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City Book Review

Project option, Urban Studies 200 & Geography 250
Elvin Wyly

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“Prolonged, indiscriminate reviewing of books involves constantly inventing reactions towards books about which one has no spontaneous feelings whatever.”
George Orwell, *Confessions of a Book Reviewer* (1946).¹

This is how the English novelist and journalist George Orwell (1903-1950) summed up the activity of writing book reviews. It’s a widely-quoted saying, but it’s also misleading, because Orwell, who “qualifies as one of the greatest writers of the century”² enjoyed reviewing many books for many years. He “spent a good part of his journalistic career churning out reviews – a task he not only relished but defended as valuable and necessary. In fact, Orwell called himself a

¹ Cited in Una McGovern (2005). *Webster’s New World Dictionary of Quotations*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, p. 629.

² Steve McKinzie (1996). “The Noble Art of Reviewing: Challenges, Rewards, and Tricks of the Trade.” *College & Undergraduate Libraries* 3(2), 91-99, quote from p. 92.

book reviewer. He enjoyed it as much as anything he did.”³ But of course *prolonged* reviewing risks exhaustion, and *indiscriminate* reviews aren’t useful to anyone. But careful and creative reviews can be remarkably valuable for reviewers, authors, and many other readers. As one analyst emphasizes,

“...the task of reviewing demands reflection and expands awareness. You will be learning more about a discipline, a literary genre, or simply how the world is changing around you. In the process of such reviewing, you also cannot help but hone your critical thinking skills and sharpen your analytical abilities. You are taking apart arguments, rehashing an author’s conclusions, or re-thinking a book’s perspective on an issue – helping your readers to understand what a certain piece of work is about, what it means to the profession, or where it should take its place in a larger scheme of literature.”⁴

If you choose this project option, your job is simple: write a review of any book that has a plausible connection to an urban-oriented topic. Choose a book that suits your interests, and that deals in some way with urban issues, and describe its context and contribution to our knowledge of cities and urban life. Your review should not be limited to a *description* of the content of the book; you should also *analyze* and *evaluate* the goals, method, and style of the book. One way to approach the book review is as a series of four “rhetorical moves”:

Move 1: Introduce the book. Define the general topic, place the book in the context of its field, provide information about the author, and describe the intended audience the author of the book is trying to reach.

Move 2: Outline the book. Provide a general overview of the organization of the book, briefly describe the topic of chapters or sections, and, where applicable, convey the book’s bottom-line conclusions.

Move 3: Highlight key parts of the book. Where appropriate, provide a more focused description of particular chapters or aspects of the book, especially sections that are distinctive or that deal with issues you know something about.

Move 4: Provide a general evaluation. Evaluate and analyze the book. Assess the author’s goals, and how well the book accomplishes the goals. Do you recommend that others read the book? To whom do you recommend the book?⁵

Not every one of these steps is relevant to every book review, of course, and you should feel free to be creative. But you should maintain a balance between neutral description and considered commentary or judgment. Describe the book’s contents, but don’t limit yourself to a step-by-step inventory of what’s in the book (any reader can see that by glancing through the table of

³ McKinzie, “Noble Art,” p. 92.

⁴ McKinzie, “Noble Art,” p. 93.

⁵ Adapted from D. Motta-Roth (1998). “Discourse Analysis and Academic Book Reviews: A Study of Text and Interdisciplinary Cultures.” In I. Fontanet, ed., *Genre Studies in English for Academic Purposes*. Castello de la Plana: Universitat Jaume, pp. 29-58.

contents). Offer your assessment, but don't let your opinions dominate the entire review.⁶ Submit your review according to the general instructions for all projects, on any of the specified deadlines. Please do not forget to include the following information at the top of the first page of your review.

Author of book under review (year). *Title of Book You're Reviewing*. City of Publication: Publisher. Reviewed by [Your Name.]

You've probably written many book reviews in the past, and if so, you're confident in how to do this stuff. In that case, you can just get on with it, and there's no need to read further. If you need additional advice or ideas to get started, however, then here are few ideas and suggestions.

