

Ten Prompts to Get You Writing Book Reviews

by Nina Murray

Welcome! I have written many book reviews, and I am still writing them. A book review was my first publication as a-new-to-America grad student. I had a job (free-lance) writing book reviews. In 2021, I founded [The Alma Review](#), a blog dedicated to book reviews. Of books written by people from Kazakhstan.

This handbook will not tell you what books to read, or how to time your reviews. You'll figure that out. Instead, I am here with ten creative prompts that are designed to help you generate new ideas for your reviews.

This—ideas, or ways to approach discussing a book—I find the hardest to generate in my own reviewing practice and the most reliable source of procrastination. Often, I end up postponing writing about a book because I *think* I'm not ready to say anything. Inevitably, when I start writing, I discover I have all sorts of things to say. Now I want to help you do the same: cut through the noise and end procrastination.

But first:

Ten reasons why you should be writing book reviews

1. You completely control what books you want to review. You set your own deadlines (unless you have managed to turn this into a job, in which case, awesome!). You are free to choose the genres and authors you focus on, or to have no special focus at all.
2. Writing book reviews makes you a better reader.
3. Writing book reviews is *writing*, so it also makes you a better writer.
4. There are many places where you can publish your book reviews (when they are good!), from academic journals to blogs and podcasts. They are easy to find.
5. If you can read in languages other than English, your reviews help make writers from other parts of the world visible. And that's #doinggood in the world!
6. On Amazon and Goodreads, your book reviews appear linked to your Author profile—they help build your brand. If you are not an author, don't worry. One day you will be.
7. Writing a book review is a low-cost way to do a great favor for a fellow writer.
8. So that, at some point in the future, you can ask them to reciprocate.
9. Or, a review is a great reason to get in touch with the author you admire (after you've published it, of course).
10. Book reviews are fun!

The Silver Bullet

I thought I'd start by giving you the fool-proof, best-ever, works-like-a-charm shortcut to reading more books and writing reviews faster. The silver bullet. The magic wand. The fairy dust.

And then I realized there isn't one.

Except maybe this one: *Take notes.*

Here's my first challenge:

As you read the book you plan to review next, keep a small notepad with you (I personally collect promotional and hotel notepads precisely for this purpose). I learned the hard way that the margins are really too small to fit any reasonable thoughts you might have as you read. Take notes. Maybe they are bits of language you find particularly striking, or really successful descriptions. Maybe they are just words and phrases (for poetry readers out there).

Write down the questions that occur to you as you read. A reliable one in poetry is, Who is 'you'?

When you are done reading for the day, take a moment to jot down how you feel and what you think.

Notes are my shortcut into writing the review, because, let's face it, it's a lot easier to start with something someone else has said (i.e. a quote) than to plunge head-first into the uncharted waters of one's own half-formed opinion. For poets like myself, they can also be an excellent learning tool, because, while good writers borrow from other writers, great ones steal outright.

As you get into the habit of taking notes, you will also find out at what point in your reading you form your opinion of the book. If you follow a particular author, your notes will also help you trace what they do differently from book-to-book.

Place

Focus on the setting: choose a book that is intensely about a place or places. How do you know that the physical location, the geographical setting is important? Consider the ways in which the environment defines the story, and then focus on the language--to what lengths does the author pursue his/her commitment to the very particular and concrete realities of the place?

I read some very place-bound books in the last few months: *Waterland* by Graham Swift and *A Thousand Acres* by Jane Smiley to name just the standouts.

Place is also inextricably bound with time, the flow of events and the speed at which the story unravels. If I were a closer observer, I would likely find that there is a similar relationship between the place-time—the chronotope, as Dr. Bakhtin called it—and the pace of the poetic composition. In *Waterland*, set in a lock house on a channel in East Anglia, events occur with the flow of water—to and away from the lock, to and away from the town, carrying what will float.

In *A Thousand Acres* the large and prosperous farm imposes and enforces routines of both work and thought—right up until it's broken up and no longer does.

Finally, if you are seriously intrigued by these questions, let me refer you to the online course from the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa, called Stories of Place—it is free to take, and full of suggested readings and thoughtful discussion.

