

Thinking about Book Reviews

by Heidi Greco

We probably all have memories of Grade Five or so when we might have been asked to do a book report. Worse yet, it might have been something we had to read aloud to our class. Those of us who have always been readers probably sometimes noticed classmates who had clearly *not* read the book—often only copying out the descriptive blurb meant to tease a person into buying the book.

Thankfully, those days are behind us, and we can consider the many differences between a book report and a book review.

While a report often meant a brief plot summary, along perhaps with a kind of rating about the book, a review needs to go beyond those boundaries.

In general, a review needs to introduce readers to just enough detail that they'll understand who and what are the heart of a book without giving too much away. After all, the point of a review is generally to lure readers into wanting to track down the book, not to tell them so much they don't need to bother reading a title for themselves. So, how does a reviewer accomplish this task?

Points to consider

I suppose the number one rule is that the reviewer needs to read the entire book. It's too easy to miss some important revelation if you're just skipping around through its pages. And really, it isn't fair to the author whose work you're considering to give their book such flimsy treatment. Besides, this is no longer Grade Five, so superficial reading (or worse, not reading) is simply not acceptable.

It's also probably fair to suggest that you avoid reading the cover blurbs, whether that means those from the publisher offering the book's description—or worse, the bits of praise offered by other writers in support of the book. It's best to save looking at these until after you've formed (and written) your own observations and opinions. And if it turns out you've said almost the same thing as one of those commenters, you'll have time to make adjustments before you send out your piece.

As you read, look for the book's strong points. Are the characters people you can believe in, can you picture them in your mind, does what they say make sense in terms of who you understand them to be? Are plot points clearly developed; is there a logic to how actions proceed? What about descriptions—are they vivid, appealing to your senses? And dialogue—is it natural-sounding (and appropriate to the era in which the book is set)?

All of these elements are worth considering when you're evaluating a book, and sometimes you'll find that you aren't convinced about some of them. That's when you'll need to justify your stance with reasons. These don't need to be elaborate, drawing on philosophical arguments, but need to be clear and supported with an example or two from the text. A quoted

passage shouldn't be so long that it distracts a reader from your review; it needs to provide some example or insight into what you've been trying to say about the book. And just as quoted passages can provide support when you're finding fault with some aspect of a book, they can bolster your words of praise as well.

A couple of How-To thoughts

While every reviewer probably develops their own method for noting passages they might want to quote, or spots where they don't understand what's going on, or other places they might want to go back to, I have fallen into the habit of relying on Post-It notes. Not only do they mark my spot, I can even scribble small reminders on these. Those more comfortable with working from a PDF can insert electronic notes that are much more elaborate than the tiny scribbles I can squeeze onto a sticky. (I shy away from PDFs only because I seem to already spend too much of every day in front of some or other screen.)

There are times when you can draw upon an author's previous works to round out comments you want to make, especially if the work you're reviewing is a departure from earlier themes or situations they've explored. Other times you may want to compare a writer's work to that of some other author: "...as chilling as anything by Stephen King." Just remember that you don't want to ever denigrate your reader by making references your audience may not be familiar with. It's always best to try to be inclusive in the ways you express your views—after all, your goal is to be understood.

Dealing with specific genres (and more)

While most of these comments are applicable to reviewing books in general, certain genres must be treated somewhat differently. It's only good sense to stick with reviewing a genre that you know something about. If you're not familiar with contemporary fantasy novels, there's no point trying to bluff your way through writing a review of one, in particular if a book is part of an established series.

Other kinds of books can present their own unique challenges. For example, it's usually not possible to cover every contributor when you're reviewing an anthology. Short story collections also present their own restrictions. It's best to avoid trying to say something about every story; such reviews generally come off sounding like a list of tiny summaries. Try instead to focus on a select few, those which allow you to comment on their strengths, with perhaps some mention of a weaker story that will afford you the chance to give a bit of balance to what you say. As for poetry, it's a matter of extra-careful reading, thinking, and then re-reading, as poetry rarely reveals its full self in a single go.

When it comes to the matter of being assigned a book that you really dislike, don't be afraid to go back to your editor and ask for something else—a book that you can happily stand behind. Because really, with the limited number of review sites these days, why fill them with words about books you don't think deserve a readership.

Heidi Greco was the Guest Editor for *Counterflow* #3. She lives on territory of the Semiahmoo Nation in Surrey, BC where she writes poems, fiction—and of course, book reviews. To see some of her reviews (including one featuring Carla Stein's *Warp and Weft*), visit the Reviews page on her website: <https://heidigreco.ca/reviews/>.

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