Writing a novel? The editor who reads your manuscript may take advice, but it’s likely to be from colleagues in the house’s editorial or marketing departments. Serious nonfiction is another matter. If you’re writing a book for scholars, or if you’re writing a book for general readers and publishing it with a scholarly house, prepare yourself for a reader’s report.

Readers’ reports are *specialist* evaluations of scholarly work. Not generalist evaluations. They’re there to struggle with arguments, pick nits, keep you from looking like a fool (a disaster of one), and keep the publishing house from looking like a group of fools (a disaster of many). This is why readers’ reports are essential to the operation of university presses and other scholarly publishing organizations. A university press uses the reader’s report as part of the press’s gatekeeper function. Only manuscripts good enough to warrant the press’s imprint shall receive it. Outside the university press arena, commercial academic publishers will often seek readers’ reports, as well. Even certain kinds of trade nonfiction – medical self-help for example – won’t be put into print before the publisher has subjected it to careful professional scrutiny. Readers’ reports are the means by which a publisher can determine that the project is, first of all, academically sound. There may be other reasons for an academic publisher to solicit a report on your project, but academic soundness is the most important – both for your publisher and for you.

**The Basic Drill**

No one really likes readers’ reports. There’s nothing pleasant about
subjecting yourself to review, whether it’s a manuscript evaluation or a trip to the dental hygienist. There may be little comfort in being reminded that it’s good for you, but it’s good for your book. And it’s part of a three-stage process from submission to contract: interesting an editor, passing muster with readers, and finally convincing a faculty board or publications committee.

Readers’ reports can be secured at more than one stage in a manuscript’s life. Typically, these junctures are

- **Submission of a complete manuscript, partial manuscript, or proposal.** If your editor likes your project, whatever its stage, a report is the next step.
- **Delivery of the completed manuscript.** If you have a contract for a book you haven’t completed, expect to have the finished manuscript sent to an outside reviewer.
- **Delivery of the revised completed manuscript.** And if you have been required to revise your manuscript to accommodate concerns voiced by the first reader’s report, expect that the project will again be sent out for review – either to the reader who reviewed it initially, or to yet someone else.

Books submitted for a series will probably go first to the series editor. Professor White may immediately decide that this is a project for her series, and may write an evaluation of the project herself. Or she may decide that it looks promising, but would like your editor to secure a report from another scholar. She may suggest that Professor Green read it for the press, and that a copy of the report be sent on to Professor White as well. If it isn’t a book for a series, the editor will select a reader for your materials. Some houses have advisory systems, by means of which a designated scholar advises an editor on all the projects in a particular area. This kind of relationship between editor and scholar is intended to move the review process along smoothly, and to avoid floor fights at the faculty board meeting. Other editors may informally cultivate the advice of a particular specialist in a field, using that scholar as a resource for all projects submitted to the press in a given area. At some presses such advice may count as a sufficient reader’s report in itself.

If there’s neither a series editor nor a regular advisory editor in place, it’s up to the editor to choose a reader for your work. A good
match yields an invaluable report. A poor match can waste precious time, or result in a book being declined for the wrong reasons. The editor selects one, two, or sometimes more readers to comment on the project. Although the time actually spent on a review may amount to no more than a long weekend or parts of several evenings, the reviewer will be sandwiching the task into an already busy schedule. It’s reasonable to allow anywhere from four to eight weeks for a report to be completed.

The more commercial a house, the more independence an editor will have to recommend a project for publication. The more traditional a university press, the more strictly the review process will depend upon the advice and consent of a faculty committee.

