

Teaching American History 2011

Historical Fiction Book Review Instructions

As part of your graduate credit for the Teaching American History course, each of you will read a book of adult historical fiction (selected book is cited below). Though you will all read the same book, you will be required to submit your own individual book review. General technical criteria and helpful questions to address when writing this review are listed below.

Your task is to evaluate a piece of historical fiction **AS A HISTORIAN**, assessing the historical context of the story, the extent of historical evidence used to create the characters and events, and the particular historical perspective of the author.

2011 BOOK SELECTION:

Berry, Don. *Moontrap* (Corvallis, OR: Oregon State University Press, 1962, reissued 2004).

Set in the Oregon Territory, *Moontrap* is a book of remarkable beauty and power about a man caught between his wild past and an uncertain future. The year is 1850, a transitional period in the new Oregon Territory, with settlers and lawmakers working to subdue the untamed region. Johnson Monday, a former mountain man, has been living on a bend of the Willamette River near Oregon City with his Shoshone wife, struggling to make a place in settled society. Nominated for a National Book Award and winner of the Spur Award of the Western Writers of America for best historical novel, *Moontrap* recounts the conflict one man faces in choosing between his old ways or forging a new life.

**YOUR BOOK REVIEW IS DUE NO LATER THAN 4:00PM ON
WEDNESDAY, MARCH 30, 2011.**

Technical Specifications for the Review:

1. The book review should be 5-7 double-spaced pages, in 12 pt. font.
2. The title of the review should be the complete citation of the book (see book citation).
3. Any quotes taken from the book should be followed by the page number in parentheses.
4. Any outside references used in the review should have an in-text citation (author, date) with a reference section at the end of the review listing the full citation.
5. Your name should be on the first page of the review (right justified).

General Criteria for Assessment of Written Work:

1. Clarity, conciseness and completeness.
 - You address assignment/activity guidelines and expectations.
 - Your thesis and main points are clear, well-organized, and well-supported with examples, descriptive details, explanations, and evidence from readings or observations.
2. Insightful reflection about and critique of book.
3. Authenticity and conviction. Your own voice, experience, and expertise come through!
4. Effective and appropriate use of language conventions to communicate with audience/reader.
5. Professional and ethical use of source material if used. You include in-text citations for quoted materials and a complete list of references at the end of your work.

CONSTRUCTING A BOOK REVIEW

Even though a book review asks you to provide an opinion of the work, make sure that your views are based on evidence from the book and not on personal feelings.

Book reviews ordinarily incorporate two parts. The first provides a short synthesis of the contents, conveying some idea of the book's subject and how the author addresses it. What is the historical context of the book? Who are the characters? How do they elucidate historical events? The second sets forth a critical evaluation and asks most essentially, does the book articulate believable, verifiable, and legitimate historical claims? To what extent does the author use historical evidence to construct the story? In other words, the reviewer must look out for signs of bias, prejudice, distortion, and misrepresentation and then arrive at an appraisal accordingly.

The following sections can be used to help conduct and organize a review. Not all sections or questions may be relevant, but are presented to provide general guidelines.

Reading the book: Upon finishing each chapter, you may want to write out a brief summary while it is fresh in your mind. Record your thoughts about the story and its believability, not just what happened.

The author: Who is or was the author? What clues does the book give you about the author's own time and perspective? The author's racial, geographical, cultural and intellectual background is often very important and provides insight into the particular approach or perspective the author takes with the subject matter. [Berry was part of the group of quasi-Beats at Reed College in the 1950s who were very disaffected with modern American life, so in this case the author's point of view is very important.]

Summary of the contents of the book: The summary should be a brief and analytical discussion of the subject matter of the book, not a mere enumeration of the chapter topics. Provide a synthesis that clearly articulates the context of the book and the story it is telling.

Historical range of the book: What range is covered, both chronologically and topically? Why might the author begin and end the story when he/she does? Are there events/people that you consider critical to this topic that were excluded? Why might that be and how might inclusion of additional information change the story?

Emphasis: What does the author consider the most important material presented? What factors – e.g. political, economic, psychological, sociological, philosophical – are emphasized and why? How well or accurately do you think the author captures the ethos of the time he/she is writing about? Does the story seem plausible?

Point of view or bias: Does the author appear to sympathize or identify with any particular social class or group? Does he/she reveal personal convictions as to the merits of economic, political, cultural or other practices? Do the characters reveal a multi-layers approach to the historical topic?

Sources used: Is there evidence that the author used original/primary sources to build the story? What are they? Does the story revolve around actual events or people? How do the characters and scenes in the story adhere to or perhaps distort the historical "facts"?

Contribution of the book: What is this book's place in the literature on the subject? What was its impact on you, the reader? How might this book help other young adults with the subject matter?