1. **Choosing the Book.** Use your good judgment in selecting a book to review. Read through the references and "Suggestions for Further Learning" at the end of each chapter of the textbook for ideas and recommendations. Look at my lecture notes – and especially the footnotes – if you're interested in what books have shaped my thinking on various matters. Talk to your Teaching Assistant. Go to the library shelves, and browse through various sections dealing with matters you find of interest. Stop by my office hours for a chat.⁷

Be careful when you're tempted to do a Gratuitous Google.⁸ It's fine to use a few online tools to get you started. But there are two reasons you need to be careful. First, the online world is now a free-market free-for-all, which means that there's a lot of deception out there. There's actually an industry devoted to buying and selling reviews. Consider the case of Todd Rutherford, a book reviewer who describes himself as "just a pure capitalist." Several years ago, Rutherford

"...was part of the marketing department of a company that provided services to self-published writers -- services that included persuading traditional media and blogs to review the books. It was uphill work. He could churn out press releases all day long, trying to be noticed, but there is only so much space for the umpteenth vampire novel or yet another self-improvement manifesto or one more

⁶ As you gain more expertise on a particular topic, of course, you have more credibility to offer your opinions. Earning that credibility, however, requires investing hard work to learn how to do scholarship that is comparable to that in the book you're reviewing. Without that credibility, 'reviewer' becomes 'critic.' Reviews written by critics are often a lot of fun to read. But becoming a critic has challenges of its own. And since the critic entertains the reader at the expense of the author (or performer, or artist), creators often have nasty things to say about critics. So it takes a certain personality to choose this path. A sample of famous quotes about critics: "A critic is a man who knows the way but can't drive the car." Kenneth Tynan (1966), *New York Times Magazine*; "What is a modern poet's fate? / To write his thoughts upon a slate; / The critic spits on what is done, / Gives it a wipe – and all is gone." Thomas Hood (1897), "A Joke," collected in *Alfred Lord Tennyson*. "I won't quit until I get run over by a truck, a producer, or a critic." Jack Lemmon [John Uhler] (1986), *Newsweek*. On the other hand, critics (not surprisingly) have a critical response, in Jim Bishop's (1957) retort: "A good writer is not, *per se*, a good book critic. No more so than a good drunk is automatically a good bartender." *New York Journal-American*. All quotations cited in Una McGovern (2005). *Webster's New World Dictionary of Quotations*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

⁷ No email please. For advice and recommendations on matters like this, the old-fashioned technology of the conversation is far more efficient than email.

⁸ I just made that up: "Google" is now a general part of the English language as a verb, but it can also be forced back into noun form to describe a particular kind of action. "Gratuitous" has several meanings -- all derived from the Latin *gratus*, 'pleasing' -- but the specific dictionary definition I have in mind here is 'Not called for by the circumstances; unwarranted.'

homespun recollection of times gone by. There were not enough reviewers to go around.

Suddenly it hit him. Instead of trying to cajole others to review a client's work, why not cut out the middleman and write the review himself? Then it would say exactly what the client wanted -- that it was a terrific book. A shattering novel. A classic memoir. Will change your life. Lyrical and gripping, Stunning and compelling. Or words to that effect.

...Mr. Rutherford started a Web site, GettingBookReviews.com. At first, he advertised that he would review a book for \$99. But some clients wanted a chorus proclaiming their excellence. So, for \$499, Mr. Rutherford would do 20 online reviews. A few people needed a whole orchestra. For \$999, he would do 50.”⁹

Todd Rutherford's business took off quickly, and so he hired help through Craigslist. One of the most “productive” workers he hired was Brittany Walters-Bearden, a young woman who had just married a former professional wrestler and wound up short of money in a hotel in Las Vegas when she saw the Craigslist ad. “A lot of the books were trying to prove creationism,” she told a reporter for the *New York Times*. “I was like, I don't know where I stand, but they make a solid case.”