Some university presses have a more flexible relationship with their governing body. At least one press is permitted to enter into contractual agreements with authors, and merely report to its faculty board, at specific intervals, what the press is doing. This freedom, which increases the press’s competitiveness, is a privilege to be both prized and responsibly husbanded. At several other presses, the director may be empowered to offer a limited number of contracts without the prior endorsement of a reader’s report or the blessing of the faculty board. These special maneuvers were developed as a means of allowing university presses to compete with commercial houses (and with other university presses similarly encouraged to compete with commercial houses). No pokey evaluation process, no cumbersome docketing procedure, just a swift and aggressive offer for a highly desirable project. Yet even these books are routinely subjected to evaluation when the manuscript is finally delivered. If you have such a project, you’re in the catbird seat. But most writers aren’t, and won’t be the obscure object of a publisher’s frantic desire. It’s safest to assume that your project is going to be vetted in the traditional way: an editor’s preliminary reaction, then a reader’s report (often two), an in-house consideration, and finally a request for the approval of a faculty publications committee.

The review process can be efficient (a single report swiftly procured) or convoluted (sequential reports, and then a re-review after you’ve rewritten chapters 4 and 9). But when it’s over, your editor will
either decline your project or agree to take it to the next stage. That stage is presenting the book to some validating mechanism within the house. A commercial publisher will require that the project be approved either by a senior executive or by an in-house committee, usually representing the interests of the marketing, finance, production, and editorial departments. At a university press, an editor will similarly need to make a case for the book, either to her director or to an in-house committee, and then in almost all cases to the faculty committee as well.

When you submit your manuscript to a university press, you’re hoping that the project will finally make it to the faculty board. At some university presses, the board meets every month or so, at which meeting the members are presented with the projects the press has already determined it would like to pursue. If the faculty board grants its assent, an offer to publish may then be made. If the board demurs, the project may be killed instantly. In some cases, the press management can steer the board decision away from the brink, sometimes deferring a debated project to the review of a particular board member or set of members. Or the project may be sent out for further review in order to answer questions that arise at the board session.

The faculty board of a university press is usually composed of professors from disciplines in which the press publishes or hopes to publish. If you’ve written Hello Finland?, a sociological study of mobile phones, you may wonder exactly what a professor of French literature or Mexican history or invertebrate paleontology, all sitting on the publications committee, can add to a discussion of your book. In practice, most scholars outside the field of the manuscript defer to the colleague whose work is closest to the matter at hand. Be optimistic. Busy faculty who volunteer to serve on a press board do so because they like books and enjoy the chance to engage with material and ideas most of their fellow specialists will never pursue.

Commercial houses don’t have campuses, or faculty and so their rules are different. There is a misconception that the absence of a faculty board means that a publishing house has no means of determining what it should publish. Commercial houses regularly operate without a faculty board, and they do so by insisting that editors function with wider authority and responsibility. Projects that must make a profit, of course, need to be supported by the other wings of the organization: marketing must agree that it can bring in enough
money from sales; production must agree that it can produce the book without spending more than the budgeted sum; and finance is supposed to keep everybody honest. The impetus for accepting a manuscript, however, comes from the editor whose project it is. It’s up to the editor to take whatever steps are necessary to make a strong case for the book. And, as we’ve already seen, that can mean contacting exactly the same people the editor would be calling if the project were with a university press.

Mechanics

Many houses supply the reader with questions. These questions may look like this:

- Does this manuscript make a significant contribution to the field? (Or more directly, will people pay attention to this book?)
- Does the author demonstrate a mastery of the scholarly literature? (Does the author know the subject? Know it well?)
- What are the particular strengths or weaknesses of the manuscript? (Particularly the weaknesses. Every manuscript can be improved.)
- What is the project’s intended audience?
- What books are the project’s competition in the market?

Some presses present their academic questions on preprinted sheets, obliging the reader to give succinct replies. Other houses ask the reader to check boxes with numbers or other codings, so that the final report looks a little like those evaluations that hotels ask you to complete on checkout. (Were you satisfied/very satisfied/completely satisfied with the author’s prose style?) Some presses stress academic soundness; other temper scholarly considerations with market savvy. It’s an open secret that scholars are better at evaluating academic soundness than the market. Still other reader’s report templates are free-form affairs, putting the burden on the reader to provide all the necessary responses. Some presses reserve this option for their most accomplished and most frequently consulted reviewers. Still other report formats contain both compulsory and freestyle sections, sort of like an ice-skating competition.

