Writing Theological Book Reviews

Introduction

Whether your future vocation is in the academy or the church, it is important to become familiar with significant books in your field. Having insight into a book is more than being able to summarize its contents. It is essential to be able to critically analyse the argument of any given book. Writing book reviews can be a profitable pathway towards developing the skills of critical reading and expressing your ideas in a clear and succinct manner. On a more practical level, Basic Degree students sometimes write book reviews as part of their course requirements and Advanced Degree students write them as their first step into the world of publishing. This guide suggests some basic steps for writing book reviews.

1. Prepare to Read and Review

Before you begin to read the book, think about the following:

**Purpose**: The aim of a book review is to summarize its contents and give a fair appraisal of its merit. One author has described a book review as "a really honest advertisement." (Thornton in *Theology* 65 (October 1962), 397).

**Audience**: Is this review a class assignment or a submission to a publication? This will affect the aim of your review, the elements of the book that you highlight and the way you express your thoughts. Whatever the case may be, make sure that you know the expectations of your readers. Ask professors and publications to provide clear guidelines for book reviews.

**Preliminary Sections**: What does the title suggest about the point that the author wants to make? Read the preface for clues to the author's argument, theological biases and methodology. Study the table of contents for the author's main ideas and how s/he presents them.

**Field or Genre**: A knowledge of where this book fits into the "big picture" is essential. The author's intention is to make a significant contribution to a particular field of research. Knowledge of the discipline may give insight as to where the author stands on key debates within the area. For instance, the author may represent one perspective within a particular area in theology and biblical studies. Awareness of this fact will help the reviewer discern the author's biases as well as evaluate his or her contribution.

2. Read the Book

As you read the book, do the following:

**Read Critically**: Be a vigilant reader, not a casual observer. To do an effective book review one should be aware of the author's agenda and how s/he promotes that agenda.
Determine the author's thesis: The author usually makes this apparent within the preface or introduction of the work. The thesis statement is like an opening argument in a criminal trial. You, like a jury, are required to judge the validity of this argument as the book unfolds.

Analyse the author's argument: As the book evolves, the author will attempt to persuade the reader to accept his or her initial thesis statement. Your task is to determine whether the author has argued his or her case in a logical and accurate manner.

Weigh the evidence presented: To support his or her argument, the author will provide evidence from a number of sources, i.e., the Bible, ancient historians, archaeology, etc. The reviewer must evaluate the evidence on a number of fronts (accuracy, currency, relation to author's argument and the author's use of).

Acknowledge the author's biases: Every author has his or her preconceived notions. You need to recognize these presuppositions and note how they influence the overall argument.

Assess the author's presentation: An important part of successful communication is presentation of information. To assess a book properly the reviewer must consider its style and editing (grammar, spelling, typographical accuracy), its format (illustrations, index, bibliography, footnotes) and whether the writing was understandable.

Take Effective and Useful Notes: Your notes need not be unwieldy, but you should have enough information to write an accurate review. Your notes should reflect the steps of the previous section. Here are a few suggestions to make your note-taking more effective:

Make a flow chart of the author's argument: This can be done in a pictorial or written form. Begin with the author's thesis and as the book proceeds, show the progression of the argument. As well, note the evidence cited at each point in the argument. This will help you to be cognizant of the author's thesis and the way that his or her argument corroborates that thesis.

Record significant quotes to cite in your review: Do not engage in painstaking copying of the work, but note key statements made at crucial junctures in the book.

Tally the number of obvious errors: Keep track of spelling, typographical or grammatical errors since they indicate careless writing and editing.

3. Organize Your Thoughts

You may feel somewhat overwhelmed by the amount of information that you have about this particular book. So much so that you may not know where to begin in writing the review. To make the transition from researching to writing it is essential to organics your thoughts.

Establish the thesis of your review: It is important to unify your research on the book into a statement that describes your overall impression of it. This statement will be the central point that you wish to convey to the readers of your review.
Outline the arguments that support your thesis: By drafting an outline of your review you will establish the major points of your argument about this book. This outline will enable you to organize your information.

4. Write the Review

After reading, researching and organizing your thoughts, you are ready to begin to write the first draft of the review.

Record the preliminary information: List the complete bibliographical citation for the book (full title, author, place, publisher, date of publication, edition, pages, special features, price and ISBN).

Write a compelling introduction: The opening sentence should capture the reader's attention and state your thesis.

Present your argument: Flowing out of your thesis statement will be supporting arguments that will be the essence of your review. Furthermore, the points of your argument should be supported by summary or citation of the book's contents. In assessing a work properly, it is important to represent it fairly.

Make your conclusion: If your thesis has been well argued, this should be the logical end of your review. This could include a recommendation on the value of the work.

Revise your draft: Carefully proof-read your review and allow others to read and respond to it.

5. Additional Resources

This document is not intended to be an exhaustive guide to book reviewing, so if you want to learn more consider these helpful resources.

Books and Journal Articles

On the Web

Numerous universities have outstanding web pages with links to their libraries. Many libraries have excellent research guides on book reviewing. Here are some sites to visit:

- Queen's University Library
- Indiana University