“For a 50-word review, she said she could find ‘enough information on the Internet so that I didn't need to read anything, really.’ For a 300-word review, she said, ‘I spent about 15 minutes reading the book.’ She wrote three of each every week as well as press releases. In a few months, she earned \$12,500.

‘There were books I wished I could have gone back and actually read,’ she said. ‘But I had to produce 70 pieces of content a week to pay my bills.’”¹⁰

So be careful in the online world. I trust the book reviews I read in professional, scholarly journals -- like *Urban Geography*, *Urban Studies*, the *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, *City: Analysis of Urban Trends, Culture, Theory, Policy, Action* -- and then long-established press sources like the *New York Times*. I'm much more careful with the online stuff that's growing so fast.

There's a second reason to be careful about the gratuitous Google. You need to flip through a book to get a sense of whether it's right for you – and this is not always easy to do online. It's best if you can go to a good library and browse urban-oriented sections. Lots of books with simple titles are actually quite specialized, and if you're searching for titles on online databases it's more difficult to flip through to get a sense of what you're in for.¹¹ Suppose you do a quick

⁹ See David Streitfeld (2012). “The Best Book Reviews Money Can Buy.” *New York Times*, August 25.

¹⁰ Streitfeld, “The Best Book Reviews.”

¹¹ There are some online tools that include searchable full-text inventories of books. But these collections are uneven, given the contests between publishers and online search-engine corporations over the revenues from intellectual property.

search on cities, globalization and trade, and you find a book titled, *The Spatial Economy: Cities, Regions, and International Trade*.¹² Sounds pretty straightforward. So you decide that this is your book, and instead of trudging to Koerner Library to look for it, you decide to click through online and just buy it. Once it arrives you flip through it, and you see chapters with simple, clear titles, like “The Emergence of New Cities.” But then you page through and you realize that a key part of the entire argument of the book relies on a fairly deep understanding of equations like this one:

$$w_2 = \left[L_1 e^{-(\sigma-1)\tau^{M^i} G_1^{\sigma-1}} + L_2 w_2 G_2^{\sigma-1} (1 + e^{-2(\sigma-1)\tau^{M^i}}) \right]$$

...and you realize that this is only half the full Equation 10.A.2 that appears on page 169.¹³ Yikes! If you’re comfortable with this stuff, then of course the Fujita, Krugman, and Venables book is a wonderful selection to give you a sense of influential currents in contemporary neoclassical urban economics. But if this isn’t your preferred flavor, then you’re likely to wind up rather frustrated.

So consider going to the library, and browsing the shelves. Choose a Library of Congress (LC) classification number on a topic that fits your interests, and then go that section of the shelves to begin exploring related topics. Here are a few LC classification numbers to get you started:

G140	Great Cities of the World
GF125	Settlements – Cities, Urban Geography
HT101-395	Urban Groups. The City. Urban Sociology.
HT161-165	Garden Cities. “The City Beautiful.”
HT165.5-169.9	City Planning.
HT170-178	Urban Renewal. Urban Redevelopment.
HT231	Effect of City Life.
HT321-325	The City as an Economic Factor. City Promotion.
HT351-352	Suburban Cities and Towns.
HT361-384	Urbanization. City and Country.
HV4032-4470.7	Poor in Cities. Slums.
JS39-8500	Local Government. Municipal Government.
BV637-637.5	City Churches.

This is just a small selection – there are dozens of additional, separate classification numbers for cities and towns across all parts of the world, for example.¹⁴

¹² The full citation: Masahisa Fujita, Paul Krugman, and Anthony J. Venables (2001). *The Spatial Economy: Cities, Regions, and International Trade*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

¹³ Fujita et al., *Spatial Economy*, p. 169.