A reader’s report is usually more than one page long and less than
five. Some reports are remarkably detailed, while others may be abrupt. It’s hard to blame the reader whose attention flags when it’s clear the manuscript is simply too weak to be considered further. That reader might think twice about offering her services again to an editor whose judgment she may now find in question. Other reports – often the most enthusiastic – convey not only analysis of the manuscript but pages of corrections, even down to common typing errors.

Once your editor has received the readers’ report she will study it. And not only for what it tells her about your project. Negotiating the reader’s report between author and reviewer can be tough sledding. Usually your editor can send you a blind copy of the evaluation. The blind copy is a carefully photocopied version, eliminating the writer’s letterhead, footer, even watermark, all of which might provide clues to the writer’s identity. But there are times when much more has to be cut out of the report – chatty asides to the editor, less than even-handed criticism, even nasty moments. Some readers’ reports can resemble a classified document, leaving you wondering just what terrors may lie beneath the blacked-out passages. An alternate strategy is for the editor to have the report’s useful passages retyped and presented within the content of a letter. The editor’s purpose, however, is always to determine whether the project is good enough for scholars and strong enough for the market.

The Reader

Who reads manuscripts? Readers aren’t faceless academic police; they’re scholars like yourself, though if you’re a recent Ph.D. they tend to be older or at least more widely published than you yet are. A good reader is a scholar in your field, usually known to the publishing house, willing and able to evaluate your manuscript in terms of its intellectual soundness, its scholarly contribution, its competition, its audience, its marketability, and maybe even the price it could bear. Many readers for scholarly houses are press authors. Some are academics known to the acquisitions editor at the house. It’s often the case that the person evaluating your manuscript has reviewed projects for that house on many other occasions. Editors like using readers on whom they know they can depend for timely reporting, and whose acumen and taste they trust.

People who read for scholarly publishers fall into one or more of
the following categories:

- They are deeply committed to their field, and to the development of young writers’ careers.
- They find reading unpublished manuscripts on subjects within their specialties a means of keeping abreast of new developments, and as a way of spotting new talent.
- They read for the modest earnings of the honoraria, or for the free books that publishers may offer them in lieu of cash.

Consider, though, that reviewing a completed manuscript requires reading three to five hundred pages of typescript, taking notes, and producing an analysis meant to be useful both to the publisher and to the writer. It’s a weekend’s work for a fast reader. Now consider that an honorarium may be $150 or, famously, ‘twice that amount in books,’ as many publishers quickly suggest. Twenty hours of work for $150 comes out at a princely rate of $7.50 an hour. If there are unsung heroes in academic publishing, they are the scholars who, for a paltry honorarium, devote days to reviewing the work of a colleague, often someone younger and frequently unknown to the reader.

Your editor knows many scholars, including the press’s authors, who contribute their time to the review process. These readers may seem like faceless ogres, particularly if your project is declined. But to a scholarly publisher, outside readers are national – and sometimes international – treasures. What’s surprising is that some of the best known scholars do actually read manuscripts for presses. It’s their academic pro bono work.

A good editor will know her faculty committee and her review process inside and out. She will understand whose opinion will count, and who can be counted on. More than one faculty committee has sniffed at reports from a mere assistant professor. Some readers are extravagantly conscientious, taking days to review a manuscript and preparing a cogent and detailed analysis of the project’s strengths and its weaknesses (even down to catching – and commenting on – the misspelling of Nietzsche in chapter 8). Other readers are content to bless a project. At a faculty board meeting I attended some years ago, one professor examined an admittedly brief evaluation and responded dryly: ‘That’s not a reader’s report. It’s an autograph.’ And so
it was. Choosing a reader is a minor art. There’s nothing for a publisher to gain by submitting your project to a scholar who shreds everything he reads, or to someone whose schedule means that the report can’t be expected for six months or more.

