is probably not as taxing as preparing a scholarly article or presentation, we think it is still a valuable form of professional (and scholarly) development.

### SELECTION

To help achieve these goals, we ask reviewers to help select the book they will review. We think reviewers will choose books that they find intriguing and feel competent to appraise, and that reviewers reading such books will tend to write more thorough and engaging reviews. We ask each reviewer to suggest five books. In addition to being of interest to the reviewer, we ask that the books be related to law or law librarianship and that they have been published within the last year.

Beyond those basic requirements, there are some softer suggestions for characteristics that make a book more or less desirable for reviewing. Deviations from these suggestions are not insurmountable but may require some work to address. Given the column’s present publication schedule, the book’s contents should be stable. Between three and six months can pass between a book being selected and its review being published. If the book is frequently updated or supplemented, the review may not be accurate upon publication. While edited collections of essays are common in the legal literature, they can be difficult to thoroughly review within a reasonable word count. Some thought is needed to avoid writing a series of capsule summaries of each chapter. Reviews of edited collections should extract the larger themes and use specific chapters as examples. For this reason, the column tends to review monographs by a single author or set of co-authors that jointly wrote the entire work. The column’s readers are mostly professional law librarians. Good candidates for review should reasonably merit consideration for addition to library collections or for furthering librarians’ professional development. Many titles we review are published by university presses, but trade

publishers are represented as well.

After a reviewer suggests five books, we select one book. We weigh reviewer preferences heavily, but we also apply the factors discussed above and strive to have a healthy diversity of legal topics, both within that column and between recent past columns. Sometimes considerations external to the book play a role: a book's release has been delayed too much, or more than one review suggests reviewing the same title. We ask publishers to send complimentary copies to reviewers. We also provide reviewers with a formatted template for the review, a style sheet, and a publication agreement.

## REVIEWING

Upon receiving a book, the reviewing librarian should read the book closely and critically. Some books we review are reference works that are never meant to be read straight through. In these instances, a blend of close reading and skimming is warranted, as long as the reviewer is examining the book more thoroughly than most readers would.

We generally prefer reviews to be between 500 and 900 words. This gives enough space for a thorough, though compact, review. There are a number of questions a reviewer can seek to address, and no review of the desired conciseness can touch on even half of them. We leave decisions on what aspects of a book to cover and emphasize to the reviewer's professional discretion. As food for thought, however, we offer some critical questions to mull when reviewing:

- What are the central theses and legal issues discussed?
- How thoroughly does the book cover these issues?
- How does the book compare to other works on similar topics?
- How does the book fit into and contribute to our knowledge and thinking on its topics?
- What researchers are likely to find this book valuable, and what library collections would it best fit into?
- To what extent are the facts and contentions in the book supported by citations and documentation?
- How well-organized and readable is the book?
- Are there any features that make the book especially useful, or flaws that are particularly bothersome?

Reviewers should feel free to draw on their knowledge and experience relating to the book. We prefer that reviewers provide a clear recommendation on whether the book is worth acquiring. Of course, reviewers generally suggest books that they expect to be of good quality, and most books receive positive reviews. Merely being suggested and selected for review might be regarded as a probative indicator of quality. Nonetheless, no book is perfect, and sometimes a book does not meet initial expectations. We encourage reviewers to offer constructive criticisms, especially regarding issues that a selector would want to know about.

## CONTACT



If you are interested in reviewing a book for Law Library Journal, please contact the LLJ Book Review Editor's [Susan Azyndar](#) and [Susan de Maine](#).