

How to Write a Book Review

The purpose of a book review in the most basic sense is to convey to the reader what the book is about and whether it is worth reading or not. A good book review expands upon these two areas.

When describing the book the following should be included:

- **The vital statistics:** the title, author, publisher, price, paperback or hardback, length, illustrations, if it has been translated
- **The type of material:** fiction, nonfiction, essay, poetry, biography
- **The contents:** describe what the book is about, the plot, its purpose, its organization
- **Information about the author:** what they have written before, other prominent work, their qualifications
- **A quoted passage:** to allow the reader to see important information and a sense of the writer's style.

When providing judgment of the book it should be followed by the reason why that judgment was made. It should provide enough support for the reader to decide whether or not they want to read or buy the book. The following are examples of what to make judgments on:

- **Intent or purpose:** how well the author realized their intent or fulfilled the purpose of the book
- **Relevancy:** if the book is relevant to the real world and our time
- **Accuracy:** whether the book works or fails based on its accuracy or errors
- **Uniqueness:** comment on the unique qualities of the book
- **Audience:** a comment on the intended audience of the book or its appeal to other potential readers

In addition to these general features, fiction and nonfiction book reviews should also include the following:

Fiction

- **Describe the setting:** a level of society, a period in history, or a city, country or region
- **Plot:** its strengths and weaknesses, if it will keep a reader interested
- **Illustrate the characters:** are they relatable, do they seem real
- **State the theme**
- **Length:** is the book well edited, in that it is not excessively long or overwritten

Nonfiction

- **Author:** their qualifications to write on the selected topic, their style, point of view
- **Sources:** what are the sources; personal, primary, secondary
- **Major points and issues:** what are the main points and the extent and thoroughness with which they are covered
- **Conclusion:** did the author fulfill their purpose and provide a good conclusion
- **Audience:** is it for the general public or a specialized group

With all of these features that should be included there are also a few things to avoid when writing a book review.

- Writing a review that is merely a plot summary and nothing more
- Having the opinion overshadow the discussion of the book itself
- Telling the reader what to think instead of showing them
- Reviewing the book he or she wishes was written instead of the book that was written
- Personal prejudices based on extraneous factors that distort a reviewer's judgment

- Conveying hostility toward the author or the subject

The next point is expressed by book reviewers as the worst thing to do in a book review.

- Never use the review as a way to present personal ideas or theories, the book review is about the book and how well the author fulfilled their purpose.

The following are suggestions on how to make a good book review a great one:

- The writer should have a dash of originality, capacity for felicitous use of language, a strong sense of organization and of course a readable, correctly spelled and punctuated document.
- The style of the review should be conversational with rhythm in phrasing, using uncommon words and vivid images to help express ideas.
- The writer of the review must have their own point of view, their own voice.
- Reviewers need to know their audience. This helps determine the emphasis of the review and the point to make.
- Reviewers should have the skill to articulate clearly what they think and why they think it.
- Reviewers must work to achieve fairness, objectivity, accuracy, and sensitivity.
- William McPherson defines a good review, “But to suggest how a book is put together, why it works or fails to work, to demonstrate its accuracy or reveal its errors, to bring some illuminating insight to the whole, is to say a great deal-especially in a thousand words. If, in addition, a reviewer tells us with seeming careless ease something about how the language works, how our minds work, and how society works while keeping his focus on the book in question, you have the best in book reviewing.” (pg. 72)

Reference

Kammerman, Sylvia, ed. *Book Reviewing: a guide to writing book reviews for newspapers, magazines, radio, and television-by leading book editors, critics, and reviewers*. Boston: The Writer, Inc., 1978.

Book Review Example

Title, Author, Publisher, & Year →

THE CONTEMPORARY TEA HOUSE:
JAPAN'S TOP ARCHITECTS REDEFINE A TRADITION
By Arata Isozaki, Tadao Ando & Terunobu Fujimori. Tokyo: Kodansha. 2007

Introduction

A quoted passage →

There can be few building forms more laden with cultural significance than the Japanese Tea House. Indeed, the authors of this publication assert that it is “the most important architectural form ... perhaps for all contemporary architecture.” For the Western observer, however, the arcane practices of the “tea ceremony”, steeped in ritual and historic continuity, may merely head a list of exotic cultural stereotypes that serve to confirm the ‘otherness’ of Japan. This, therefore, is an important publication.

← Why the book is relevant to a specific audience

Body

Description of book's content →

Presented as essays written by the architects responsible, it selects 20 contemporary examples to demonstrate the Tea House's enduring importance. All are exquisite, some extraordinary – such as Terunobu Fujimori's design balanced 6m high on two tree trunks. The choice of materials is often daring and original – for instance, charcoal and firewood vaulted ceilings – and their detailing exemplary. As might be expected from this publisher, each is lavishly photographed, and the architects recount their design intention accompanied by selections of the original design sketches. In all, this book conveys a very clear picture of these Tea Houses' physical form.

← A mention of the quality from this publisher

Describes the quality of the images →

The challenge must be to place the Tea House in context, to move beyond the physical and discover the enduring human values that these buildings are designed to satisfy. This has been attempted before, notably by Heinrich Engel in *The Japanese House*, 1964. He fashioned a powerful thesis, arguing that the Tea House, and its adoption across a wide spectrum of Japanese society, showed the essential humanising role of architecture to create an environment that protects that defining human characteristic – self-reflection. A fierce polemicist, building on meticulous research, he concluded that the absence of a comparable space within Western architectural tradition demonstrated that “while man learned to master the art of building he forgot the art of living.”

← The value of this book in comparison to another on the same topic

Conclusion

Conclusion with judgment →

In this publication one of the architects contributes an introductory essay but treads an uncertain path between historical fact, procedural detail and cultural values. It accordingly lacks the clarity of argument necessary to convincingly step outside the pragmatic and expose the enduring, universal human values that this architectural form nurtures. This book is a valuable and sincere work, but to engage truly with the Tea House's unique enduring value in modern society the reader may also need to look elsewhere. SIMON PILLING

Pilling, Simon. Review of *The Contemporary Tea House: Japan's Top Architects Redefine a Tradition*, by Arata Isozaki, Tadao Ando & Terunobu Fujimori. *Architectural Review* 223 (May 2008): 94.

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