Be prepared to recommend potential readers. Don’t pick your graduate school advisor, your spouse, or anyone in the department where you teach. And don’t pick people who have books on the bestseller list.

When a publisher chooses the wrong reader everyone loses valuable time. A house can’t learn anything from sending your project to the Attila the Hun Professor of Sociology for a guaranteed annihilation, but your editor won’t learn anything useful either from the Little Mary Sunshine Professor of Literature. A good editor will quickly learn to avoid readers who see the evaluation process as a simple matter of signaling thumbs up or thumbs down. This shouldn’t become gladiatorial combat.

Some editors, though not all, will welcome suggestions for potential reviewers. You should give careful thought to this issue, and have answers readily at hand. Scholars who make good reviewers will be well versed in your subject and perhaps even be familiar with your scholarship. (You needn’t have published a book before – an article, a lecture, or even an exchange of papers by mail might have brought you to a senior scholar’s attention.) More often than not, your editor will be looking for the name of a reader whose own credentials will lend authority to the evaluation. A chaired professor at a major university is always a welcome candidate, but you don’t need a brand-name reader in order to secure a book contract. What you do need is someone able to demonstrate both her command of the field and her grasp of your work, and to offer comments that convince your editor, and your editor’s board, that this is a book the press should take on – and can afford to.

Who is a good reader? Often it is a midcareer scholar actively engaged in his own work. A busy author and researcher is frequently eager to know what else is going on in the field and may even enjoy taking on the task of writing evaluations. Editors often go back to the same readers time and again. Why? Because publisher and scholar
develop a relationship that permits the editor to ask complex or speculative questions pertaining to the project in hand. And because working with a reader over a period of time gives an editor an opportunity to judge the nuances of a report.

The Report

How many readers does it take to answer a publisher’s concerns? According to a long-standing tradition in the university press world, a manuscript must have two positive readers’ reports. Inevitably, a wag once defined a publishable book as a book two people liked. So why two readers’ reports? Why not three? If one, like the much maligned Bulgarian judge at the Olympics, votes against you, wouldn’t the two positive reports carry the day? From time to time, an author might suggest asking an editor to get three reports, ‘just in case.’ The biggest projects – multivolume reference works or bona fide introductory texts – are always reviewed by many readers. It isn’t unheard of to have thirty reports on a prospectus and the work-in-progress.

Poor choices for readers are scholars who are operating in the glare of publicity, or who are otherwise leading figures in their field. Practically every author of a work in African American studies will suggest Cornel West or Henry Louis Gates, Jr., as good readers for the manuscript. Practically every author of a project in gender theory will suggest Judith Butler. If these three scholars were to read all the manuscripts in their respective fields, they would do nothing else. While your editor will be happy to learn that you think your project could interest Professor West, Gates, or Butler, you don’t really want to be in a situation where the fate of your manuscript depends on their availability.

The reports should offer you real benefits. Two reports should double the chance that you and the publishing house will learn something useful. An editor commissioning readers’ reports will sometimes place a manuscript with a reader precisely to draw out a clearer assessment of one specific aspect of your project. One reader may be more interested in the theoretical underpinnings of your work, one in the empirical research. Or one reader may be more attuned to the
political dimensions of the project, while the second may have a better ear for the economic arguments.

Sometimes two readers’ reports will yield nothing more than two or three useful observations. ‘I hate the subtitle.’ ‘Lucretia Mott was born in Nantucket, not Fall River.’ ‘The Tlingit do not eat chard.’ Some readers’ reports are hasty and banal, and like the tepid and rapidly written letter of recommendation, they do little harm and hardly any good.

If you’re lucky, your reports will make your book even stronger. They can also save you from embarrassing errors or bring to your attention a useful, or competing, book on your subject. If you’re fortunate enough to get a thoughtful, complex reading of your manuscript, take it to heart. It may be the first full-blown critique you will ever have seen of your work. Take the praise as genuine, and take the criticisms seriously.

