unanimously accepted version of any significant portion of the past. Instead there are many versions that often conflict with one another. As Dutch historian Pieter Geyl said, history is "an argument without end."

Certainly no student of history can ignore important pieces of information, for facts are the bricks out of which historical interpretations are built. But facts do not speak for themselves, and often the known facts will bear the weight of more than one interpretation. This is the primary reason historians keep rewriting the history of a single event or period. They are not writing simply to present facts that have already been recorded in other books. They are writing to explore alternative explanations (interpretations), firmly based on the evidence, of why and how things happened the way they did, and perhaps to introduce new evidence not included in previous studies. Or as the British wit Oscar Wilde put it: "The one duty we owe to history is to rewrite it."

Another reason for rewriting history is that as our perspectives and interests change over time, so do the questions we ask about the past. It was no accident that the explosion of interest in African American history and women's history paralleled the increased activism of both groups in the 1960s and 1970s. Nor should it be surprising that Americans became increasingly interested in the history of Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War, the history of the Balkans during the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, or the history of the Middle East and Islam after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

The study of history, therefore, involves not only learning the events of the past, but learning (from written histories) what others before you have said about those events. However, a word of warning is in order. Even though all good history is interpretation, not all interpretation is good history. The fact that there is a subjective quality inherent in all historical interpretations should not be taken to mean that "one opinion is as good as another." As Francis Parkman, the eminent nineteenth-century American historian noted, "Facts may be detailed with the most minute exactness, and yet the narrative, taken as a whole, may be unmeaning or untrue."[3] Thus, while there is room for much honest disagreement among historians, in certain cases we must recognize that some interpretations fit the facts better than others, and interpretations based on shoddy scholarship or faulty reasoning should be exposed and rejected.

How to Read Historical Literature

Reading history cannot be done passively; it requires an alert mind critically engaged with the text. Unfortunately, no one has yet invented a labor-saving device to make the process effortless. You can save time and energy, though, if you know what to look for when reading history or other types of nonfiction.

Begin by remembering that when you read an article or book your main goal should be to understand the author's major interpretations and conclusions. You will come across much new information, and you should pay attention to the most important of the new facts. But it is more critical to master the author's *interpretation* of how the facts relate to one another. We all know that individual facts are

Copyright © 2010 Harlan Davidson, Inc.

[3] Francis Parkman, *Pioneers of France in the New World* (1865), Introduction.

easy to forget. Once a noted expert on fish who became a college president vowed to memorize the name of every student on campus. He soon abandoned the effort, complaining, "I found that every time I learned the name of a student, I forgot the name of a fish." Many of us share the college president's forgetfulness for facts. We are, however, much better able (and it is much more important) to remember neatly summarized generalizations and conclusions.

The Thesis

When reading a book or article you should first try to ascertain the author's primary thesis, or major explanatory interpretations and conclusions. The factual information is, of course, important, but that information will be more easily assimilated if you understand the author's broader purpose in writing the account. It is an author's interpretation (thesis) that makes a book or article distinctive, and this thesis is the glue that ties together the disparate facts that can otherwise overwhelm the reader. In the late 1920s, for example, both Sidney Fay and Bernadotte Schmitt wrote lengthy studies of the origins of World War I (1914–18).[4] Both authors used essentially the same documentary evidence, but each interpreted that evidence in a different way. Schmitt assigned to Germany most of the responsibility for starting the war, whereas Fay minimized German war guilt by distributing blame more widely among a number of countries. Thus, the *topics* of the books were almost identical (the origins of World War I), but their *theses* (interpretations) were radically different.

Usually one can discover the thesis of a book quite easily.[5] If it's not immediately obvious, either the book is poorly constructed (not uncommon) or you missed something. Many times the author states the thesis explicitly ("My argument/thesis is . . . "); on other occasions you must do the work yourself. Most authors summarize their central arguments in a preface, foreword, introduction, or first chapter, and recapitulate the main points again at the end of a book or article. *These are the sections of a book you should read first.* In the case of an article, read the first few paragraphs and the last few in order to isolate the thesis. Don't be afraid to read the last chapter or section before those in the middle; a history book is not a murder mystery in which the reader needs to be kept in suspense until the end.

It is important to identify the thesis early. The facts in the book should support and illustrate the thesis, and if you have identified that thesis from the beginning, you will find it much easier to read the rest of the book. As you become increasingly familiar with a given topic, you will find it easier to master additional books on that topic. With the essential facts already at your command, you will be able to concentrate on the book's interpretation and how that interpretation differs from others you have read.

Finally, although the thesis is the most important single element in a book, you should by no means ignore the rest. As you read, take note of the important gener-

---

[4] Sidney B. Fay, *The Origins of the World War,* 2 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1928); Bernadotte E. Schmitt, *The Coming of the War, 1914,* 2 vols. (New York: Scribners, 1930).

