

A Message to Readers

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A few weeks after my appointment as Book Reviews editor, I started receiving a large number of books from AAAI, books that have been accumulating since the last reviewer stepped down. As I was going through them, I thought, "So many books, so few pages." *AI Magazine* is not a publication exclusively devoted to books, such as the *New York Review* or the weekly book review supplements of major newspapers. At best, it can devote a few pages each issue to book reviews. Also, it doesn't appear that frequently, just four issues a year. Given these constraints, how can the magazine best serve its readership?

I enjoy reading book reviews myself. My ideal book review is the kind that appears often in *New York Review of Books*. The books under review are commented on of course but often mostly in passing. *New York Review of Books* reviewers use the occasion of the book review as a launching point for a fairly extensive tutorial on the subject, often extremely well written. Technical publications, with few exceptions, do not fit this mold. Looking at the exceptions first, *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* makes a point of identifying a few—just a very few—major books and solicits multiple reviews on them, as does *Artificial Intelligence Journal*. *Computational Linguistics* seems to have identified long, thorough book reviews as one of the best ways in which it can serve its community. The journal's area of interest is just small enough and the number of pages that they devote to this is large enough that they are able to pull it off. Having a dedicated corps of reviewers doesn't hurt them either.

But, as a rule, most technical publications, like *AI Magazine*, are limited in the amount of space they can devote to book reviews. Many of them just limit themselves to a Books Received section, with an occasional short review of some book or other. The editor may reject certain titles as not overly relevant for the journal—just as I am not

going to look for a reviewer if I get a book on *Optimization Techniques in the Steel Industry*. But beyond that, books appear to be somewhat randomly selected and reviewed. Editors of such publications can rarely make the claim that the lists of books reviewed in their publications over some period represent in some considered sense the most important or significant books in the subject area in that period. Since AI is such a large area, the odds are that *AI Magazine's* coverage is even more spotty with respect to the list of important books in our multiple subareas. The best claim that editors can make is that they have drawn their readers' attention to some important books.

Can we do better? Can we do something more systematic? Here are a couple of my thoughts on this matter.

Systematic coverage of subareas. The scope of AI is large. It has numerous subareas and methodologies that don't always make contact with each other. It also has sister disciplines, such as cognitive science, that are closely related to AI in techniques and methodology. A typical AI person has relatively little knowledge of what goes on in other subareas than the ones she or he is working in. I think it would be useful to bring important books in the various subareas and allied disciplines to the attention of people working in the subareas as well as the larger readership. It would be particularly useful if related books can be dealt as a group in one review. Again, given space limitations, the goal cannot be to give detailed point-by-point critiques of the books but can only be that of summarizing the issues that the books are trying to tackle and arguing their importance.

Sometimes a book ostensibly deals with a subarea of AI, but a discerning reviewer might be able to relate its concerns to the larger concerns of AI.

A book is important if it is creating—or should be creating—a "buzz" in the subfield, something that excites people. A good book review in this

genre should educate the general readership on the background, describe the alternatives that are being proposed in the book or books, and communicate their importance.

In addition to the books that might be treated like this, I think it would be useful if we could provide, with the help of the folks in the subareas, a listing of books, with brief descriptions, that the area experts wish to draw the readers' attention to. This list, in my proposal, would not be quite the Books Received sections that one often sees. The list that I am talking about would still involve selecting the wheat from the chaff according to the judgment of the subarea experts, perhaps with short annotations that describe what the books are about. Over time, the books chosen for review or brief mention in particular subareas should represent the lion's share of important publications in the area.

Realizing this vision requires the cooperation and work of people representing the various subareas. I intend to ask the editorial board members to suggest names of people who might be tapped to take responsibility for this in their subareas. I will be glad to receive nominations, self or otherwise, from readers for candidates who might be able to help in this way in the various subareas.

Textbook reviews. As the dynamic field that it is, AI continues to enjoy a constant flow of new textbooks, representing different methodologies and teaching approaches. I think it would be extremely valuable if we could devote, at approximately two-year intervals, space in *AI Magazine* for instructors to share their experiences, positive and negative, in using the various texts that are available. I would be delighted to hear from volunteers who might take on the responsibility of coordinating the first such set of reviews.

Let me know what you think. Even more than other areas of putting a journal out, the book review section really does depend on volunteers, and lots of them. Please do write to me with suggestions and with offers to take on some of the responsibilities that I outlined here. My e-mail address is chandra@cis.ohio-state.edu.