One rule of the game is that all readers’ reports must be made part of the manuscript’s file. The bad reader’s report can’t be toed under the rug like the broken figurine you hope Aunt Edna won’t notice.

There are other questions that an editor may put to a reviewer. They may be invisible, but they can have a significant impact on the shape of what you eventually publish. An editor who has selected your manuscript for review is already on your side. But that editor has to play his best guess about how to make the book work. Sometimes this means being direct with the reader. For example, an editor facing a manuscript he feels certain is too long may specifically request from the reviewer suggestions for reducing the project’s bulk. You may not have told your editor your book was too long, and you may not think it is. But your editor may see the manuscript as a brilliant project endangered by its own verbosity. It’s the editor’s hunch that if it isn’t cut, it can’t be published. And so the reviewer may be asked whether the first chapter can go, or indeed whether any of the other chapters can join it.

It seems almost impossible to publish a collection of essays all of which are genuinely uniform in quality. An editor may reasonably direct the reviewer to finger the weakest links in the chain, even if
length is not an immediate concern. So, too, a collection of a single author’s essays will often admit of the same tightening. ‘Can we live without his classic essay from 1976?’ an editor might wonder. Even the completely new, single-author manuscript may, if written to indulgent length, be grilled. Whatever its genre or format, a book that’s too much of what it is will invite cutting.

Some books are long, and should be. But think about length early on. And often. You can take stock of how your book is progressing as you write it. Are the chapters swelling beyond your original plan? Are you writing more and enjoying it less? The best way to prevent your editor and a press’s review system from recommending cuts is for you to get there first, think hard about what you need and what you don’t, and shorten the text. Be brave. It’s not merely university press publishers who are looking for shorter manuscripts, either. A Knopf author was featured in a New York Times article on the basis of his having written a history of the world in 250 pages.

Among the advantages available to the commercial scholarly press, the optional nature of reader’s reports is the most controversial. A commercial house has no faculty board through which to validate the scholarly soundness of a project. A commercial publishing house, scholarly or not, is by definition in the book business in order to make a profit, and many projects that achieve a high standard of scholarly excellence will be unavailable to a commercial publisher for the simple reason that their market is too small.

Remember: editors are believers. I might love an author’s manuscript, and be ready to put it into print, but I don’t want my author to mistake my support for professional expertise in her field. In these cases, I often suggest that the author and I develop a list of readers who could review the final manuscript. This review – a combination of some fact-checking and a reassurance that no egregious errors remain – is different from an initial review of a proposal or a manuscript.

When I moved from a university press to a commercial environment, I found myself calling some of the reports I solicited ‘safety net’ readings. This is what I meant: I might respond eagerly to an author’s scholarly work, and even be able to make detailed comments on arguments and theories. But what I can’t do is let my enthusiasm, and even some limited expertise, present itself to the author as an expert critique in a specialist’s field. In other words, I might roll up my
shirtsleeves and engage an author’s book on nineteenth-century opera, but I still want a musicologist to check the facts (‘What’s this about the Faust ballet music not being by Gounod?’), and indeed to comment on the author’s interpretative stance and arguments. For me, the safety-net reading is a cooperative venture. If the book has already been commissioned, and if the editor still believes in it, both the press and the author will benefit if the final text is as strong as it can be.

A good reader’s report will engage fully the entire manuscript, and will respond to any particular questions put by the editor. The best readers are both coaches and judges. (Weak readers only want to coach, and never judge. This sort of reader can’t possibly recommend that the press decline the manuscript and finds something useful in everything. Editors really don’t want readers who do this.) The best readers are tough and fair, enthusiastic and engaged. They aim to help the author get the most out of the project she has undertaken, even if this means telling her where something has gone terribly wrong. The very best readers don’t shirk from cleaning up the messy little errors that creep into any piece of scholarly writing. A good reader has the courage to say that a project is truly misconceived, saving the writer from embarrassment and the publisher from both that and financial failure. And when informed praise is due, good readers’ reports are unafraid to offer it.

