What is an Interpretive Book Review?

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1. **What it is not.** An "interpretive book review" is *not* a "book report." It may, like a report, provide a synopsis of the book author's main points, arguments, and evidence, but it must go far beyond that.

2. **An interpretive review is commentary.** It must comment on the book author's points, arguments, and evidence. It must reflect on the validity of the author's point-of-view (and, no, not every point of view is valid), and it must evaluate the author's claims. Does she make her case? Does she provide convincing evidence to back up her claims? Has she left out significant evidence that applies to her subject?

3. **The broader context.** In addition to the *internal* criticism mentioned above, an interpretive book review must look outside the book and see it and its author in a broader context. Others have certainly written on the same or similar topics, so how does the present book compare or differ from them? Is there something about the author's education or background that relates to her historical opinions? Is the author following a fad or a fashion in historical debate? Often an author will tell you at least some of these things in her introduction. Sometimes you will need to look in a few more books for the answers.

4. **Specific tips and instructions.** The following may be of use to you as you prepare your review.
(a). Pay close attention to footnotes or endnotes as you read. They contain references to the evidence the author used to support the sentence or paragraph in question. Think of a piece of historical writing as if it were a case in court and you are a member of the jury. You will either be convinced or not based on the evidence presented.

(b). Without actually examining the evidence the author used, it is difficult to evaluate whether or not it was used carefully and honestly. However, a few hints may be of some use. First, note what kind of source was cited in the note. If it is a primary source (i.e., an original document) then conclusions drawn from it carry more weight than those drawn from secondary sources (i.e., books or articles by other historians). Next, consider whether or not the source cited could plausibly be sufficient evidence for the claim or assertion the note is trying to back up. Lastly, if the author has indulged in long passages without citing her sources, she is at least guilty of poor scholarship; perhaps she is guilty of intellectual dishonesty.

(c). Always read the author's introduction, preface, forward, and acknowledgements very carefully. These important parts of most scholarly books contain vital clues and hints concerning the author's point of view, purpose, ideas, and intellectual origins.

(d). It is always important to pay attention to an author's credentials. Academic training, institutional affiliation, and other professional associations are important elements in determining whether or not an author is credible.

(e). Likewise, the book's publisher plays an important role in the quality of the book's scholarship. Academic publishers such as university presses and certain commercial presses that specialize in academic books (W.W. Norton, Greenwood, Twayne, etc.) follow certain procedures to assure that the books they publish are sound scholarly works. It is almost universal that such publishers send prospective book manuscripts (with the author's name removed) to other scholars in the author's field for comment and criticism. Such works are then said to have been peer reviewed. Academic
presses place great importance on this kind pre-publication review. Books published by purely commercial presses such as TimeWarner, Random House, and the like, do not necessarily follow such rigorous procedures. Often, the salability of the book is more important than its validity as careful and accurate scholarship.

(f). When a book was published is also important. Perspectives in history change. Points of view very often depend upon social and political realities of an author's time and place. A book on Nazis, for instance, written in the United States in 1944, will have a point of view that a book on a similar topic published in 1980 would not have.

(g). The following structure for your review may prove useful.

I. Introduce the book and its general topic (one paragraph).

II. Provide a brief synopsis of the author's main points, arguments, theses, and narrative (three or four paragraphs).

III. Comment on and criticize the three or four most important points or arguments.

IV. Comment on the author's qualifications, credentials, and intellectual affiliations.

V. Comment on the book's place in the larger context of scholarship on similar topics.

VI. Conclude with final comments on the book's value, purpose, and usefulness.

None of these components (except the first and the last) need be kept entirely separate. They could be woven subtly together.

(h). At the top of your review papers, please place a complete bibliographic citation to the book your are reviewing. It

(i). Please type your review, double-spaced, with at least one inch margins on all sides. Instead of using a cover page, simply place your name, the course number and term (ex.: Hst 456 W08), and the professor's name, in the upper-right-hand corner of the first page (above the bibliographic citation). Do not use any kind of cover or folder. Instead, staple or clip pages together. Number all pages after the first in the upper-right-hand corner.