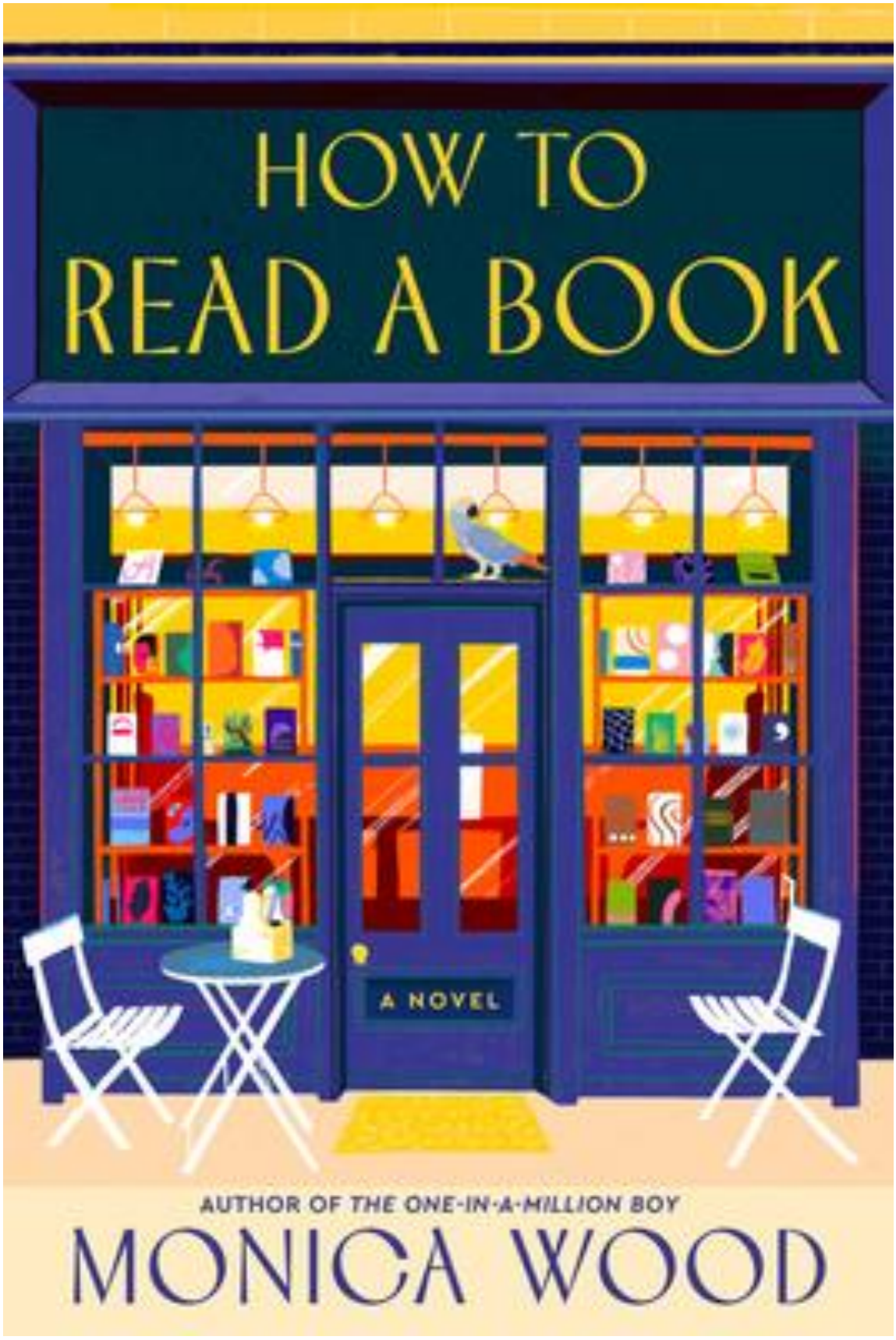
HOW TO
READ A BOOK
A NOVEL
AUTHOR OF THE ONE-IN-A-MILLION BOY
MONICA WOOD

Chapter 10

Criticizing a Book Fairly

We said at the end of the last chapter that we had come a long way. We have learned how to outline a book. We have learned the four rules for interpreting a book's contents. We are now ready for the last stage of analytical reading. Here you will reap the reward of all your previous efforts. Reading a book is a kind of conversation. You may think it is not conversation at all, because the author does all the talking and you have nothing to say. If you think that, you do not realize your full obligation as a reader—and you are not grasping your opportunities. As a matter of fact, the reader is the one who has the last word. The author has had his say, and then it is the reader's turn. The conversation between a book and its reader would appear to be an orderly one, each party talking in turn, no interruptions, and so forth. If, however, the reader is undisciplined and impolite, it may be anything but orderly. The poor author cannot defend himself. He cannot say, "Here, wait till I've finished, before you start disagreeing." He cannot protest that the reader has misunderstood him, has missed his point. Ordinary conversations between persons who confront each other are good only when they are carried on civilly. We are not thinking merely of the civilities according to conventions of social politeness. Such conventions are not really important.

What is important is that there is an intellectual etiquette to be observed. Without it, conversation is bickering rather than profitable communication. We are assuming here, of course, that the conversation is about a serious matter on which men can agree or disagree. Then it becomes important that they conduct themselves well. Otherwise, there is no profit in the enterprise. The profit in good conversation is something learned. What is true of ordinary conversation is even more true of the rather special situation in which a book has talked to a reader and the reader talks back. That the author is well disciplined, we will take for granted temporarily. That he has conducted his part of the conversation well can be assumed in the case of good books. What can the reader do to reciprocate? What must he do to hold up his end well? The reader has an obligation as well as an opportunity to