The Body

Much as a story unfolds in a physical place, humans experience themselves, in complicated and sometimes painful ways, in their bodies.

In your next review, take the opportunity to discuss the relationship between certain characters and their bodies, or, if you are reading poetry, between the voice and the lived experience. Is the body a source of joy, frustration, shame? Does it call attention to itself? Is the voice, therefore, dis-embodied, remote, or intensely physical? Finally, are the events that happen in the body (injuries, pregnancies, transformations) predictable or unexpected?

Bodies—and their functions—are so familiar to us that we take many for granted. Because bodies are also sites of social and sometimes political control (as when a government mandates what clothes one is and is not allowed to wear), they can become sites of resistance, violence, conflict. The idea may be noble, but the lived experience of such instances is horrific. What does it do to a person to experience one's body as a tool of one's oppression? How does language reflect that?

On the other hand, breaking free from assumptions about bodies can generate incredibly imaginative, refreshing literature. Case in point—*The Left Hand of Darkness*, by Ursula LeGuin (no spoilers, you have to read it) and the Broken Earth trilogy by [N. K. Jamisin](#).

This very short poem is my comment on the apparent package of reactions women's bodies are assigned to produce:

G
google
 gloat
goad
grope gag
gore gut

Motion

It occurs to me that in literature, bodies at rest do not, often, tend to remain at rest, thus defying Newtonian physics. As we discussed previously, even places that appear to be the epitome of rock-solid (a castle, a fort, a farm) tend to have calamity brought into them, frequently with dire consequences. The opposite of a body at rest is, of course, a body in motion, and my challenge today is two-fold:

Write about a book you are reading (or listening to) on your commute. How does being in motion affect your experience of the book? Do you remember it differently?

Also, consider writing about a book that takes movement as its explicit theme or central metaphor. My example here is the lovely Run by Ann Patchett, which I recommend highly.

Make a list of motion-themed books and publish it!

My short poetic comment below communicates the experience of riding in a car across Estonian countryside in mid-March.

piebald fields
race by
in streaks of blue
white
tan
snow dreaming of being water again
in the rippling shadows
the land is taut
where boulders bulge
knuckles of a restless god
the sky ennobling and chaste—
an arctic

Supporting Characters

It is often the case with fiction that the protagonist is the person we get to know best in the book.

This is fair. Novelists have a finite amount of energy and imagination, and constructing a compelling narrative takes discipline and focus. Plus, there's nothing wrong with compelling protagonists—case in point, Claire. You know who I'm talking about.

The difference between competent fiction and great fiction, sometimes, is in the supporting cast. A great story (short stories as much as novels) has room for more than one emotional arc; its heart is big enough to ache for more than one character. Of the books I read recently, Future Home of the Living God had some outstanding secondary characters (who, quite possibly, outshone the protagonist at several points in the book). Another good example of even-handed handling of characters is the TV series Sinner, based on a book by Petra Hammesfahr. So here's the next challenge:

In your next review, focus on supporting characters in the book. Are they accorded a fair share of authorial interest and empathy? Do they travel narrative paths of their own? Do you, as a reader, get a sense of them as independent and peculiar human beings?

Community

As the protagonist (or the speaker in poetry) claims the focus of your attention, consider him/her, nonetheless, as existing at the center of concentric circles. The tightest, most intimate, perhaps, is his/her body. The physical setting and supporting characters shape the next circles, and beyond them lies the wider circle of the community in which the action takes place. In the poetry collection *Line Study of a Motel Clerk*, by Allison Pitinii Davis, this community is Pittsburgh, and its physical as well as linguistic peculiarities define and shape both the experience of the people she writes about and the language she uses. From the realm of fiction, Richard Russo (especially in *Empire Falls*) is a writer extraordinarily attuned to the way his characters fit—or do not fit—into the social and economic fabric of a town. Part of this dimension, of course, is memory, but I'll save that for another post, and meanwhile, here's the next challenge:

In your next review, focus on the way the story (sentiment, if it's poetry) ripples through the wider space of the surrounding community. Do the social and economic arrangements of the town/apartment block/country come to bear on the actions, feelings, or perceptions of the characters? Does the local community contribute to the conflict that drives the action? Is the group tightly knit and isolated, or disconnected and aloof? Is it, above all, credible in its role and reactions to what happens in the narrative? If not, why?