More and more frequently readers are asked to comment on a book’s market. No longer are market considerations the province only of a commercial house’s reader’s report. This poses a dilemma for academics: what does an academic know about marketing? Isn’t that the publisher’s job? Yes – and no. The publisher and the professor have complementary expertise. Each knows something the other doesn’t, and yet each has a view of the other’s field of specialization. The publisher and the editor know more about how books are to be shaped, packaged, presented to readers, and promoted. The professor is the academic authority. And yet a good editor must have antennae for quality scholarship, while the professor – who buys books, assigns them, and even writes them – will have useful views on the material aspects of the publishing process. Don’t confuse the reader editor relationship with the Cartesian mind-body split.

So what can a reader usefully say about the market for a project, and how might that be of use to you and your publisher? The reader
can name the competing works, summarizing their strengths and weaknesses. Perhaps your project is too narrowly focused to reach enough people. Perhaps it’s too general to appeal to the audience you envision. If you are lucky you will encounter:

- an editor able to recruit an informed and passionate reader for your manuscript
- a hard-nosed report that finds the weaknesses in your book and gives you guidance as to how you might correct them
- a publishing house (and faculty board) able to see that your book will now be stronger for the revisions you’ve undertaken in response to the evaluations

**Working with the Pain**

Once your editor has a reader’s report in hand, it will be sent on to you. The evaluation should be candid, and may be structured in response to a set of questions posed by your editor. The report will be anonymous, although rendering a report anonymous is sometimes hard work. It’s easy enough to remove a reader’s name from the report, but sometimes the reader has left clues as to his or her identity, my favorite being the moment in which the reader fulminates about the omission of his book in the manuscript’s review of the literature. (‘The finest discussion of the Shakespearean romances can, of course, be found in the work of Northrop Frye and Herman Schmidlapp!’ It will occur to you that Professor Schmidlapp just may be the author of the report.) Of course, in some academic fields there are simply very few specialists qualified to judge your project, and you may be able to figure out who the reviewer is on the basis of prose style or frame of reference or a signature concern.

If you do figure out the identity of your reader, resist the Aha! Effect (readers of William Safire’s *On Language* column will know the Gotcha Effect, to which this is a close cousin). The object of study should be the contents of the report, not the identity of its (anonymous) author. You may in fact receive a report actually signed by the reviewer, and inviting you to contact him or her to discuss the manuscript or points in the report.

*When you receive your reader’s report, study it promptly.* You will be expected to reply. And while your reader may have been given guide-
lines in preparing the evaluation, you won’t have any simple rules to guide you at your end. Here’s a set of suggestions.

1. Resist the temptation to fire off an e-mail response. You’re likely to become defensive, even before you can figure out what the reader is saying. Take at least twenty-four hours before responding to your publisher. But don’t disappear – a month is too long.

2. Take notes as you read the report. What are its main points? Even if the reader has structured the evaluation in numbered paragraphs, you might benefit from reorganizing it in terms that reflect better how you see your own project.

3. Take the report seriously. If you feel you were misunderstood, it may mean you need to be clearer.

4. No matter what’s in the report, don’t get angry.

What happens after you’ve received the report depends in large part on the degree of the report’s criticisms, and to lesser extent on the temperature of the praise. If there’s nothing negative in your report and all you’re left with is an endorsement that says ‘I recommend publication,’ you won’t have much to work with. And neither will your editor. Preferable by far is a report that says, ‘This is what the author needs to fix’ and then goes on to detail the weaknesses, but finally, and unambiguously, concludes, ‘With these changes I strongly endorse publication of this manuscript by the press. It will be not only the finest study of the subject, but a book that will change the way we think about it for years to come.’ In a slightly different publishing house the longed-for words would be: ‘Make the changes I recommend and this book will be adopted in every introduction to oneiromancy, a subject enjoying an enormous increase in enrollments throughout North America and in selected overseas localities.’

