Words to the Whys: Crafting Critical Book Reviews

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"MY FAVORITE CHARACTER IS..." and "I recommend this book because..." are typical phrases that characterize the traditional book report, but they also epitomize the kind of direction that provides little preparation for the critical evaluation and review of books that often awaits students in many of their high school and college classes. How can we as teachers transcend the simplicity of book reports and their minimal demands upon our students' intelligence and abilities? How can we teach book *reviewing*, a task that encourages the development of the more sophisticated, higher order thinking skills (e.g., the full evolution of ideas and the explanation and justification of reactions—the *whys* in the title) that have an educational value beyond the dimensions of the assignment itself? What follows are some thoughts and practical suggestions for answering these questions.

Book reviews, whether for professional journals, newspapers, or our classrooms, generally have two aims in common: to inform the reader about the contents of the book and to provide an evaluation that presents the reviewer's judgment of the book's quality. This two-fold task is often none too easy for many students. Since the degree to which students succeed—or fail—as they complete assignments is due as much to the clarity of directions as to their intelligence or experience, I have devised—and here expand upon—a set of instructions (batteries not in-

cluded) that is aimed to make composition and thought development easier. These instructions are an integral part of my course syllabi; that is, the section of my syllabus devoted to the book review assignment includes three parts: 1) a discussion of the nature of book reviews and the goals of the assignment, plus advice on how to proceed; 2) a description of what a summary is and how it can be composed; and 3) an elaboration upon the essence of a critique and the variety of possibilities (in the form of questions) that can be explored. Teachers can, and should, modify my suggestions both to suit their own needs and to adapt them to the perceived ability levels of their students. In addition, I always include in-class oral elaboration and time for questions, both when the syllabus is distributed and again a week or so before the assignment is due.

Discussion and Preparation

A productive way to prepare students for what is expected of them is to discuss the nature of book reviews. What is the purpose of a review? How should it inform the reader? I encourage students to exchange ideas about the kind of information that should be included in—or excluded from—a book review, the various ways a review might be organized, and the degree to which a review ought to be used to forward the reviewer's own ideas. Teachers will have to establish their own guidelines and boundaries here, but as much as possible I try to allow for significant latitude since diverse approaches usually can be taken to reach the same goal. We also talk about assumptions the reviewer should or should not make and about the audience (read: level of sophistication) for which we are writing. As a reader of a book review, I ask students, what would you like to know that would help you to make an intelligent decision about whether to read the book?

I also recommend that students sit with paper, pencil, and instructions close at hand as they read their book so they can note any and all reactions precisely as they come to mind. Just as one who observes a crime will be a more credible witness if what is seen is recorded immediately rather than recalled later on the basis of memory, so students should have a clearer fix on their thoughts if they note them when they occur rather than wait to gather and organize them after the book has been completed. In this way ideas cannot be lost, forgotten, or abridged, and when the reading has been completed students ought to be in possession of a thorough set of notes from which to craft a review. Waiting to collect one's thoughts until after the book is read is likely to result in shrugged shoulders and a shortage of ideas. Instead, taking notes along the way should produce more material than is needed. The resulting harvest, inevitably, yields more of substance—and without the need for fertilizer.

Like any piece of writing, be it an examination essay, a term paper, or something else, a book review reads best when it is launched with an introduction. This can take a variety of forms, including a personal anecdote that can be related to the subject of the book, a brief story from the book itself that can be used to introduce the broader content, or even a clever quotation on which to build an introduction—all of which can serve the useful function of capturing a reader's attention. There is, however, simpler and more fundamental information that an effective introduction should minimally contain in order to prepare the reader for what follows: an overview of the book that incorporates both an encapsulated summary and a sense of the reviewer's general judgment. Thus armed with this equivalent to a thesis statement, the reader is prepared to wade into the body of the review.

The Summary

A successful summary consists of a discussion and highlighting of the major features, trends, concepts, themes, ideas, and characteristics of the book in as much detail as space limitations, established by the instructor, will allow. This can be as brief as a single sentence—if such brevity is what is desired (if not, the essence of such a sentence can otherwise be included as part of the introduction, say as a topic sentence)—or a paragraph, or it can go on for two, three or more pages. I find that a three-page limit (or half the total length of the review) works best in that it allows students enough space to describe the book without their losing sight of the purpose of the review. Since shorter summaries tend to be more difficult to write (i.e., because so much more has to be coherently compressed into fewer words), it is probably a good idea for teachers to restrict their length as much as conventional wisdom and student abilities dictate.

In the actual writing of the summary, I instruct students to use their own words, to combine ideas and story line into new sentences and phrasing of their own. While quotation marks should be placed around words and sentences taken directly from the book, for the most part using the exact language of the author should be avoided because it undermines original thinking. That is, summarizing is a good way to learn and to assimilate and explain material, but the process doesn't work especially well unless what is read and digested is translated into the student's own language, and that it is done in a way that makes sense to the student.