talk back. The 93 CHAPTER 10. CRITICIZING A BOOK FAIRLY 94 opportunity is clear. Nothing can stop a reader from pronouncing judgment. The roots of the obligation, however, lie a little deeper in the nature of the relation between books and readers. If the book is of the sort that conveys knowledge, the author's aim was to instruct. He has tried to teach. He has tried to convince or persuade his reader about something. His effort is crowned with success only if the reader finally says, "I am taught. You have convinced me that such and such is true, or persuaded me that it is probable." But even if the reader is not convinced or persuaded, the author's intention and effort should be respected. The reader owes him a considered judgment. If he

cannot say, “I agree,” he should at least have grounds for disagreeing or even for suspending judgment on the question. We are really saying no more than what we have already said many times. A good book deserves an active reading. The activity of reading does not stop with the work of understanding what a book says. It must be completed by the work of criticism, the work of judging. The undemanding reader fails to satisfy this requirement, probably even more than he fails to analyze and interpret. He not only makes no effort to understand; he also dismisses a book simply by putting it aside and forgetting it. Worse than faintly praising it, he damns it by giving it no critical consideration whatever. Teachability as a Virtue What we mean by talking back is not something apart from reading. It is the third stage in the analytical reading of a book; and there are rules here as in the case of the first two stages. Some of these rules are general maxims of intellectual etiquette. We will deal with them in this chapter. Others are more specific criteria for defining points of criticism. They will be discussed in the next chapter. There is a tendency to think that a good book is above the criticism of the average reader. The reader and the author are not peers. The author, according to this view, should be subjected to a trial only by a jury of his peers. Remember Bacon’s recommendation to the reader: “Read not to contradict and confute; nor to believe and take for granted; nor to find talk and discourse; but to weigh and consider.” Sir Walter Scott casts even more dire aspersions on those “who read to doubt or read to scorn.” There is a certain

