

Nonfiction Book Review

INTRODUCTION

Attention-getting opener

Background and summary

Opinion statement (thesis)

BODY

First reason

Evidence: example

Second reason

Let Us Now Praise James Agee

In his insightful introduction to the nonfiction book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, John Hersey notes that "There never had been, and there never will be, anything quite like this book." Hersey is right. After struggling with his subject for three years, James Agee created what seemed at the time to be a new form of nonfiction. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* describes the world of Southern tenant farmers with language that is deft and graceful; it creates a memorable picture of a moment in American history and of three families trying to survive the Great Depression.

One reason for the book's success is the innovative approach Agee took to his subject. His narrative focuses on three southern Alabama families: the Gudgers, the Ricketts, and the Woods. Rather than simply conducting interviews with these families, however, Agee lived with them, becoming part of their lives and learning about their hardships firsthand. As a result, Agee is able to deeply explore the personalities of each one of his subjects. For example, in describing Emma's bad marriage and her desire to escape her father's home, he paints a picture that encourages the reader to sympathize with Emma and to understand the factors that led to her present circumstances. A casual description by a visiting reporter could never provide the depth of feeling and understanding that Agee's account does.

Another distinctive feature of this book is its compassion. Agee

Nonfiction Book Review *continued*

Evidence: example and quotation

Evidence: example and quotation

Evidence: examples and quotations

Third reason

could have exaggerated and sensationalized his account of the lives of poor tenant farmers, but instead he took his subject very seriously. Agee's compassion is apparent in the book's numerous lengthy passages of careful philosophical musing. For example, in one such passage he writes, "I believe that every human being is potentially capable . . . of fully 'realizing' his potentialities." Agee's philosophy insists that families who live in poverty lead lives that are just as important and compelling as those with more resources. His compassion is also visible in the care he takes to describe and explain the families' daily lives. In a chapter titled "Education," he describes the circumstances under which several family members attended and eventually dropped out of school. Agee notes that the Ricketts children "are spoken of disapprovingly, even so far away as the county courthouse, as 'problem' children." He then explains why these children are unsuccessful in school, listing the many reasons that render the children powerless to amend their behavior. Elsewhere in the book, Agee uses vivid details to describe how the families live, as when he describes the Ricketts and their house as "almost beyond possibility of being dirtier." But he always tempers the accusatory nature of these remarks with explanations of their causes and an appreciation of their positive attributes, as when he writes that "such houses as these approximate, or at times by chance achieve, an extraordinary 'beauty.'"

Collecting his information by living with his subjects was not

Nonfiction Book Review *continued*

Evidence: examples

Agee's only innovative technique; he also experimented with the form of nonfiction and, as a result, created a book with a fresh literary perspective. Agee did not write his book as a news report or even as a conventional narrative. Instead, the book presents details about the families in patches, surrounding each patch with poetic passages in which Agee either muses about his own feelings and experiences or discusses philosophical issues such as human potential and the meaning of beauty. Slowly, Agee pieces together his story with images, descriptions, and brief anecdotes. At times these flights of poetic language can seem tedious and confusing. However, the effect of this writing style is to provide an understanding of the three families that slowly metamorphoses—through brief flashes of insight—into a complex web of meaning.

Restatement of thesis

However difficult modern readers may find some passages of the book, James Agee's final achievement is clear. By approaching his subject with an insatiable curiosity, with deep human compassion, and with a spirit of poetic innovation, Agee was able to paint an intimate portrait of the lives of some of the poorest Americans in a time of desperate need. The enduring power of that portrait is what makes *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* unique in the annals of nonfiction literature.

Nonfiction Book Review

Definition

A **nonfiction book review** evaluates the success of a work of nonfiction. A good book review uses solid reasons to support the reviewer's opinion and can persuade readers either to read a book or to avoid it.

Many nonfiction book reviews use the structure illustrated in the framework below. Print this framework and use it as a guide when you write your own nonfiction book review.

Framework

Directions and Explanations

Introduction

- Hook your reader.
- Provide background information and a brief overview.
- State your opinion.

Draw readers in Use an attention-getting statement, an anecdote, a quotation, or another rhetorical device to hook readers.

Lay the groundwork Provide background information that will help readers understand your review.

Assert yourself Offer an opinion statement that both evaluates the book and persuades readers either to read it or to avoid it. Make sure your statement includes the title of the book.



Body

- Provide first reason and its corresponding evidence.
- Provide second reason and supporting evidence.
- Provide additional reasons and evidence.

Present the reasons Include at least three reasons that support your opinion statement.

Convince them Back up your reasons with evidence: examples and quotations from the book. Remember to use evidence that will persuade your readers.



Conclusion

- Remind readers of your opinion and leave them with something to think about.

Wrap it up Restate your opinion and offer any additional information that will convince your readers either to read the book or to leave it alone.