Abstract: This study explores the realm of book reviews within medical history journals, an area often overlooked in the existing literature. By scrutinizing four prominent journals over a five-year period, encompassing 780 book reviews, this research elucidates prevalent trends and patterns. Findings reveal disparities in review volume and author demographics, underscored by English-language dominance. Challenges such as limited word counts and evaluation dynamics emerge as impediments to review quality. Proposed enhancements include relaxing word limits, conducting reader surveys, and fostering access to non-English literature. These strategies aim to invigorate scholarly discourse, enriching the landscape of medical history research.

Keywords: book review; medical history; journal

1. Introduction

No one would question the significant role book reviews play in academic circles. Generally, the humanities and social sciences place more emphasis on book reviews, whereas medicine (and natural sciences) tends to overlook them [1]. In fact, many books are published in medicine and related fields. These books are often reviewed on the websites of scientific societies or in their newsletters, rather than in scientific journals. Medical history spans across humanities, social science, and medical disciplines. While there are numerous studies on the ‘book review’ [2–4], there has not been an exploration focused solely on the field of medical history. This paper reports a small-scale investigation and analysis of book reviews published in medical history journals. It first identifies the characteristics of book reviews and then discusses their content, aiming to provide suggestions for further development of book reviews in the field of medical history.

2. Materials and Methods

Within Web of Science, the Social Science Citation Index and Science Citation Index Expanded have a category titled the ‘History and Philosophy of Science’, which includes the history of medicine journals. This study selected journals from the ‘History and Philosophy of Science’ category in the Social Science Citation Index and Science Citation Index Expanded. The selection criteria were twofold: (1) In order to ensure the accuracy of analysis, journals that focus on the history of medicine were selected, while those focusing on other sciences, such as mathematics, astronomy, or general science, were excluded. (2) Journals with book review sections were selected; those without such sections were excluded.

The time frame for selection was 2019 to 2023, covering the most recent five years to observe the latest trends. Ultimately, four journals were selected: Medical History (published by Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK), Bulletin of the History of Medicine (published by Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, MD, USA), Social History of Medicine (Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK), and Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences (Oxford University Press) [5–8]. All these are well known in this field, publishing four issues each per year.

This study collected all the data from book reviews and conducted an analysis consisting of two parts: (1) general characteristics and trends of book reviews and (2) content analysis of book reviews. The analytic method was based on two aspects: (1) scholarly...
research on book reviews and (2) selected guidelines for book reviews, including general academic writing guidelines, book review guidelines for historical studies, and book review guidelines for library science. The analysis examines whether these book reviews meet the expectations stated in these guidelines. Finally, suggestions are made to improve the quality of book reviews and view counts.

3. Results and Discussion

From 2019 to 2023, over the course of five years, a total of 773 book reviews were published across the four journals. Medical History published 92 book reviews; Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences published 155; Social History of Medicine published 311; and Bulletin of the History of Medicine published 215. Among these, Social History of Medicine published the most because this journal adopts a broader approach to the topics of books reviewed. In addition to medical subjects, such as medicine, diseases, drugs, and public health, books on topics such as food history, environmental history, demographic history, and the history of the body are also included, widening the range of books eligible for review compared to the other journals.

The operational procedures of the four journals are consistent: publishers or authors of books send them to the book reviews editor or the Editor-in-Chief, who is responsible for finding reviewers. Books reviewed have generally been published within the previous 1–3 years, and the length of reviews is limited to around 800–1000 words, which can be extended to 1200 words for collections of essays.

The publication of book reviews in Medical History is less consistent than the other journals; it did not publish any book reviews in all four issues in 2023, and there were a total of five issues without book reviews over the five years. The other three journals consistently published book reviews, occasionally missing one issue, but overall the number of book reviews published each year remains relatively stable. Social History of Medicine published between 12 and 24 reviews each issue, Bulletin of the History of Medicine between 8 and 27; Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences between 6 and 12; and Medical History between 1 and 9.

All four journals are English-language journals, so, naturally, the book reviews are written in English. However, reviews of books in languages other than English are very few. Among the non-English language books, Medical History reviewed three, Social History of Medicine reviewed five, Bulletin of the History of Medicine reviewed three, and Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences reviewed none. Although the topics of the books reviewed are not limited to the English-speaking world and also include works from China, India, France, and African countries, the predominance of English-language books for review reflects the fact that these four major English-language medical history journals primarily serve English-speaking readers. The scarcity of non-English medical history books introduced is not very conducive to the field. Moreover, book review editors cannot be expected to be proficient in all languages, making it difficult to introduce and find suitable reviewers. Generally, editorial board members come from all over the world, and it is believed that, with their assistance, more non-English medical history works can be introduced. In fact, this might be more appealing to scholars in the English-speaking world, making them more willing to explore medical history works beyond the English language.