truth here, of course, but there is also a good deal of nonsense about the aura of impeccability with which books are thus surrounded, and the false piety it produces. Readers may be like children, in the sense that great authors can teach them, but that does not mean they must not be heard from. Cervantes may or not have been right in saying, “There is no book so bad but something good may be found in it.” It is more certain that there is no book so good that no fault can be found with it. It is true that a book that can enlighten its readers, and is in this sense superior to them, should not be criticized by them until they understand it. When they do, they have elevated themselves almost to equality with the author. CHAPTER 10. CRITICIZING A BOOK FAIRLY 95 Now they are fit to exercise the rights and privileges of their new position. Unless they exercise their critical faculties now, they are doing the author an injustice. He has done what he could to make them his equal. He deserves that they act like his peers, that they engage in conversation with him, that they talk back. We are discussing here the virtue of teachability—a virtue that is almost always misunderstood. Teachability is often confused with subservience. A person is wrongly thought to be teachable if he is passive and pliable. On the contrary, teachability is an extremely active virtue. No one is really teachable who does not freely exercise his power of independent judgment. He can be trained, perhaps, but not taught. The most teachable reader is, therefore, the most critical. He is the reader who finally responds to a book by the greatest effort to make up his own

mind on the matters the author has discussed. We say “finally” because teachability requires that a teacher be fully heard and, more than that, understood before he is judged. We should add also that sheer amount of effort is not an adequate criterion of teachability. The reader must know how to judge a book, just as he must know how to arrive at an understanding of its contents. This third group of rules for reading, then, is a guide to the last stage in the disciplined exercise of teachability. The Role of Rhetoric We have everywhere found a certain reciprocity between the art of teaching and the art of being taught, between the skill of the author that makes him a considerate writer and the skill of the reader that makes him handle a book with consideration. We have seen how the same principles of grammar and logic underlie rules of good writing as well as rules of good reading. The rules we have so far discussed concern the achievement of intelligibility on the part of the writer and the achievement of understanding on the part of the reader. This last set of rules goes beyond understanding to critical judgment. Here is where rhetoric comes in. There are, of course, many uses of rhetoric. We usually think of it in connection with the orator or the propagandist. But in its most general significance, rhetoric is involved in every situation in which communication takes place among human beings. If we are the talkers, we wish not only to be understood but also to be agreed with in some sense. If our purpose in trying to communicate is serious, we wish to convince or persuade—more precisely, to convince about theoretical matters and to

persuade about matters that ultimately affect action or feeling. To be equally serious in receiving such communication, one must be not only a responsive but also a responsible listener. You are responsive to the extent that you follow what has been said and note the intention that prompts it. But you also have the responsibility of taking a position. When you take it, it is yours, not the author's. To regard anyone except yourself as responsible for your judgment is to be a slave, not a free man. It is from this fact that the liberal arts acquire their name. CHAPTER 10. CRITICIZING A BOOK FAIRLY 96 On the part of the speaker or writer, rhetorical skill is knowing how to convince or persuade. Since this is the ultimate end in view, all the other aspects of communication must serve it. Grammatical and logical skill in writing clearly and intelligibly has merit in itself, but it is also a means to an end. Reciprocally, on the part of the reader or listener, rhetorical skill is knowing how to react to anyone who tries to convince or persuade us. Here, too, grammatical and logical skill, which enables us to understand what is being said, prepares the way for a critical reaction. The Importance of Suspending Judgment Thus you see how the three arts of grammar, logic, and rhetoric cooperate in regulating the elaborate processes of writing and reading. Skill in the first two stages of analytical reading comes from a mastery of grammar and logic. Skill in the third stage depends on the remaining art. The rules of this stage of reading rest on the principles of rhetoric, conceived in the broadest sense. We will consider them as a code of etiquette to make the reader

