BOOK REVIEW

What is the purpose a book review? You won't find a simple answer. There are many different types of book reviews with somewhat different purposes. They appear in newspapers (*Beaumont Enterprise*), popular magazines (*Newsweek*), scholarly journals (*Journal of American History, The Historian*), and in specialized review publications (*New York Review of Books, Choice,* or *History: Reviews of New Books*).

All book reviews exist to tell the reader something substantial about the book and so spare the reader from having to read it themselves. As a result of reading the review, the reader may want to buy the book and read it, check it out from the library and read it, buy it for a library so that the library patrons can read it, or ignore the book because its subject is of no interest or because its quality is poor.

The audience for book reviews will vary by publication. Newspapers and popular magazines publish book reviews to let their readers know about important or interesting new titles. They are aimed at a popular audience and review works of fiction and non-fiction that are often not at all scholarly in intent.

Some publications are a bit more highbrow than others. *New Republic, New York Review of Books, TLS [Times Literary Supplement],* and *New York Times Book Review* tend to publish more scholarly reviews with a decidedly intellectual flavor. Of course, it is important to keep in mind that reviews appearing in the *New York Review of Books* often spend more time talking about the book reviewer's ideas on the subject than the ideas in the book.

Other book reviews are written to tell librarians about new books. These reviews generally are very short, providing a brief (100-200 words) description of the contents of the book and an evaluation.

Finally there are scholarly reviews of books. These appear in scholarly journals. Such reviews are 500 to 1,500 words in length. They basically evaluate the books for other members of the profession. Book reviews written for this class will follow the pattern of a scholarly review.

A book review is not a summary of the contents of a book. Book reports summarize contents and they belong in high school. A good book review is a commentary on the book. That means that it analyses, evaluates, and judges the contents of the book.

10 Key Points

Here's a list of 10 key points to look for when reading a book for the purpose of reviewing it.

1) Find the author's point of view. This is often clearly stated in the introduction or preface.

2) Identify the author's major hypothesis, point, or contention. There may be more than one or there may be a main one accompanied by several lesser but still important hypotheses. Again, most authors will state their point or hypothesis in the introduction and the conclusion of their book.

3) What types of evidence does the author use? Look at the footnotes, endnotes, and bibliography.

4) How is the book organized to present its argument? Is the organization effective?

5) How does the author use the evidence presented in the book? Is the evidence sufficient, is it convincing, is it appropriate, etc?

6) Is the author's point of view appropriate? Is there a discernible bias? Is the author objective? Is the author true to that point of view in the way the book has been written? Always remember to respect how the author wrote the book, as long as it is appropriate. Do not criticize an author for writing a book (or article) differently from how you would have written it. If you feel so strongly about it, write it yourself.

7) How does the book fit in to the existing literature? Are there other books on this topic? Is the book revising them, enhancing them, or contradicting them, etc? Or is this book unique?

8) Based on the organization, argumentation, and evidence presented, do you find that the book contains a convincing argument?

9) If possible, compare the book with other books on similar topics.

10) Do you recommend this book to others? Why or why not? Comment on readability, whether the book grabbed your interest, was it useful, etc.

The Structure of a Book Review

I. Supply a brief summary or overview of the book's hypotheses and contents.

II. Assess the nature and the quality of the evidence presented.

III. Compare the work with similar titles.

IV. Comment on the author's presentation: organization, writing style, illustrations, tables, bibliography, index.

V. Conclusion with final assessment and recommendation to readers.

Other Important Issues

When reviewing a book, there are several other key words that can guide your efforts. Ask yourself, what is the author's purpose for writing this book? That question encompasses both point of view and hypothesis. Ask yourself, what is the scope of the book? That question deals with what the book is about. What is its subject (person, time period, place, etc.)?

It is also important to know something about the author. The keyword for this is authority. What is the author's authority? Does the author have expertise or a reputation in the subject? Beginning students will know little or nothing about the authors they are reading. That is why it is a good idea to look them up and learn about them. All the people on your reading list are well known and significant historians who are the subjects of entries in biographical reference works.

Beginning students do not know where a book fits into to the historical literature. One way to quickly find out where it fits in is to locate book reviews written by other scholars. How do they evaluate the book and why? Where do they say it fits? Their word is not necessarily gospel. Be sure you find good scholarly reviews, not simple library selection reviews, which are too short and lack detail for this purpose.

Remember, when writing your review, you audience is your classmates and your professors.