Memory

Shared memory, in addition to shared space and time, is what makes a community what it is; in real life, we all function within a network (a rhizome, if you will) of other people's and our own experiences, beliefs, and references. An individual might fit well into this network, or not at all. This, I think, is what this Margaret Atwood quote is about:

“All stories are about wolves. All worth repeating, that is. Anything else is sentimental drivel.

All of them?

Sure, he says. Think about it. There's escaping from the wolves, fighting the wolves, capturing the wolves, taming the wolves. Being thrown to the wolves, or throwing others to the wolves so the wolves will eat them instead of you. Running with the wolf pack. Turning into a wolf. Best of all, turning into the head wolf. No other decent stories exist.”

The interesting thing about books is that every reader begins a book completely naive--innocent of the world in which the characters live. Each book, then, has to meet a reader in his/her innocent state and guide him/her somehow into a shared experience of a fictional world. The other interesting thing about books is that a reader's mind is free from the constraints that bind individual characters -- a reader can simultaneously know what multiple characters know, but do not share with each other. When a work of literature uses this phenomenon to effects of its own devising, I call that "quantum narratology."

Here's the prompt for the week:

In the next book you read, attend to the landscape of the characters'/speakers' imagination: is he/she inside or outside the collective memory of the community? How does that position define their actions? Does he/she know more or less than others, and how able is he/she to share that knowledge and perspective? Is the position of the protagonist vis-a-vis the collective memory realistic and believable? Is it well scaffolded in the circumstances of the narrative? Finally, does the fabric of memory enrich the narrative or obscure it, and is this effect intentional?

Foreign and Domestic

For most people the experience of being a foreigner is brought on by the experience of traveling to a new place, especially one where folks speak a different language. This does not have to be a foreign country (I would make a joke about Brooklyn here, but I'm not from New York, so do not feel properly entitled to one): It may be enough to go to a new school, or start a new job, or just go shopping in a different neighborhood. A new language may be the language of a new profession, new class, or even a new family.

The consequences of not fitting in range from some mildly awkward to life-threatening. The experience of foreignness, similarly, can be anything from enlightening to traumatizing.

In the next book you read, focus on characters who are foreign or alien to others. Is their foreignness the result of unalterable circumstances or willful rejection? How does it affect them? How does it affect the community that perceives them as foreign? Are there characters who feel alienated from themselves? What is that like? How is this dimension of their existence reflected in the writing?

Metaphor

Metaphor is both fundamental and elusive.

Metaphor is an essential tool of imaginative writing (of all genres) as well as thinking. It is, for everyone who might still be fuzzy on the definition, a juxtaposition of seemingly unrelated things, images, or concepts that illuminates them in an unexpected way. Metaphoric thinking—the ability to make a leap from X to M—distinguishes humans from animals (and robots, if you are into that kind of thing). I have many, many things to say on the topic of metaphor, and I will work to parcel them out and articulate my ideas clearly.

Sticking to literature, for the moment, metaphors, like Christmas songs, can be well-worn and therefore either comforting or boring (usually the latter), or freshly invented and either successful or not. As a curious cultural aside, different languages appear to have different tolerance for conceptual distance between the elements of a metaphor—a phenomenon that gives me no end of grief in my translation practice. For example, in Russian and Ukrainian it is perfectly fine to mix senses whereas to an English-speaking reader that would be so weird that I can't even think of an example right now.

Metaphor, being the workhorse of poetry, is most often associated with that form of literature, but that doesn't mean that it has no business in prose. Obviously, a rich metaphoric language is a choice many writers make for their narrators or individual characters. Others conceive of whole plot lines that serve as metaphors (this is much harder).

Because this is my last prompt, I will make it a little different.

Instead of asking you to look for a metaphor in the next book you read, I invite you to think of one to describe the book, and make that the anchor of your review. Is the book at hand a glass of Pinot Grigio? A golden retriever? A hand-made quilt? A steam-punk brass band? Go forth and tell us.