

EXCELLENT REVIEW DISSECTED

Jacinta Ruru's [review](#) of Peter H. Russell's book *Recognizing Aboriginal title: The Mabo Case and Indigenous Resistance to English-Settler Colonialism* provides a particularly helpful example of a book review that is both stellar and compelling in its own right – regardless of whether Osgoode Hall Law Journal readers are proficient in the fields in which Russell and Ruru are experts; and indeed regardless of whether the OHLJ reader intends to read the book.

In roughly 2400 words, Ruru has written a complete, though concise, self-contained academic work; a mini essay on a topic of scholarly interest. Her review is a “finished, polished piece of work”¹ in the most important sense of being a self-standing scholarly artefact of its own. The book being reviewed is *almost* only the pretext for drawing the generalist OHLJ reader into a whole (otherwise rarified) corner of the academic world. While Ruru meets the perfunctory task of “bringing to a book the insight and perspective of another person working in the field”², she also conveys authoritatively and adroitly (and without condescension) that she is not just working in the field, but is herself a master in the field – and that the field is inherently worthy of intellectual attention.

The generalist OHLJ reader may never read Russell's book and may have no expertise whatsoever in the area of law which is covered; but with Ruru's review, he or she has just been exposed to a penetrating light shone upon the concerns and intrigues to which the book speaks. Ruru does this while remaining completely faithful to the book itself, which is fully unearthed and placed in context for our scrutiny. The full contours of this context, one senses, may indeed remain somewhat obscure to the author him or herself (Russell in this case). To this extent, the author and the reviewer appear to be actively engaged in an ongoing and committed conversation over time – a conversation in which many other scholars, past and present, participate.

Ruru provides a well-documented literary context in which she situates the book, describing thoughtfully the intertextual background upon which it gets its purchase. More than that, however, Ruru situates the book in larger political or intellectual debates which allow the general legal reader to enjoy the humane (non-specialist) heart of a book to which he or she might never, or never otherwise, turn their minds. She casts the book's central concerns as ones that the general legal reader would likely also share. To this extent, her review provides a map for the general reader (alongside the specialist reader) to find their way into a particular debate of general human concern as manifest in legal scholarship. Ruru's reviews stands out for the ease with which she filters out the noise of all that could be, and indeed is, said in her field of inquiry, enabling us to focus on the original and intriguing directions that the book is suggesting we might take. To this extent, Ruru manifests by counterexample Orville Prescott's point to the effect that poor

¹ <http://www.iupui.edu/~history/classes/2001/fall/reviewgd.html>

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reviewers “forget that book reviews are not supposed to make up somebody else’s mind. They are supposed to help him/her make up his/her own mind as to whether a book is for him/her or not.”³

It is striking for us that Ruru gives only a very brief summary of the book’s structure – and yet her synopsis is complete. She is clearly not writing a book report that merely recapitulates the content descriptively; she is actively digesting the book critically for us – and with admirable agility. To this extent she has mastered the tension between conveying the content of the book to unfamiliar readers and simultaneously locating it precisely within a deeper and broader critical context.

Beyond the clear mini-essay-like quality of her writing, Ruru engages the reader with all of the other “[devices](#)” that are routinely recommended for the writing of book reviews, devices that lesser reviewers might follow somewhat more formulaically. She starts with an engaging introductory paragraph that immediately and dramatically draws the reader into her preoccupations with the text. She speaks clearly to the book’s purpose, identifying its scope; she alludes to the authors’ relevant qualifications and background and his motives for writing. She uses quotes sparingly but tellingly, each use of a quotation economically advancing her particular intrigue through the text. She concludes with her personal critiques and final judgment and ties the introductory fanfare up with her concluding assessment. She nowhere uses the review as a pretext to engage in “reviewing which is primarily directed to the glorification of the reviewer at the expense of the object under examination.”⁴ She clearly has the subject matter (Aboriginal law and post-colonialism) uppermost as the review’s subject of inquiry; a subject matter that is first and foremost disclosed for our scrutiny by Russell’s book.

It goes without saying that she sources all of her material professionally in footnotes, cites the text and author and all other relevant publication details at the outset, and that she is not petty with comments about typographical errors and stylistic mishaps. She has not, to quote Elmo Ellis, chosen to “review [a] book that [she] considers [an] inferior work.” She has spent both her time (and our readers’ time) examining “a worthy volume for review.”⁵ She does all of this routine work, but she does so much more in writing a fully formed piece of academic writing.

There are many outstanding book reviews within the archives of the Osgoode Hall Law Journal. Not every reader may find Jacinta Ruru’s review of Peter Russell’s book to their taste. If you remain uncertain about what distinguishes a prosaic from a stellar book review, we would invite you to sift through sample book reviews and identify the features of those that stand out for you as excellent.

³ Orville Prescott, see [How to Write a Review](#)

⁴ Diana Trilling, see [How to Write a Review](#)

⁵ Elmo Ellis, see [How to Write a Review](#)