Your book review should be 3-4 pages long. Provide complete bibliographic information at the front, i.e., author's name, title, place of publication, publisher, year of publication, pages. Put your name at the end of the review. Look at various reviews published in scholarly journals and see how they do it.

Your Book Review is due on the date stipulated in the syllabus.

Special Instructions
for Spring 2010 Semester

You have already read *Martin Luther* by Martin Marty.   If you haven't, then read it now.   For your book review, you will read a biography of another late fifteenth or sixteenth-century individual. By reading another biography, you will be able to make comparisons and draw contrasts between the two people. You have plenty of choices. Some of the candidates for your biography are religious leaders. Others are royalty, nobles, soldiers, or explorers. During the course of writing your book review, you should consider these sorts of comparisons:

1) What was the social background of the two individuals and how were they similar or different?

2) How do the childhoods and families of the two individuals compare?

3) What were the educational experiences of the two individuals?

4) How do the two careers of these individuals compare in terms of success or failure?

5) What are the historical significances of the two people?

6) How did the personalities of the two people compare?

Not all of these comparisons will be relevant for every biography. These six are merely suggestions. If you think of other good aspects to compare, please include them in your biography. Feel free to use your imagination. Otherwise follow the more detailed instructions for reviewing a book that have been provided.

Books to Consider for Review

Bainton, Roland. *Erasmus of Christendom.* (1969).

Bainton, Roland. *Hunted Heretic: The Life and Death of Michael Servetus, 1511-1553.* (1964).

Bainton, Roland. *The Travail of Religious Liberty.* (1951).

Bainton, Roland. *Women of the Reformation in France and England.* (1973).

Bainton, Roland. *Women of the Reformation in Germany and Italy.* (1974).

Blockmans, Wim.   *Emperor Charles V: 1500-1558.* (2001).

Bouwsma, William J.   *John Calvin: A Sixteenth-Century Portrait.* (1989).

Brandi, Karl.   *The Emperor Charles V: The Growth and Destiny of a Man and of a World-Empire.* (1939)

Buisseret, David.   *Henry IV: King of France.* (1984).

Cottret, Bernard.   *Calvin: A Biography.* (2000).

Donnelly, John Patrick.   *Ignatius of Loyola: Founder of the Jesuits.* (2003).

Edwards, John.   *Ferdinand and Isabella.* (2005).

Evans, R. J. W.   *Rudolf II and His World: A Study in Intellectual History 1576-1612.* (1984).

Gordon, F. Bruce.   *Calvin.* (2009).

Greschat, Martin and Stephen E. Buckwalter.   *Martin Bucer: A Reformer and His Times.* (2004).

Fichtner, Paula Sutter.   *Emperor Maximilian II.* (2001).

Hughes, Philip Edgcumbe.   *Lefevre: Pioneer of Ecclesiastical Renewal in France.* (1984).

Huizinga, Johan.   *Erasmus and the Age of Reformation* (1924, English translation, 1957).

Kamen, Henry.   *Philip of Spain.* (1997).

Kelley, Donald R.   *Francois Hotman: A Revolutionary's Ordeal.* (1973).

Knecht, R. J.   *Catherine de' Medici.* (1998).

Knecht, R. J.   *Francis I* (1982).

Maltby, William S.   *The Reign of Charles V.* (2004).

Manschreck, Clyde L.   *Melanchthon: The Quiet Reformer.* (1958).

Markwald, Rudolf K. and Marilyn Morris Markwald.   *Katherina von Bora: A Reformation Life.* (2002).

Midelfort, H. C. Erik.   *Mad Princes of Renaissance Germany.* (1994).

Parker, Geoffrey.   *Philip II* . (1979 and later editions).

Parker, T. H, L.   *John Calvin: A Biography.* (2007).

Potter, G. R. *Zwingli.* (1976).

Raitt, Jill, ed. *Shapers of Religions Traditions in Germany, Switzerland, and Poland, 1560-1600.* (1981).

Tracy, James D. *Erasmus of the Low Countries.* (1997).

Wedgwood, C. V. *William the Silent: William of Nassau, Prince of Orange 1533-1584.* (1944).

Walker, Williston. *John Calvin: The Organizer of Reformed Protestantism, 1509-1564.* (1906).

Wendel, Francois. *Calvin: Origins and Development of His Religious Thought.* (1950, English translation, 19630.

Wright, D. F. *Martin Bucer: Reforming Church and Community.* (2002).

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http://www.corndancer.com/fritze/reformation/refmaton_mapqz.html