

Redwood City ward was exactly like my Fourth ward at Provo, the people in it as interchangeable as Ford parts. A member could move from Provo to Redwood City on Monday, be visited by the bishop, assigned a job, and be a functioning part of the intricate mechanism by the following Sunday.

Utah was as near as the local meeting house, anywhere I might be. Here could be found my own kind. And, I realized, like it or lump it, I was one of the Peculiar People, home again.

Advice to Book Reviewers

STANFORD J. LAYTON

RECENTLY I CAME ACROSS A BOOK published in 1927 by Knopf entitled *Book Reviewing*. In it Wayne Gard writes that a "review must be presented in non-technical, natural language, combining brevity with wit, so that the review may be said to have a soul."

What comprises a soul? And how may book reviews have one? Let me answer the second question first. *Not many*. Not many book reviews have a soul. During my four and a half years as managing editor of *Utah Historical Quarterly* I have solicited, received, acknowledged, edited, proofread and published approximately 150 book reviews. Of that number I would say less than two dozen were possessed of a soul.

What comprises a soul? Let me begin to answer that question by using a one-word synonym, the somewhat more secular term, personality. And define that word as Winston Churchill once did as he refused a dish of tapioca pudding for dessert at a state dinner. He interrupted his polite dinner-table conversation to enjoin the waiter, "Pray, take it away. It has no personality."

I cannot imagine how the finest cook in the world could endow tapioca pudding with personality. But I do know how a scholar can endow a book review with that elusive quality. *Be personal*. Give it *your* personality.

I was taken by another thought in the Wayne Gard book:

As to the use of first-personal pronouns there is much variation in the practice of reviewers. Some use the first personal singular, some use the editorial "we," while others studiously avoid either form. The present tendency in reviewing, as in editorial writing, is to avoid the first person altogether except in reviews that embody interview or anecdotal material. With only a little practice the reviewer can express his personal opinions just as effectively without using the words "I" or "me" or "mine," or even such expressions as "the present reviewer."

As nearly as I can judge, the tendency in 1927 has continued on a more or less straight line until 1978. Perhaps it is time for a change. I *like* book reviews that contain the personal pronoun. I hasten to add, however, that there is a right way and a wrong way to go about this. The right way is to keep the focus on the book and its author, not on the reviewer, but that is

always the cardinal rule of book reviewing.

In a recent book Samuel W. Taylor writes "I have not seen them all; and as a matter of fact there are precious few to see." He is talking about Mormon novels. In the course of reviewing one he goes on to alternately praise, chide, fuss, guffaw, gesture, delineate, evaluate and advise. "I am up to *here* with the self-righteous dietary morality characterizing too much of our Mormon literature," he exclaims, and the reader can clearly visualize the robust Sam raising his flattened hand, palm down, to his chin. No book is flawless, he acknowledges, but in the present case the strengths, which he sketches briefly, greatly exceed the weaknesses. The review is short, to the point, and alive. "I won't spoil a good story by telling you too much," he says, then concludes with, "If you want a good novel, beautifully written, enjoy, enjoy."

In this review—approximately 500 words, Taylor has used the personal pronouns "I" and "myself" twelve times.

But, as I intimated a moment ago, sprinkling a book review with the personal pronoun is no guarantee of success and in fact carries with it the hazard of canting the focus away from the book. I suspect that Sam Taylor could give a review ample personality without using the personal pronoun at all. That's because Sam himself has a lot of personality to give.

What about the rest of us? What will be our formula for success? I have only one suggestion but I think it a good one. We must somehow discipline ourselves to transcend the jaded, pedantic format that 90 percent of today's book reviews follow:

—In the first paragraph or two we are told what the book is about, usually in terms of such stock phrases as "focuses upon the question of" or "traces the development of," with such standard adjectival embellishments as "useful insights" and "incisive manner." Incidentally, I think it unfortunate that reviewers seldom articulate the thesis of their particular book anymore, being content, rather, to give us only a "table-of-contents" summary.

—In the next paragraph or two, we read an itemization of the book's deficiencies, with three or four pet phrases that have become standard fare. Some favorites of the moment are: "but the serious reader will be disappointed in a number of particulars," or "but the book is marred by a number of errors that detract from the overall quality."

—Then comes the concluding paragraph, and, almost as predictably as the presence of a caboose on a train, it begins with "despite these shortcomings, however," giving the book and its author a final pat on the fanny in such terms as "an important beginning," or "useful contribution," or "a valuable compendium of facts," or "welcome addition" or the most ubiquitous of all standard phrases "deserves a place on the bookshelf of every," etc., etc.

In my bleaker moments, reflecting on the stale state of book reviewing in today's historical journals, I have often thought that the best reviewer would be a person who knows the material but has never in his life seen a book review of any kind. Impossible, of course.

When you are called upon to review a book—whether it be Mormon history/literature or any other kind—give it the most valuable quality you have to give. Give it your personality.