Using Web of Science’s Science Citation Index Expanded, Social Sciences Citation Index, and Arts & Humanities Citation Index, Liu et al. empirically examined the patterns and dynamics of book reviews within these three indexes over the past decade (2006–2015). One conclusion drawn from Liu et al. is that book reviews are primarily contributed by authors from developed economies such as the US and the UK. Conversely, scholars from China and Japan are unlikely to contribute book reviews [1]. Larrègue et al. also elucidate that the authors of book reviews predominantly hail from the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada [9].

Based on the author affiliations listed in the four journals, Medical History had 26 authors from the UK, 19 from the US, 6 from India, and 2 from China. Journal of the History of Medicine
and Allied Sciences had 89 authors from the US, 33 from the UK, 17 from Australia & Canada, and none from China or India. Social History of Medicine had 126 authors from the US, 107 from the UK, 30 from Australia & Canada, 2 from China, 1 from Japan, and none from India. Bulletin of the History of Medicine had 141 authors from the US, 36 from the UK, 16 from Australia & Canada, and 1 from China. [Refer to the detailed numbers in Table 1] This leads to the conclusion that authors from the US and the UK dominate book reviews, influenced by the fact that these journals are English-language journals, and their editors tend to initially seek reviewers who are native English speakers. The situation is largely consistent with Liu et al.’s study, with the US leading, followed by the UK, Canada, and Australia. Occasionally, scholars from other countries such as France, Germany, Spain, and the Netherlands contribute reviews, but this may not necessarily be solely related to the level of national development. Looking at these four medical history journals, authors from non-English-speaking countries contribute proportionally very few reviews.

Table 1. Affiliation Locations of Book Review Authors in Medical History Journals.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Journal Name</th>
<th>The Affiliation Locations of Book Review Authors</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>US  UK  European Countries China Australia &amp; Canada Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical History</td>
<td>19  26  13  2  8  24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences</td>
<td>89  33  9  0  17  7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social History of Medicine</td>
<td>126  107  39  2  30  7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulletin of the History of Medicine</td>
<td>141  36  16  1  16  5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Bulletin of the History of Medicine does not have a dedicated book review editor, but all three Editors-in-Chief are faculty at universities in the US; the book reviews editor of Social History of Medicine is an academic at a university in the UK; Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences is edited by faculty from universities in the US; and the book reviews editor of Medical History is also a faculty member at a university in the UK. The editors tend to initially approach scholars from English-language universities to write reviews for two reasons. First, finding suitable reviewers is a challenging task that takes up a considerable amount of time; it is easier to find scholars from English-language universities, and this ensures that reviews are written in good English. Second, the evaluation of research outcomes worldwide often does not include book reviews as part of consideration, meaning that many scholars are unwilling to invest time in writing them [10]. Bulletin of the History of Medicine had four authors who wrote more than one review within five years, which also suggests that the book review editor may prefer authors who are familiar with it.

Many studies have indicated that the citation count of book reviews is extremely low [1–3]. From what the author of this paper has observed on Web of Science, the citation count for the vast majority of book reviews published in these four journals is zero, and at most only twice. Only two reviews reached a citation count of two. The low citation count cannot be used as a criterion for judging the quality of book reviews. Generally, the number of views for a review ranges between 100 and 300, indicating that reviews are primarily read by professional researchers, with likely relatively few views from students. It is probable that university professors rarely require students to read book reviews.

4. Recommendations

What content should an ideal book review include? As a book review, there must be two parts, introduction and commentary, and the commentary should point out the strengths and weaknesses of the book [2,11]. This is the first important aspect to offer a critical assessment of the content: what strikes the reviewer as noteworthy, whether or not it was effective or persuasive, and how it enhanced the reviewer’s understanding of the issues at hand [12]—these are all aspects of a typical book review.
As medical history is a relatively niche category, there is no specific research on book reviews focusing on this. Therefore, this article first examines how reviews of history books should be written. When writing a review or critique, the reviewer not only reports the content of the text but also assesses its strengths and weaknesses. It is important to note the most important evidence and sources the author presents to support their thesis and to evaluate the author’s use of evidence and sources, as well as describe how they deal with counterevidence, and, furthermore, to compare this text with other books or articles the reviewer has read on the same subject to identify what sets the reviewed book apart [13,14].