¹⁴ If you need further guidance, speak to a reference librarian, or see <http://toby.library.ubc.ca/webpage/webpage.cfm?id=520>

2. Writing the Review.

The history of the book review tells us quite a lot about the changing conditions of reading, writing, and the ongoing conversation of human civilization. Just as the Greek city-states occupy a privileged position for the history of political theory, Athens was the crucible for early reviews of books, beginning around 140 BCE.¹⁵ The first publication devoted entirely to book reviews was the *Journal des Scavans*, launched in Paris in 1665 “to give readers (and scholars) a universal account of the state of learning,” with reviews “conceived of as installments of a continuous encyclopaedia to be carried on until the end of time.”¹⁶ Today, this encyclopedia is large indeed: the online *Book Review Index* of one of the leading scholarly information providers includes references to more than 4 million separate reviews written in recent years.¹⁷ Not surprisingly, however, quantity does not equal quality. The quality of reviews varies widely, and there is thus a rich history of conflicts and recriminations amongst reviewers, authors, and publishers.¹⁸ It’s an exciting landscape, with so many books, and so many different kinds of book reviews. Even the comedian Bill Maher writes book reviews, and gets them published in the prestigious *New York Times Book Review*; not surprisingly, Maher reviews a book on a topic very important to him: cannabis.¹⁹

There’s also a rich collection of essays that provide advice on what to do, and what to avoid, in writing book reviews. We’ve already seen one example of this genre -- Motta-Roth’s four rhetorical moves noted above. A few others are also worth mention.

James Cortada provides a sobering yet hilarious guide, under the title, “Five Ways to be a Terrible Book Reviewer.” Cortada, an historian, has authored more than a hundred articles and has written or edited more than 40 books, as well as quite a few book reviews; he reflects on this experience to suggest that there are “five mortal sins” committed by many reviewers.

- “1. Describe the book the author should have written rather than the one that was written. ...
2. Critique a book on a subject of which you have little or no knowledge. ...
3. Review a book without actually reading it, let alone understanding its content.
- ...

¹⁵ Evelina Orteza y Miranda (1996). “On Book Reviewing.” *Journal of Educational Thought* 30(1), 191-202.

¹⁶ Miranda, “Book Reviewing,” with citations to D. Roper (1978). *Reviewing Before the Edinburgh: 1788-1802*. London: Methuen.

¹⁷ Data from Thomson ISI, cited in James Hartley (2006). “Reading and Writing Book Reviews Across the Discipline.” *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 57(9), 1194-1207, citation on p. 1205.

¹⁸ See Miranda, pp. 191-192, for a brief history.

¹⁹ See Bill Maher (2012). “Reefer Madness: How Legalizing Cannabis Could Change America: Culturally, Politically, and Economically.” Review of Doug Fine, *Too High to Fail: Cannabis and the New Green Economic Revolution* (New York: Gotham Books, 2012). *New York Times Book Review*, August 5, p. 11. Believe it or not, Fine’s book, and Maher’s review, does have plausible urban connections: the book can be understood as an urban commodity-chain analysis of California’s Mendocino County, where Fine “follows one plant from seed to medical marijuana patient in the first county in the nation to decriminalize and regulate cannabis farming.” (Maher, 2012, p. 11).

4. Use the review as an opportunity to extol your ideas rather than focusing on what the author is discussing. ...
5. Fail to tell the reader what the book is about and how it fits into the larger body of literature on the subject.”²⁰

Cortada’s Judeo-Christian theological reference – the “mortal sins” committed by reviewers – is quite common in discussions of book reviews. So are reminders of early grade-school experiences with the book report. This is how Cortada explains the fifth mortal sin, failing to tell the reader what the book is about:

“Your eighth-grade teacher taught you what was needed. First, describe the content of the book: its subject, point of view, and organization. Second, tell the reader the basis of the book, such as archival research, interviews, personal experiences, and so forth. Then point out strengths, errors, and weaknesses based on your personal knowledge of the subject. Finally, end the review with a statement about who should read and use this book. This is not complicated....”²¹

And yet we are all sinners, it would seem:

“Any book reviewer reading this essay will have to confess silently to having committed these sins at one time or another. I know I have. But, as with any good religious reconciliation, it is time to resolve to sin no more.”²²

Cortada goes on to offer a seven-step program of reform and redemption:

1. Read the book and try to get into the author’s head to understand what he or she was trying to accomplish. Represent that accurately in your review.
2. Respect the enormous effort put forth by the author to get the job done. Maybe there is some worth in all that work. Tell the reader about that effort.
3. Describe and judge what was done, not what you might have done if you had written the book. Put the book in the context of other publications of the same type or subject.
4. If the book is unpublished, make specific recommendations for improving the manuscript, not for destroying it. Specify by chapter and page what to change or correct, and why.

