

Better Read than Dead: Writing a Good Book Review

“This is not a novel to be tossed aside lightly. It should be thrown with great force.” So the American writer Dorothy Parker allegedly wrote of a book whose title is now lost to time. While Parker had little respect for this forgotten book, the opposite is true of the genre she lambasted it in: the book review.

While few reviewers are as uncharitable as Parker, all well-written book reviews perform a similar function: to assess a volume that others either haven’t had the chance to read or to provide a new perspective on a text they have. Even Parker’s review does this, albeit negatively, informing the reader of all the reviewed book’s flaws.

Review Writing Basics

Clarity, brevity, style—all of these matter greatly for book reviews. But above all else, you must identify the book’s significance. *Do not just provide a summary of its contents.* A book review must convince the reader of something about the text. In other words, you must have a thesis statement and argument. To do this, highlight what you learned from the text. Strive to address questions like this:

- What arguments and interventions did the author make? Were they cogent?
- Did the author’s disciplinary background strengthen or weaken the argument?
- What sorts of sources did the author use?
- What was the author’s methodology? Did it help or harm the author’s case?
- How might the argument be different if a different type of historian had written the book?

While you may note that the author is a wonderful prose-stylist—that the narrative was gripping and kept you up past midnight—these elements alone will not convince a reader to pick up the book. Libraries are full of beautifully written books, many of which are covered in dust. Why should the reader care about the book you are reviewing?

Reasonable Criticism

This does not mean that you must like the book. You could even hate it. Parker clearly did. Pointing out the interpretative limitations, faulty assumptions, or flawed methodology of a book can be helpful *if you provide your reasons for thinking this.* Ask yourself how the author might have fixed the problem. Good reviews bring up issues; great reviews provide solutions, too.

Regardless, you should always be fair. Don’t judge a book by what it is not: the book you would have written. Determine what the author set out to achieve and judge a book by those standards. You will still provide a thoughtful assessment—be it laudatory or critical—but one that highlights the book’s potential rather than trashes it. Besides, someday you might write a book that deserves to be tossed aside lightly.