[5] We are indebted for the discussion of thesis-finding and selective-reading techniques to Norman E. Cantor and Richard I. Schneider, *How to Study History* (Wheeling, IL.: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1967), especially Chapter Five.

Copyright © 2010 Harlan Davidson, Inc.

Topic vs. Thesis

Don't confuse the topic of a book with the thesis. The topic refers to the specific subject matter the book covers. The topic is the *what* the author is writing about. The thesis refers to the distinctive *argument* the author is making about the topic—i.e., the interpretation. Many authors have written on the causes of the American Civil War (that is, they have written on the same topic), but they have presented different theses about the cause or mix of causes that led to the conflict. To some, the war was fought over slavery; to others it was a war that grew out of the economic differences between the South and the North; and still others have said the war was caused by a conflict over the issue of states' rights.

Remember:

The **topic** refers to the subject matter. When you say: "This book is *about* the origins of the Civil War," you are describing the topic of the book.

The **thesis** refers to the author's central argument about the topic under discussion: e.g., "The author *argues* that the Civil War was fought primarily over the issue of slavery." (No sentence can be a thesis statement unless it can be prefaced with the words: "The author *argues* that . . ." or "I *argue* that . . ." or a similar phrase.)

alizations made in each chapter or subsection of the book. You should also make a mental or written note of what factual material is covered in order to have a clear idea of what the book does and does not contain. That way, if you need a specific piece of information in the future, you will know where to find it.

Selective Reading

Reading a book is like mining for precious gems—the valuable stones must be separated from the surrounding rocks. A useful technique for "mining" historical accounts is selective reading. After you have read carefully to establish the thesis, the rest of the book can be digested more rapidly. A well-constructed book will contain regular patterns that you can use as shortcuts. For instance, an author's major points are usually summarized at the beginning or end (or both) of each chapter. Similarly, central ideas in individual paragraphs are often contained in a topic sentence, usually, but not always, the first sentence in the paragraph. Once you have established where a particular author tends to locate the key ideas, it becomes much easier to read the rest of the book. Be aware, however, that this technique is most valuable for books on topics about which you already know something. We do not recommend this technique when you are reading a book on an unfamiliar subject. Further, we are not talking here about speed-reading (a questionable and highly overrated technique) but about *selective* reading—the ability to discriminate between the sections of a book that you should read with relative care and those that you can read less intensively.

Copyright © 2010 Harlan Davidson, Inc.

Authors' Choices and Hidden Agendas

"What I like in a good author," wrote American essayist and critic Logan Pearsall Smith, "is not what he says, but what he whispers." Indeed, the "whispers" in a work of history—what we can read "between the lines"—are frequently as important as the author's explicit statements. In every history book the author makes countless value judgments and decisions that, though not always explicitly identified, make that particular book different from all others. It is important, therefore, to try to identify the author's underlying assumptions and values. There is no absolutely foolproof way to do so. To some extent each book and each author is unique, and the historian-detective must use any and all clues to penetrate below the surface. At a bare minimum it might help to ask the following questions of every book you read:

- **Does the book reflect an identifiable bias or point of view, and how might the author's bias have influenced the book's subject matter or conclusions?** Books reflect—often unintentionally—the political, national, religious, or ideological values of their authors. As Arthur Schlesinger Jr. points out, "All historians are prisoners of their own experience."[6] For instance, in many cases books on the religious upheavals of the Reformation during the sixteenth century clearly reveal the religious convictions of the authors. Similarly, British accounts of the American Revolution often differ quite markedly from American accounts. Critical readers should look for clues to an author's values and biases in order to weigh more intelligently the arguments made in her or his book. A word of caution is necessary here. The intrusion of bias does not automatically discredit an author's thesis. The test of a historical interpretation—even one rooted in bias—is how well it conforms to the evidence.
- **How does the author approach the subject?** That is, which of the varieties or subcategories of history does the book represent? Most authors choose to emphasize some aspects of past experience more than others: e.g., economic relationships (economic history); politics (political/institutional history); individuals (biography); the role of groups (social history); ideas (intellectual history); war (military history); diplomacy (diplomatic history); everyday life (again, social history). The approach an author takes when writing about a subject reflects a conscious choice—perhaps to examine the subject from an economic as opposed to a political perspective—and you should always be aware of that choice.
- **How does the author organize the book?** The author also decides whether to organize an account chronologically (events discussed in order of occurrence) or topically (events discussed in thematic units). Actually, authors often combine the two, alternating the chronological narration of events with periodic analyses of specific issues or topics. Taken as a whole, though, most books will conform predominantly to one organizational scheme or the other. A look at the table of contents may help you determine whether a book is organized topically or chronologically. Usually, however, you will have to dip into the work itself to get a firm sense of how the author has organized the material.
- **What are the author's sources and how well are they used?** Here you are concerned with the author's research apparatus. Are there extensive source references

[6] Arthur Schlesinger Jr., "History and National Stupidity," *New York Review of Books* (April 27, 2006), 14.

