COLQ 2994H

Janssen

Critical Book Review

Kimberly asked the other day about the difference between a book “report” and this assignment. That is a very good question, and I have been thinking a lot about it and want to address it at the outset. In my experience, when I have had to write a book “report,” it was usually the kind of assignment that was simply testing whether or not I had actually done the reading. That is probably the most elementary form of writing about books.

Book *review*, on the other hand, is a fundamental scholarly and professional practice. There are various contexts in our culture for finding reviews of works in all media, from Amazon to *The New York Times Review of Books*. For years, I was the Book Review Editor of a scholarly journal, and the common denominator of all *critical* reviews is that you have to make a judgment about the value of the book based on careful analysis and examination of the contents, considering context and audience in the process. For the latter criteria, consider our class (the content and the group) as your readership. That seems kind of obvious, but it is worth emphasizing because you also want to keep in mind the ultimate purpose of this assignment: to expand the breadth and depth of our collective understanding and appreciation of the central theme of our class.

A *critical* book review also means that you base your evaluation of the material on the fundamental qualities of scholarly argument. You can find great examples of careful argumentation on Amazon, but you can also find loads of examples of writers spouting unsupported praise or complaint. Clearly, I expect you to avoid the latter. So, your review should have a worthwhile thesis that explains to readers your overall estimation of the book. In weighing both the good and the bad, of course, you should support your ideas with evidence using quotation and summary. Also, considering the context and audience, it is perfectly acceptable to make references to other works we have read. If you are reading a book that, in your estimation, fits in the genre of *dystopia*, it is fine to draw a specific comparison or contrast to, say, *Brave New World*. Also, you should incorporate at least 3 other reviews in yours. We will examine several examples of book reviews in the next couple weeks, and I will also make suggestions of places you can go to look for reviews of your book.

Your review should be 750-1,000 words long. It should be double-spaced, using MLA style for documentation.

Book reviews are due on 10/16. That week will be devoted to presentations of reviews, and you will receive a grade for the review and one for the presentation, as listed on the syllabus. As we discussed, I would prefer to keep the rules for presentation informal, so it is really up to you *how* you choose to present. The presentation might be more of a supplement to the review itself. You may choose to put together a PowerPoint for the presentation, but that is not required. The only hard and fast rule about the presentation is that you should be prepared to talk with us for 7-10 minutes about your book.

One last rule of thumb to consider: all reviews depend on some amount of summary. In doing a book “report,” it might be acceptable to base the whole thing on summary. Though you will need some amount of summary in your review, it is important not to get carried away. You can assume that your readers have not already read the work; this is the reason, after all, that we have book reviews, to alert readers to material that is worth their time in our estimation and to warn them away from the unworthy. For your presentation, it will be fine if you spend a little more time doing summary work for us. The issue of *spoiling*, as in “spoiler alert,” is always a consideration in doing reviews. I will leave it up to you how to handle that problem.