not only polite, but also effective, in talking back. (Although it is not generally recognized, etiquette always serves these two purposes, not just the former.) You probably also see what the ninth rule of reading is going to be. It has been intimated several times already. Do not begin to talk back until you have listened carefully and are sure you understand. Not until you are honestly satisfied that you have accomplished the first two stages of reading should you feel free to express yourself. When you have, you not only have earned the right to tum critic; you also have the duty to do so. This means, in effect, that the third stage of analytical reading must always follow the other two in time. The first two stages interpenetrate each other. Even the beginning reader can combine them somewhat, and the expert combines them almost completely. He can discover the contents of a book by breaking down the whole into its parts and at the same time constructing the whole out of its elements of thought and knowledge, its terms, propositions, and arguments. Furthermore, even for the beginner, a certain amount of the work required at those two stages can be performed during a good inspectional reading. But the expert no less than the beginner must wait until he understands before he starts to criticize. Let us restate this ninth rule of reading in the following form: Rule 9. You must be able to say, with reasonable certainty, “I understand,” before you can say any one of the following things: “I agree,” or “I disagree,” or “I suspend judgment.” These three remarks exhaust all the critical positions you can take. We hope you

have not made the error of supposing that to criticize is always to disagree. That is a popular misconception. To agree is just as much an exercise of critical judgment on your part as to disagree. You can be just as wrong in agreeing as in disagreeing. To agree without understanding is inane. To disagree without understanding is impudent. Though it may not be so obvious at first, suspending judgment is also an CHAPTER 10. CRITICIZING A BOOK FAIRLY 97 act of criticism. It is taking the position that something has not been shown. You are saying that you are not convinced or persuaded one way or the other. The rule seems to be such obvious common sense that you may wonder why we have bothered to state it so explicitly. There are two reasons. In the first place, many people make tht> error already mentioned of identifying criticism with disagreement. (Even "constructive" criticism is disagreement.) In the second place, though this rule seems obviously sound, our experience has been that few people observe it in practice. Like the golden rule, it elicits more lip service than intelligent obedience. Every author has had the experience of suffering book reviews by critics who did not feel obliged to do the work of the first two stages first. The critic too often thinks he does not have to be a reader as well as a judge. Every lecturer has also had the experience of having critical questions asked that were not based on any understanding of what he had said. You yourself may remember an occasion where someone said to a speaker, in one breath or at most two, "I don't know what you mean, but I think you're wrong." There is actually no point in

answering critics of this sort. The only polite thing to do is to ask them to state your position for you, the position they claim to be challenging. If they cannot do it satisfactorily, if they cannot repeat what you have said in their own words, you know that they do not understand, and you are entirely justified in ignoring their criticisms. They are irrelevant, as all criticism must be that is not based on understanding. When you find the rare person who shows that he understands what you are saying as well as you do, then you can delight in his agreement or be seriously disturbed by his dissent. In years of reading books with students of one kind and another, we have found this rule more honored in the breach than in the observance. Students who plainly do not know what the author is saying seem to have no hesitation in setting themselves up as his judges. They not only disagree with something they do not understand but, what is equally bad, they also often agree to a position they cannot express intelligibly in their own words. Their discussion, like their reading, is all words. Where understanding is not present, affirmations and denials are equally meaningless and unintelligible. Nor is a position of doubt or detachment any more intelligent in a reader who does not know what he is suspending judgment about. There are several further points to note concerning the observance of this rule. If you are reading a good book, you ought to hesitate before you say, “I understand.” The presumption certainly is that you have a lot of work to do before you can make that declaration honestly and with assurance. You must, of course,

be a judge of yourself in this matter, and that makes the responsibility even more severe. To say “I don’t understand” is, of course, also a critical judgment, but only after you have tried your hardest does it reflect on the book rather than yourself. If you have done everything that can be expected of you and still do not understand, it may be because the book is unintelligible. The presumption, however, is in favor of the book, especially if it is a good one. In reading good books, failure to understand is usually the reader’s fault. Hence he is obligated to stay CHAPTER 10. CRITICIZING A BOOK FAIRLY 98 with the task imposed by the first two stages of analytical reading a long time before entering on the third. When you say “I don’t understand,” watch your tone of voice. Be sure it concedes the possibility that it may not be the author’s fault. There are two other conditions under which the rule requires special care. If you are reading only part of a book, it is more difficult to be sure that you understand, and hence you should be more hesitant to criticize. And sometimes a book is related to other books by the same author, and depends upon them for its full significance. In this situation, also, you should be more circumspect about saying “I understand,” and slower to raise your critical lance. A good example of brashness in this last respect is furnished by literary critics who have agreed or disagreed with Aristotle’s Poetics without realizing that the main principles in Aristotle’s analysis of poetry depend in part on points made in other of his works, his treatises on psychology and logic and metaphysics. They have agreed or