In addition, it is often best for students to present the summary in a manner that reflects the organization of the book, to write it as if the

entire book were to be viewed through the wrong end of a telescope. That is, since one of the purposes of a review is to demonstrate how effectively a book is organized, summarizing in such a micro-reflective way will help to achieve this. In other words, the presentation of a true but condensed picture of a book should include the way in which it is organized, although chapter-by-chapter summaries are to be avoided in favor of a unified essay that highlights significant features and narrative thrust.

Finally, summarizing a book, despite what some students might imagine, does not ordinarily enable the reviewer to provide a particularly incisive understanding of the contents as a collection of hypotheses or arguments based upon any number of suppositions.[1] Even our telling students that they must reach beyond summary into the realm of analysis is not enough in and of itself. Instead, in something akin to the directions that often accompany children's toys in need of assembling, we must offer guidelines that constitute a methodology that will help them to turn up the volume of their thinking.

The Critique

Students tend to be wary of undertaking a critique for several reasons. First, because they are neither professional historians nor experts in the subject matter of the book they are reading, students often assume such an assignment is beyond their level of knowledge. "How can I be critical of something I know nothing about?" is a common response. Second, since they have little or no experience with critical writing, they do not believe they possess such ability. Third, too often they have been allowed to get away with a level of thinking that is superficial, that places few demands on their intellect, that doesn't pressure them into trying harder. One of our jobs as teachers is to lead students forward, to show them how to do what appears beyond them, and that is what I try to accomplish with these instructions and the questions that follow.

To begin with, I make it clear, in the introductory paragraph to this section of my syllabus, just what a critique consists of—thoughts, responses, and reactions to what is read. Such a critique is not expected to be of a caliber similar to a professional historian's or to reflect an expertise not likely to exist—although, with experience, one can learn to review a book on the basis of one's general knowledge and one's ability to follow an argument or to test an hypothesis. I also try to dispel the notion that all criticism must be negative. In fact, I assure students, there is nothing wrong with having only positive things to say; the "trick" is to justify and support whatever position is taken.

What I do expect from students is a reaction to the book, but since not knowing what to react to is part of the problem, I present a significant number of questions that I encourage them to keep in mind before, during, and after the book is read. Collectively, these questions comprise the bait to lure students away from the security of inexperience and the easy way out, and toward developing their minds and critical thinking abilities. They are not, I insist, to be answered seriatim, taken like numbers in a store by customers waiting their turn to be served; in fact, there are many more here than any single review could hope to address. Instead, they are meant to prod, to prime intellectual pumps, to suggest avenues of exploration for those who are new to the domain of criticism. Teachers should review this list and choose to include as many as would be considered appropriate guides for their students. Students, in turn, should be instructed to select several of the most useful (say, five to seven for a three-page critique) on which to concentrate. Thus, answers to as many of the questions as are fitting should form part of a smooth-flowing essay, complete with topic sentences and transitions. Effective criticism, in other words, also involves writing that is clear and coherent.

1. What is your overall opinion of the book? On what basis has this opinion been formulated? That is, tell the reader what you think and how you arrived at this judgment. What did you expect to learn when you selected the book? To what extent—and how effectively—were your expectations met? Did you nod in agreement (or off to sleep)? Did you wish you could talk back to the author? Amplify upon and explain your reactions.
2. Identify the author's thesis and explain it in your own words. How clearly and in what context is it stated and, subsequently, developed? To what extent and how effectively (i.e., with what kind of evidence) is this thesis proven? Use examples to amplify your responses. If arguments or perspectives were omitted, why do you think this might have been allowed to occur?
3. What are the author's aims? How well have they been achieved, especially with regard to the way the book is organized? Are these aims supported or justified? (Aims are usually found in the preface or introduction to the book, or sometimes in the opening paragraphs of the first chapter. If they are not found, what does this tell you about the book and/or the author? Were you able to discern them anyway? If so, how?) How closely does the organization follow the author's aims, whether stated or implied?
4. How are the author's main points presented, explained, and supported? What assumptions lie behind these points? What would be the most effective way for you to compress and/or reorder the author's scheme of presentation and argument?

5. How effectively does the author draw generalizations from the material being presented? Are connections between generalizations and the supporting material and evidence made clearly and logically? Use examples to support your evaluation.

6. What conclusions does the author reach and how clearly are they stated? Do these conclusions follow from the thesis and aims and from the ways in which they were developed? In other words, how effectively does the book come together?

7. Identify the assumptions made by the author in both the approach to and the writing of the book. For example, what prior knowledge does the author expect readers to possess? How effectively are these assumptions worked into the overall presentation? What assumptions do you think should not have been made? Why?