²⁰ James W. Cortada (1998). “Five Ways to be a Terrible Book Reviewer.” *Journal of Scholarly Publishing* 30(1), 34-37.

²¹ Cortada, “Five Ways,” p. 35.

²² Cortada, “Five Ways,” p. 36.

5. If you are not an expert on the subject of the book, don't review it, especially if you are going to write a negative report – you will look foolish to those who do understand the subject.
6. Remember what your eighth grade teacher taught you about how to write a book report, and apply it.
7. Keep the review short, on point, and fun to read.”²³

If the seven-step program doesn't work, then an even more stern series of orders comes from Linda Perkins in the concise form of “The Twelve Commandments of Reviewing”²⁴:

- “1. Thou shalt read the book.
2. Thou shalt double-space.
3. Thou shalt write neither a book report nor a plot summary, but a clear and thoughtful critique.
4. Remember the intended audience and keep it foremost in thy meditation.
5. Thou shalt review the book that was written and not the one thou wouldst prefer.
6. Consider no author nor any illustrator, no matter the reputation, a graven image, nor in thy haste neglect or cast down the debut of new writers and illustrators.
7. Thou shalt not fall in love with thine own words.
8. Thou shalt nor disparage nor cast off lightly thy neighbor's dissenting opinion, no matter how fatuous or hare-brained it may be.
9. Thou shalt neither reject nor recommend without due cause.
10. Honor thy readers – be brief.
11. Thou shalt not bear another's reviewers' opinions under thy name.
12. Remember thy deadline and keep it – holy or not.”

²³ Cortada, “Five Ways,” pp. 36-37.

²⁴ Linda Perkins (1995). “The Twelve Commandments of Reviewing.” *Wilson Library Journal*, February, p. 14.

3. Trust Yourself.

Despite all of the admonitions above, the most important piece of advice is to trust yourself. Devote enough time to choose a book carefully, and then devote enough time to understand, evaluate, and write about the book in your own voice. If you're nervous or intimidated after reading these suggestions, or if you've struggled to choose a book, then perhaps this project is not for you. Not everyone enjoys doing book reviews, and that's one of the reasons you have several choices for the projects in this course.

But maybe you'll find that the book review is your perfect niche. If you do, here's the gold standard you should aim for: Martin Levin, who died in May, 2008, was among the most prolific book reviewers ever. He wrote so many reviews, many of them machine-gun essays that reviewed a half-dozen books in a single essay, that "the labor needed to tally them defies the length of the workweek. But by any conservative estimate, counting his column and his hundreds of freestanding reviews, Mr. Levin read and reported on more than 3,000 books" in the *New York Times Book Review* from 1958 to 1985.²⁵ On April 7, 1963, the *Times Book Review* returned after a 114-day break because of a newspaper strike; Levin "marked the occasion by reviewing 38 books at once."²⁶ Levin perfected his rapid-fire review essays in part because of the terms of his job: he was handed a thick stack of books each week that his editors felt were "worthy of mention but not so worthy as to rate stand-alone reviews"; every week he got a stack of "forgettable first novels, a welter of westerns, and a great many multigenerational family sagas."²⁷

By contrast, you need to choose just one book. Enjoy!

²⁵ Margalit Fox (2008). "Martin Levin, 89, Prolific Book Reviewer." *New York Times*, Obituary, May 30, p. A18.

²⁶ Fox, "Martin Levin," p. A18.

²⁷ Fox, "Martin Levin," p. A18.