disagreed without understanding what it is all about. The same is true of other writers, such as Plato and Kant, Adam Smith and Karl Marx, who have not been able to say everything they knew or thought in a single work. Those who judge Kant's Critique of Pure Reason without reading his Critique of Practical Reason, or Adam Smith's Wealth of Nations without reading his Theory of the Moral Sentiments, or The Communist Manifesto without Marx's Capital, are more likely than not to be agreeing or disagreeing with something they do not fully understand. The Importance of Avoiding Contentiousness The second general maxim of critical reading is as obvious as the first, but it needs explicit statement, nevertheless, and for the same reason. It is Rule 10, and it can be expressed thus: When you disagree, do so reasonably, and not disputatiously or contentiously. There is no point in winning an argument if you know or suspect you are wrong. Practically, of course, it may get you ahead in the world for a short time. But honesty is the better policy in the slightly longer run. We learned this maxim first from Plato and Aristotle. In a passage in the Symposium, this interchange occurs: I cannot refute you, Socrates, said Agathon: Let us assume that what you say is true. Say rather, Agathon, that you cannot refute the truth; for Socrates is easily refuted. The passage is echoed in a remark of Aristotle's in the Ethics. "It would be thought to be better," he says, indeed to be our duty, for the sake of maintaining the truth even to destroy what touches us closely, especially as we are philosophers CHAPTER 10. CRITICIZING A BOOK FAIRLY 99 or lovers of wisdom; for,

while both are dear, piety requires us to honor truth above our friends. Plato and Aristotle here give us advice that most people ignore. Most people think that winning the argument is what matters, not learning the truth. He who regards conversation as a battle can win only by being an antagonist, only by disagreeing successfully, whether he is right or wrong. The reader who approaches a book in this spirit reads it only to find something he can disagree with. For the disputatious and the contentious, a bone can always be found to pick a quarrel over. It makes no difference whether the bone is really a chip on your own shoulder. In a conversation that a reader has with a book in the privacy of his own study, there is nothing to prevent the reader from seeming to win the argument. He can dominate the situation. The author is not there to defend himself. If all he wants is the empty satisfaction of seeming to show the author up, the reader can get it readily. He scarcely has to read the book through to get it. Glancing at the first few pages will suffice. But if he realizes that the only profit in conversation, with living or dead teachers, is what one can learn from them, if he realizes that you win only by gaining knowledge, not by knocking the other fellow down, he may see the futility of mere contentiousness. We are not saying that a reader should not ultimately disagree and try to show where the author is wrong. We are saying only that he should be as prepared to agree as to disagree. Whichever he does should be motivated by one consideration alone—the facts, the truth about the case. More than honesty is required here. It goes without saying that a

reader should admit a point when he sees it. But he also should not feel whipped by having to agree with an author, instead of dissenting. If he feels that way, he is inveterately disputatious. In the light of this second maxim, his problem is seen to be emotional rather than intellectual. On the Resolution of Disagreements The third maxim is closely related to the second. It states another condition prior to the undertaking of criticism. It recommends that you regard disagreements as capable of being resolved. Where the second maxim urged you not to disagree disputatiously, this one warns you against disagreeing hopelessly. One is hopeless about the fruitfulness of discussion if he does not recognize that all rational men can agree. Note that we said “can agree.” We did not say all rational men do agree. Even when they do not agree, they can. The point we are trying to make is that disagreement is futile agitation unless it is undertaken with the hope that it may lead to the resolution of an issue. These two facts, that people do disagree and can agree, arise from the complexity of human nature. Men are rational animals. Their rationality is the source of their power to agree. Their animality, and the impedections of their CHAPTER 10. CRITICIZING A BOOK FAIRLY 100 reason that it entails, is the cause of most of the disagreements that occur. Men are creatures of passion and prejudice. The language they must use to communicate is an impedect medium, clouded by emotion and colored by interest, as well as inadequately transparent for thought. Yet to the extent that men are rational, these obstacles to their understanding can be overcome. The sort of

