

## Reviewing a Scholarly Book

We're all familiar with book reviews, but a scholarly review of a book dealing with the past is somewhat different. Here we are more concerned with matters of logic than with style, with how well the author builds a thesis about a historical period than with how well the story is told.

Reading a book of history is obviously different than reading a book of fiction. In fiction we generally suspend our disbelief and allow the author to tell us all sorts of things -- both credible and incredible -- and only worry whether the story makes sense on its own terms. In reading history we should do the reverse, sharpen our critical faculties and **continually ask whether the author has provided evidence** to support his story.

Perhaps the most common error students make in writing a review is to try to summarize the book. The other common mistake is to attack the author for not taking your approach -- for not writing the book you would write about the topic. When you review a book you are writing about the author's book, not about the subject of the book or about the book you would like to write about that topic. Thus while the author may have written about astronomy in Medieval Europe that is not your topic; **your subject is the book itself, its audience, its thesis, how well it is based on evidence, and how soundly the author argues for a position.** Of course, in discussing the thesis of the book you will touch on the principal points the author makes in the book, but those are not your central concern.

Your review should state the central theme or distinctive approach to the topic that the author chose and discuss how well the author carried out this intent, using about three pertinent examples from the book to illustrate your discussion. You are concerned with the clarity of presentation, logic of argument, and adequacy of evidence which the author uses in the examples you discuss. Finally, you should discuss how well these, and the other examples which you don't have space to present, support the book's central thesis or approach.

You might want to use something like the following outline for your review:

- I. Introduction (150-300 words)
  - A. The topic of the book
  - B. The intended audience
  - C. The author's central position(s)
  - D. Kinds of evidence used
- II. Discuss 2-4 specific examples (75-150 words for each)
  - A. How does each example relate to the author's position(s)
  - B. What is the author's evidence for each example
- III. General evaluation of the book based on your previous discussion (75-150 words)

While the author's evidence may be quotations from ancient writers, works of art from the past, or archaeological remains, your evidence of how well the author argues his/her case will consist of examples of the argument itself. In this regard **your review must include references to specific passages, including page numbers, e.g., (pp. 35-42)** on which you base your discussion. When appropriate **brief quotations** from the book may also be used.

Two mechanical notes:

The review must be typed; type double spaced and leave adequate margins so there is space for me to write comments (I always write comments).

The heading of the review must provide a full description of the book that you are reviewing using the following format:

Peter Brown. *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Late Antiquity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981. xv + 187 pp.