Firstly, lifting the word limit on book reviews is paramount. Because reviews need to encompass the three crucial components mentioned above, it is often impossible to do so within 1200 words. From another perspective, whether a book is 1000 pages or 300 pages, having the same word limit for reviews is unreasonable. A 1000-page book has more content to discuss, and it is not possible to treat it the same as a 300-page book. One way to open up the word count could be as follows: Currently, the common practice is to review two or more books to constitute a review essay. If reviewing just one book was also allowed to qualify as a review essay, it would be possible to discuss the weaknesses of books, their historiographical context, and comparisons with similar studies [13–16]. Reading the book reviews published in the four journals in 2022, the comments are generally mild, without in-depth analysis. In 2022, *Medical History* published a review by François-Olivier Touati that spanned three pages, breaking the typical word limit for book reviews. At the same time, Touati’s review provided detailed explanations of primary and secondary sources, leading to a more in-depth discussion of the content of the reviewed book [17]. This is a special case. Journals and publishers each have their own publishing strategies and considerations, and they may not always have the flexibility to make changes. Whether publishing book reviews is a priority for a journal is also a factor to consider. For example, a journal could publish 10 book reviews in one issue, but the discussion might not be very in-depth. Alternatively, it could publish only eight book reviews, allowing for more thorough discussions for each. A journal may decide whether to introduce more books in the same issue or to discuss them in greater depth. This is always a difficult decision to make.

Secondly, if reviewers are required to explore these three aspects of a book, the academic standards for reviewers must be more demanding: in other words, senior faculty are the first priority to be invited to serve as book reviewers. However, many faculty are not very willing to write book reviews, for two reasons. Firstly, they do not want to offend others in their academic careers. Secondly, book reviews are not considered academic research outputs, and in the current global university landscape where research outputs are heavily valued, few are willing to spend time on such activities [18]. As a result, graduate students under the guidance of senior researchers or junior professors who would like to practice their writing skills are more likely to accept invitations. Currently, the only benefit for book reviewers is that, once the review is completed, the book does not need to be returned to the journal or publisher. This is the result of the university evaluation system emphasizing papers over book reviews, and no journal or individual can reverse this system.

Thirdly, book review editors should collaborate with members of the editorial board to find non-English books for review. It is believed that readers of the four aforementioned journals can read English. However, upon careful consideration, it becomes apparent that readers who are native English speakers and study medical history have an even greater need for reviews of non-English books. For instance, a significant portion of medical history books from countries such as India, China, Japan, France, and Germany are not written in English and rely on non-English sources for research. Therefore, there is a greater need to introduce these books to English-speaking readers. English-speaking readers would likely be more interested in understanding medical history written in languages they are not familiar with. For example, while there are numerous English works on the European plague, accessing Chinese, Japanese, French, German, and Spanish books on the topic is not as straightforward, making such information more valuable. It is also necessary to consider
the possibility of expanding the journal’s editorial board. Selecting scholars with shared values and academic standards to join and work together is not always easy.

Fourthly, book reviews should be open access, meaning that authors should not be charged for open access, and readers should have free access to them. Since authors are aware of the extremely low citation count of book reviews, no one is willing to pay for open access charges. The best approach for journals is to open up book reviews to readers to increase readership. As mentioned earlier, book reviews make up more than half of book reviews introducing the content of the reviewed book. Once scholars read a book review, they are unlikely to read reviews of the same book from other journals. *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*, *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, and *Social History of Medicine* have not yet made book reviews freely accessible to readers. The competitors for book reviews in these four journals are other types of publishers, such as H-net, which provides book reviews for free and delivers them to email accounts. This means that scholars can access book reviews as soon as they open their computers, making them the fastest and most up to date. If journals want to increase the readership of book reviews, open access is currently the only way.

5. Conclusions

Book reviews hold a significant place in academic journals and play a crucial role in scholarly communication. However, beyond academia, various issues such as English language dominance and university evaluation methods influence the evolution of book reviews. To improve the quality of book reviews, academic journals can consider easing word limits to provide scholars with more room for thorough discussion, thus captivating readers’ interest. Additionally, conducting surveys among readers to gauge their preferences for book review content and the demand for non-English medical history books can enhance the readership of book reviews in medical history journals. By addressing these considerations, journals can augment the impact and relevance of book reviews, enriching scholarly dialogue and fostering a deeper engagement with medical history.

The author of this paper has read all the book reviews published in four medical history journals from 2019 to 2023 and includes quantitative findings. However, the recommendations of this paper have certain limitations. In particular, to better understand the operations and considerations of journals and publishers, future research could involve interviews with journal editors and publishers, as well as surveys of book reviewers and readers. Combining these data with the analysis presented in this article may yield new perspectives. Typically, the publication of book reviews is highly contextual. In some disciplines, scholars increasingly do not write books or read reviews. Additionally, many journals do not receive review copies or struggle to find suitable reviewers. Consequently, my recommendations may apply to some journals in some fields.

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