

How To Do a Book Review

Annette F. Timm

I What is a history book?

Before beginning, think about what an author is trying to accomplish in writing a book of history. This may seem obvious, but if you think about it, it isn't always. The answer will help you to review the book. How does the author go about accomplishing his/her goals? There are several component parts to this question:

- 1) **goal or intention** of book – who is the audience? what is the book setting out to do?
- 2) **thesis/ argument** → not always same as goal – sometimes explicitly historiographical – must be transparent in review → ask what is author setting out to do?
- 3) **structure** → more than just chapters – on which different levels does the argument take place? i.e. social, political, economic (the most obvious type) – also personal vs. political
– this is the author's strategy for making his/her case – does book cover what reader might expect?
– you can mention division of chapters, but don't just summarize them one after the other
- 4) **theory** → not always visible or even conscious – a good review sees it no matter what
– theory much more important for some authors than for others
– even those that deny they have a theory sometimes do (implicit)
– theory is the underlying assumptions that are central to the construction of the argument (theory in historical writing now becoming more and more explicit, more important)
– previously most common theory Marxian, now a large variety (Foucault, Habermas, state theory, gender theory, cultural theory etc. etc.)
- 5) **sources** → evidence (archival, biographical, newspapers, etc.) – how handled? what kinds of material does the author use?
– have to look in footnotes to figure this out (though sometimes author states in introduction or preface)
primary vs. secondary sources: primary sources are documents produced during the period the historian is exploring (anything from government documents, to books, newspapers, diaries, etc.)
secondary sources are things written by current historians about the same topic
- 6) **style** – most books well-written, but not always – academia has strange mechanisms of quality control
– if style gets in the way of your understanding the argument, then this should be noted
– tone also important – appropriate for audience? (i.e. too arrogant, or too condescending?)

II What is a book review?

Before writing, ask yourself why book reviews are done – what are they trying to achieve? For which audience?

- 1) virtually all book reviews (academic or not) are written to help people determine whether or not they should read the book. A full summary of book not necessary. The reader just needs to know what the book is actually about to make a judgment about whether it is worth reading.
- 2) book reviews are commonly used by all scholars to get a handle on fields outside of their own specialties – so they have some idea about the major arguments going on elsewhere – don't have time to read it all
– readers of reviews realize that they can't master the *content* of the book without reading it themselves
– just want to know if the argument the book makes is interesting.... does the book contribute something worthwhile? Will the book be controversial?

III Elements of a Book Review

- 1) Put full citation for book at head of the review.
- 2) State the author's intentions/audience in the first paragraph of your review. Go back to this point in your conclusion (was the goal achieved?).
- 3) Evaluate, make critical comments on work.
Note: critical does not have to mean negative. If you've gone through all the elements of the book mentioned above, then you *have* critically analyzed the book.
Important: you must take a stand – do not be shy about making an argument.
- 4) In the process of point 3 above, use brief paraphrases or citations from the book. Block quotes (longer than three lines) are not necessary – They take up too much space in a short review.
- 5) Compare the book to works by others. Use other reviews to help you find things (and article indexes like "Historical Abstracts" to find reviews). How does this book fit into a social or historiographical trend?
- 6) If you can, relate the work to other works by same author. This can be as simple as looking in the card catalogue. Sometimes trends in the personal development of the author are interesting.
- 7) Style/format of book: comment on this if noticeably good or noticeably bad.

IV Check List for a Book Review – Suggestions of things to focus on

* **Note:** not all of the points below will be relevant for all books!

- 1) General Field – where does the book fit in its general field?
- 2) Purpose: why written? → find this in preface, or introduction
- 3) Title: sometimes title of the book is in itself interesting. Maybe it doesn't seem to fit the book? If something is glaring here talk about it, otherwise leave it out.
- 4) Contents – type of book → examples:
 - descriptive – mood creating
 - narrative – fundamentally chronological organization – events in a sequence of time
 - expository – thesis, argument – often mainly historiographicalquestion to ask: what are the main ideas, how are they developed/organized?
- 5) Authority – how does author prove the thesis? things to look at here:
 - a) Author's ideas:
 - key words, terms concepts defined? internal consistency of ideas? how well developed?
 - b) Area covered:
 - conscious methodology? oversights? biases? omissions?
 - c) use of sources:
 - new? how gathered? how reliable? new interpretation of primary sources? new primary sources?
 - critical examination of all secondary sources? good documentation?
- 6) Style:
 - simple? technical? clear? turgid? economical? lucid? wordy?....
 - does the style chosen fit the intended audience?
- 7) Significance of work in field
 - Note: footnotes may help you here: what new questions does author bring up? has there been further work in field since book was written? what further work needs to be done on subject?

V Organization

- 1) Beginning: start with something that catches the reader's attention – can be anecdote from book, could be part of the check list above (i.e. importance of book in field...)
- 2) Development – description/evaluation
 - think carefully about how you will structure your review (i.e. don't follow the author's chapter outline)
 - when possible explain why author wrote as he/she did (goal, intention)
 - sometimes useful to relate one part of above check list to another (i.e. the author's bias affected the choice of sources in a negative way)
- 3) Conclusion – end on a strong note
 - don't start talking about minor matters here (i.e. typographical errors)
 - try to end with your assessment of strengths and weaknesses of book
 - relate this to your opening remarks (did the author meet the stated goals? prove thesis? add to our knowledge in a significant way?)

VI Writing - Technical Points

- 1) **Quotations**, when they are from the book you are reviewing, should be followed by the page number in brackets i.e.: (p. 24).
- 2) **Footnotes**, in proper style (See **Essay Guide** at <http://hist.ucalgary.ca/undergraduate>) Should be used for cited arguments from other authors.

VII Writing and Style

Follow general style and writing tips available at web site: www.hist.ucalgary.ca/atimm