

How I write a book review

Gwen Adshead

Somerset Maugham (1951) described three categories of readers; those who read for pleasure (which is innocent), those who read for instruction (which is praiseworthy) and those who read from habit (which is neither innocent nor praiseworthy). I guess I would fit happily into any of these categories; so getting a book to read and review is nearly always enjoyable. Every book is a challenge; each one potentially exciting. In describing my method of book reviewing, I must advise the reader straight away there are many ways of reviewing a book and 'method' is perhaps a bold term for what I do.

As a reviewer, I tend to start with some of the physical qualities of the book. To me, as a reader, the print size and the font are very important. The quality of paper is also important. Small things niggle, and can put me off an otherwise good book. For example, I prefer chapters with titles, and if possible references at the end of each chapter.

The most important thing for me to grasp is the author's argument. I am almost less interested in the author's conclusions than how they explain them. How is the argument laid out and can this be followed by the average reader?

Having got a sense of what the book is physically like, and established the author's drift, I tend to start (rather idiosyncratically) with the acknowledgements. This is often an excellent way to get a flavour of the author's approach; dry and dusty or lively and literate. Some authors thank everyone they have ever met in a somewhat dispiriting alphabetical list that goes from Aarvold to Waterstone; other authors, in describing their acknowledgement, give an interesting picture of the journey they have taken in creating their book. If they happen to be writing about a world that I know well, I can think whether I would have approached the subject in the same way.

I then embark on reading. If the book is good I am likely to read it all the way through. If I am not enjoying it then I will probably dip in here and there. A lot depends on the question of style. Some people are blessed with a really fluent style; conversational in tone, but academic in its

precision. This is hard, but not impossible, to achieve; and it may be improved by practice. Poor writing styles are much more common and the reviewer needs to try and not be too affected by this. I can think of one or two excellent books which were written in an awful style, but well worth the effort required for reading.

So much for the reading; what about writing the review? Now I must put my ideas into practice; more so because I try to get over the gist of a lengthy book in maybe less than 500 words. In reading other people's reviews, I like some context and evidence of original thought by the reviewer. Listing the contents chapter by chapter is dull and uninformative. It is important to be accurate if you quote from the text. Rude sniping (if one dislikes the book) is unhelpful; measured criticism combined with tolerance is more interesting, helpful and generates fewer feelings of revenge.

The point of a review is to get across, in clear and even entertaining prose:

- (a) what the book is about;
- (b) whether it was comprehensible to you, the reviewer;
- (c) your likes, dislikes and reasons;
- (d) who, if any one, should buy the book.

It is a privilege to read other people's hard work and be invited to share your own views with others. It is said that everyone has one book in them; perhaps for every book there is at least one review waiting to be written, and a reviewer waiting to have their say.

Reference

MAUGHAM, S. (1951) The book bag. In *Collected Short Stories*. Pp. 5–46. London: Mandarin.

Gwen Adshead, *Honorary Senior Lecturer/Consultant in Forensic Psychotherapy, Broadmoor Hospital, Crowthorne, Berkshire and Traumatic Stress Clinic, 17 Charlotte Street, London W1P 1LB*