8. Are you able to detect any underlying philosophy of history held by the author (e.g., progress, decline, cyclical, circular, linear, random)? If so, how does this philosophy affect the presentation of the argument? If not, what kind of thinking or attitudes appear to drive the author?

9. How does the author see history as being motivated: primarily by the forces of individuals, economics, politics, social factors, nationalism, class, race, gender, something else? What kind of impact does this view of historical motivation have upon the way in which the author develops the book?

10. Does the author's presentation seem fair and accurate? Is the interpretation biased? Can you detect any distortion, exaggeration, or diminishing of material? If so, for what purpose might this have been done and what effect does it have on the overall presentation?

11. Does the date of the book's publication vis-à-vis the content reveal anything about how the period in which it was written might have influenced its thesis? For example, books written during the Great Depression, or during World War II, or during the Cold War might be affected by prevailing attitudes or perceptions. In other words, since every age writes its own history, to what extent does the book reflect its time?

12. Does the author's nationality, gender, race, ethnicity, class, and/or age (to the extent these are known) affect the writing? Does the author acknowledge any obvious or not so obvious biases?

13. Does the material presented raise your curiosity about the subject, and is there anything especially distinctive about the book? Might the book have some impact upon the course of your educational or other pursuits? What are you most likely to remember about it in a week, a month, a year? Here, too, elaborate upon your responses.

14. Is there enough information in the book? Is the subject treated thoroughly or summarily? If you were the author's editor, what would you add to render the book more thorough and well rounded? What would you subtract that might be extraneous or distracting? Explain why you would take these actions.

15. Where and how does the book fit in relative to the content of the course for which it was read? Does it add or contradict anything you read in other books or texts or what was discussed in class? How would you explain, and possibly resolve, these differences?

16. How well is the book written? If you wish to use quotations to illustrate a particular style or point, keep them short, preferably no more than one sentence.

17. If the book includes graphic material (e.g., pictures, charts, diagrams, appendices), how easy are these to follow or read? Are they referred to in the narrative? If so, are they used to enhance both the text and your understanding? If you had difficulty utilizing this material, explain why.

18. How useful are the footnotes (or endnotes) to you as a reader? If you made use of them, explain how. If more than just source citations are included in these notes, what purpose do they serve?

19. What is the quality of the bibliography provided? With the book's date of publication in mind, does the author seem familiar and up to date with the literature in the field? Upon what kinds of sources does the author seem to depend? What kind of primary and secondary sources? To what degree are you impressed by the use of these sources, and why?

20. If you had occasion to make use of the index, how easy was it to use and how useful was it in finding what you were looking for? Did you find any subjects missing?

Armed with these questions—veritable written stimulants to reflection—students have more than enough direction with which to formulate and organize a critical book review. Ignorance as to how to proceed cannot be an excuse, and better students can use this direction to be creative. It even becomes possible for students to develop skills whereby they are able to integrate summary and critique in a way that discourages these two components from being presented as separate and distinct.

Moreover, by being aware of and thinking about these questions, students can learn to read more critically and to think about what historians do and why they do it. Every bit as important, learning to think and write critically in history can be carried over into their work in other disciplines, just as it also can, in general, further their development as educated and thinking citizens.

Without the experience of writing critical book reviews, students are likely to think the task is beyond their ability. But with these signposts in the form of directions and questions to guide their thinking, many dis-

cover and develop in ways hitherto unknown to them. To the extent it works—and it has worked effectively for my students, especially as I have refined these instructions over the years—the experience becomes both a profitable and exciting exercise.

Note

1. For an excellent look at how to teach students to analyze works of history critically, see Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., "Demystifying Historical Authority: Critical Textual Analysis in the Classroom," in *History Anew: Innovations in the Teaching of History Today*, edited by Robert Blackey (Long Beach: The University Press, California State University, Long Beach, 1993).

An Alternative Approach to the Discussion Class

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AMONG COLLEGE TEACHERS there often exists a rather dreamy, utopian vision of the history discussion class.[1] In this familiar fantasy, students sit in an Arthurian circle. The instructor opens the discussion with an appropriately general question—for example, asking the students to express their "reaction" to a reading, to compare historical events to contemporary ones, or simply to define a term, such as slavery. The students then share their thoughts in an air of equality before an instructor who is there more to observe than to judge. An enlightening and exciting interchange of ideas ensues.

Every utopia is, inevitably, someone's dystopia, and, as a student, I quite often found this model of the discussion class somewhat less than ideal. Mine was, in fact, a common student reaction. The practical application of the utopian discussion method seldom generated enlightening interchanges. The more common experience was that of a student entering a classroom eager for information but leaving unsatisfied, having been forced to kill an hour or so listening to other students politely compare historical readings to current events. The instructor, measuring success solely by the volume of comments, never seemed to "get it." The final indictment of the discussion class could be found in the blank pages of spiral notebooks, tacit evidence that students found little of value in the proceedings.