Copyright © 2010 Harlan Davidson, Inc.

Chronological vs. Topical Organization

Books organized *chronologically* present material the same way many college survey courses do—year-by-year or period-by-period. Books organized *topically* have chapters or sections based on thematically similar materials. Topically organized books might cover the same chronological periods again and again, but each time the actual "topic" under discussion will be different. A good example of a book organized topically is Clinton Rossiter's *The First American Revolution* (1956). While each chapter of Rossiter's book covers the same period of American history (the colonial period before 1776), each one focuses on a different aspect of the period—the economics, religion, politics, social structure, etc.

(footnotes, endnotes, or in-text citations)? Few? None? Is the bibliography long? Short? Missing altogether? This sort of information can give you a clue as to the seriousness and perhaps the credibility of the book, although it would be a mistake automatically to equate extensive source citations with quality. In addition, the lack of such research apparatus does not necessarily mean that the book is worthless. It could have been the author's intention to write an introductory study (like this one) intended for a general audience. You should also note what sources the author used. Are the sources appropriate to the subject matter? For instance, a history of American slavery using only material written by southern plantation owners would be highly suspect, as would a history of the labor movement based only on the observations of factory owners. Further, did the author use extensive primary (original) sources or was the book written on the basis of secondary literature? The answer to this question can help you discover whether the author was attempting to break new ground by examining original sources or attempting to synthesize the research findings of a number of other historians. (Primary sources—letters, diaries, government documents, newspapers, photographs, etc.—are the records created by those who lived through the events being investigated. Secondary sources are the books and articles written by historians, very often based on primary sources. See pp. 140–141 for a fuller discussion of the distinction between primary and secondary sources.)

◆ **Who is the author?** To answer all of the above questions it helps to know something about the author both personally and professionally. Is the author a scholar? Journalist? Politician? What is the author's political persuasion? Religion? Nationality? Gender? If a scholar, is the person a historian, political scientist, economist, sociologist, or a psychologist? What kind of reputation does the author have in academic circles? Many times you can find such information (or some of it) on jacket covers or in a brief biographical sketch in the book itself. It is also increasingly common to use the Internet to research an author's background. Finally, if you know of some other books the author has written, it might be helpful to read some reviews of those works.

◆ **When was the book first published?** This piece of information can provide many clues to the quality and orientation of a book. A history of World War II (1939–45) written in 1946 might be less objective and less substantive than one written in 1996

Copyright © 2010 Harlan Davidson, Inc.

or 2006, although you should not automatically assume that. Certainly, though, the more recent authors would have had the opportunity to incorporate evidence unavailable to authors writing immediately after the war.

Writing Critical Book Reviews

The book review is one of the most common, and most commonly misunderstood, assignments in college. All too often students simply summarize the contents of a book, with little attempt to comprehend and comment critically on the author's major points. From what we have said above, however, it should be clear that a good book review provides critical commentary on the book in question: its purpose, major arguments, use of evidence, and presentation (organization and style). You should, of course, provide a brief summary of what the book is about, but it is more important to answer the question: "What unique ideas does this book present and is it worth reading?"

Use the following questions as a guide for writing critical book reviews. Do not try to answer each question in a mechanical way (some questions might not even be especially relevant to the book you are reading). Instead, ask yourself the following questions as you try to understand and evaluate the book. (Review as well the questions listed previously in the section on "Authors' Choices and Hidden Agendas," pp. 110–112.)

1. **What material does the book cover and what is the author's purpose in presenting that material?** Remember, there are almost no topics that haven't been considered before. Authors write books because they think they have something new or different to offer. Why does this author think another book on the subject is needed? At this point try to discern the author's approach to the subject (see p. 110)—i.e., is the book political history, economic history, religious history, social history, etc.?
2. **What is the thesis of the book and how does the author go about convincing you the thesis is valid?** Even if you disagree with the author's argument and conclusions, you should try to present the author's ideas fairly and sympathetically.[7] Discuss the book's thesis and central arguments in a way that would prompt even the author to say, "Yes, that's what I intended to say." In relaying the author's argument it is often helpful to tell your reader how the book is organized. Tell your reader why the book is organized the way it is. How does the organization reinforce the line of reasoning the author uses to advance the argument? If you have read other books on the same general topic, how does the interpretation (thesis) of this book differ from that of the others? Warning: be especially careful when thinking about the author's purpose and thesis (questions 1 and 2). If you are wrong on these points, your review won't make a lot of sense, nor will it be especially helpful to you or your readers.

[7] Thanks to our colleague Professor Kelly-Kate Pease for allowing us to incorporate some of the advice she gives her students about how to write book reviews.

Copyright © 2010 Harlan Davidson, Inc.