The reader’s report on your manuscript is one-half of a conversation. It’s now up to you to supply the other half. It can feel terribly awkward – you chatting with an anonymous figure who has nothing to lose and who – more to the point – has been empowered by your prospective publisher to judge your work. It’s also fair to assume that if this is your first book, or even your second, and you are in early or midcareer, your reader may be someone you and your editor would consider an intellectual star. But as a tabloid astrologer used to intone, ‘The stars impel, they do not compel!’ When dealing with aca-
demic stars, consider that experienced advice is still advice, not a command. Your book is your book.

If your editor sees that the report is critical but that the project is one he or she would like to take further, you might be given some tips on how to write a response to the evaluation. This response will likely become part of the file on your submission; treat it as a serious document. The typical ‘response to evaluation’ letter begins with formal courtesy, thanking the reader for the careful attention spent on the manuscript, then takes an opportunity to repeat the positive remarks in the report (see figure 2).

A negative reader’s report is another matter. A bad report can take many turns, and not all of them mean your book is toast. The report might present all the holes in your argument, or call you on the carpet for not knowing the very latest literature. What to do next? In many cases, the matter is taken out of your hands. Your editor receives a report so negative she knows it is either unlikely you can fix the project or unlikely that, even with repairs, her committee will give her the green light. She decides not to take the project further, and writes you with the bad news. A fatal reader’s report is often Exhibit A. Editors almost never back down from this position. One exception, though, is when the sensibility of the reader is so far removed from the author’s that there’s no common ground at all. This isn’t so much a bad reader’s report as a report by the wrong reader. Note, however, that though this does happen, it’s a less frequent occurrence than rejected authors believe.

A negative report not accompanied by a rejection leaves the door open. Study the report carefully. Are there reasonable criticisms? (If you can’t find any, you’re not looking hard enough. Put it aside and read it again in a day or two.) Then sit down and sift. Make a list of the points you feel can be tools for improving your project, and another list of the points you think are ill-conceived, inattentive, malicious or – as you will describe them in your response – subjective. Contact your editor and discuss the practicalities of going forward. Does the editor believe there is enough strength left in your submission to justify your spending more time on it? Is another reader’s report due in shortly? And what are your editor’s own thoughts about the usefulness of this review?

If your editor suggests you respond to the criticisms in the report, sit down and quickly sketch a repair plan for the project. You may well
be able to rewrite and resubmit the manuscript to the same house. Some readers will volunteer to have their identities made known to the author. Some will go further, encouraging the author to get in touch directly. As long as the report isn’t so bland as to be useless, this offer can be a boon to you. You might want to take advantage of the opportunity to discuss your work with an informed, specialist reader.

And finally like the urban legends dear to folklorists, there is that
fabled report, the steaming document poised to eviscerate the poor manuscript. The innocent editor sends a manuscript off to an eager reviewer – eager, that is, to exact retribution for a professional slight at the water cooler a decade ago. Or perhaps the reader is the author’s first husband. Who knew? In most cases, your editor will have a chance to commission another report. But all this takes time.

Second Chances

A good reader’s report from House A can be used at another press, at least as ancillary testimony to the value of your work. Of course, the editor at House B will face that house’s evaluation hurdles, which may well mean yet another reader’s report. A glowing report from another house, however, particularly if written by an influential scholar, can sometimes work wonders.

Some editors might not welcome evidence of a previous rejection; others won’t mind at all. When do the drawbacks outweigh the losses? Before sending on a reader’s report from the last house that rejected your manuscript, ask yourself if you know why the book was declined. Market size? You might try a smaller house, one where a slightly smaller print run may not be unwelcome. Certainly if you have a good report on a scholarly book from a commercial publisher, yet fail to land a contract, it’s sensible to try a university press. A not-for-profit house may be able to make your book work.

Remember that no matter how bruised you might feel by a reader’s criticisms, you want to hear these comments now, not in the printed reviews of the published book.