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21W.777 The Science Essay

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Homework #13*Due for class Tuesday 3/31***Essay 4: Book Review** 1000–1250 words (4 - 5 pages double-spaced).

Essay 4 is both a book review and an essay. This assignment should be enjoyable; it gives you a chance to enter into an extended discussion with a science writer whose work is esteemed by his or her peers and by the general reading public. It gives you a chance to mingle your words with those of an eminent writer, which is one of the pleasures of critiquing work that has literary merit.

For the book review-essay, you need to:

- Describe the book, fairly: give your readers a good idea of what the book is about & what it's like—its overall intention and structure.
- Give your readers the flavor of the book, using well-chosen quotes and telling details.
- Focus on a theme or develop an idea that unifies your discussion of the book—this is where your review becomes an essay, and shows your particular sensibility. You don't want to write 4 pages of: “. . . and another thing about this book . . .”—you want your review to get your readers thinking about something.
- Evaluate the book against its stated intention and, possibly, in relation to similar books.

Book reviews are challenging. For one thing, *you must accurately represent the work you've chosen to review. Whether you agree or disagree with the writer's views and approach, you must present them to readers in a form that the writer would recognize as his or her own.* But you don't want to spend the whole review summarizing the book; that's a précis, not a review. Like the reviewers whose work we read, you want your chosen book to become a springboard for a discussion of one or more current issues in science or technology or in science writing, or an issue that you think is due more attention. Another challenge will be quoting: you want to quote enough to give the reader the flavor of the book, yet you don't want your review to be a string of quotes.

You want to engage with both the content of the book—its validity, reasonableness, usefulness, originality—and also with the writing: is it highly abstract? Repetitious? Is the writing vivid? Are examples abundant and well chosen? Is the writer a master of metaphor? Does s/he rely heavily on analogies? What audience does the book seem to be addressing? Who should read this book? What are the particular pleasures of this writer's style? Note: You don't need to answer all these questions; they're just prods for your thinking. You aren't critiquing writing the way a writing teacher or editor would—you just want to give readers a feel for the language.

Recall that most of the reviews we read actually spent relatively little time on judgment, and more time describing the book and discussing issues. This is a good way to go, unless you have a good reason for wanting to strongly praise or criticize your book. Remember also that judgment may be included in phrases throughout your essay—it needn't be “saved up” for a section of its own. Readers do, however, expect some kind of summary evaluation, albeit brief.

(more)

Also: Remember to identify the book's author in a phrase or two—"Pulitzer prize winning journalist," "eminent physicist and lecturer," etc.

Finally: Readers of reviews want to know who's writing them. *So please include at the end of your essay a 1-2 sentence author bio of yourself.*

Workshop Protocol: We will workshop in small groups on Tuesday—so bring 2 sets of your draft. We'll workshop 2 essays as a whole class on Thursday.

A note about sources: I prefer that you do not use any outside sources for this essay unless the book you are reviewing is more than, say, 20 years old—in which case, it might be useful to know how it was originally received. If you draw on additional sources for your essay, you must use your own language (paraphrase), not theirs, unless you quote precisely, and must identify anyone you quote or paraphrase. This kind of essay doesn't call for citation, but please attach a list of any sources you use for my information.

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