

Letters not written

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [June 17, 1998](#) issue

Once in a while I receive a letter here that is so nutty, so outrageous or so hateful that I do not answer it. Otherwise I follow my parents' injunctions to be courteous, to speak when spoken to and to answer all mail. (Not to brag or complain, but that has meant writing a couple of hundred letters a week.) As book review editor at this magazine for over four decades, I frequently received one kind of letter that I did not feel the need to answer. At least weekly we would hear from professional publicists who were promoting books. We know that some authors employ agents whose job it is to make noise about products under contract. They send releases, make calls and write personal letters to which they do not expect answers.

Then there are personal letters, written by the authors themselves. Those are the ones that review editors, if they are nice people, are tempted to answer. But they ought not. And I hereby counsel my successors to resist the temptation, so they will have time to get their job done and fulfill their profession professionally.

Why the apparent gruffness or coldness from otherwise ungruff and warm people? After decades of suffering in silence, I can now explain.

The first reason to ignore these letters is that there are more good books that will appeal to a variety of tastes than a journal can possibly review.

Second, book review editors have to fight for space. The Christian Century would like to think of itself as the premier reviewer of certain kinds of books for a certain kind of audience, and so gives generous space to book reviews. But the editors have a lot of material for the other sections of the magazine, and can allot only so many pages for each.

We do like to notice offbeat books by obscure writers from overlooked corners of the writing world (and I think our record of discovery is quite good). Most of the time, however, we are aware that we are competing with other journals. This means that we have to join the public debate about books that other magazines are reviewing, and that interest our (and their) readers. It is rare that an excellent scholarly tome

costing \$85, published by a Belgian or Dutch company and fated to sell 119 copies worldwide in ten years, will attain notice in our pages.

Frankly, we don't review some books because reviewers don't come through. Though we prod laggard or nonperforming reviewers, original sin still has sway, and some procrastinators are not cowed by our threats of earthly damnation.

"Why didn't you review my book?" is not always an easy question to answer. Before I learned not to answer, I used to say something like "Well, the Christian Century doesn't review all books; numbers of mine are bypassed." (No Century editors have had any say as to whether or how their books are reviewed.)

Reviewers soon learn that they wade into a morass if they start explaining anything, and they thereupon enter into endless correspondences. So they learn to forget their mothers and daddies' counsel to reply, and they pretend the letters never arrived. This policy won't make their petitioners happy, and they won't be happy themselves. No one ever expected review editors to be happy. But this one was.