disagreement that is only apparent, the sort that results from misunderstanding, is certainly curable. There is, of course, another sort of disagreement, which is owing merely to inequalities of knowledge. The relatively ignorant often wrongly disagree with the relatively learned about matters exceeding their knowledge. The more learned, however, have a right to be critical of errors made by those who lack relevant knowledge. Disagreement of this sort can also be corrected. Inequality of knowledge is always curable by instruction. There may still be other disagreements that are more deeply buried, and that may subsist in the body of reason itself. It is hard to be sure about these, and almost impossible for reason to describe them. In any event, what we have just said applies to the great majority of disagreements. They can be resolved by the removal of misunderstanding or of ignorance. Both cures are usually possible, though often difficult. Hence the person who, at any stage of a conversation, disagrees, should at least hope to reach agreement in the end. He should be as much prepared to have his own mind changed as seek to change the mind of another. He should always keep before him the possibility that he misunderstands or that he is ignorant on some point. No one who looks upon disagreement as an occasion for teaching another should forget that it is also an occasion for being taught. The trouble is that many people regard disagreement as unrelated to either teaching or being taught. They think that everything is just a matter of opinion. I have mine, and you have yours; and our right to our opinions is as inviolable as our

right to private property. On such a view, communication cannot be profitable if the profit to be gained is an increase in knowledge. Conversation is hardly better than a ping-pong game of opposed opinions, a game in which no one keeps score, no one wins, and everyone is satisfied because he does not lose—that is, he ends up holding the same opinions he started with. We would not—and could not—write this book if we held this view. Instead, we hold that knowledge can be communicated and that discussion can result in learning. If genuine knowledge, not mere personal opinion, is at stake, then, for the most part, either disagreements are apparent only—to be removed by coming to terms and a meeting of minds; or they are real, and the genuine issues can be resolved—in the long run, of course—by appeals to fact and reason. The maxim of rationality concerning disagreements is to be patient for the long run. We are saying, in short, that disagreements are arguable matters. And argument is empty unless it is undertaken on the supposition that there is attainable an understanding that, when attained by reason in the light of all the relevant evidence, resolves the original issues. How does this third maxim apply to the conversation between reader and writer? How can it be stated as a rule of reading? It deals with the situation CHAPTER 10. CRITICIZING A BOOK FAIRLY 101 in which the reader finds himself disagreeing with something in the book. It requires him first to be sure that the disagreement is not owing to misunderstanding. Suppose that the reader has been careful to observe the rule that he

must not render a critical judgment until he understands, and is therefore satisfied that there is no misunderstanding here. What then? This maxim then requires him to distinguish between genuine knowledge and mere opinion, and to regard an issue where knowledge is concerned as one that can be resolved. If he pursues the matter further, he may be instructed by the author on points that will change his mind. If that does not happen, he may be justified in his criticism, and, metaphorically at least, be able to instruct the author. He can at least hope that were the author alive and present, his mind could be changed. You may remember something that was said on this subject in the last chapter. If an author does not give reasons for his propositions, they can be treated only as expressions of personal opinions on his part. The reader who does not distinguish between the reasoned statement of knowledge and the flat expression of opinion is not reading to learn. He is at most interested in the author's personality and is using the book as a case history. Such a reader will, of course, neither agree nor disagree. He does not judge the book but the man. If, however, the reader is primarily interested in the book and not the man, he should take his critical obligations seriously. These involve applying the distinction between real knowledge and mere opinion to himself as well as to the author. Thus the reader must do more than make judgments of agreement or disagreement. He must give reasons for them. In the former case, of course, it suffices if he actively shares the author's reasons for the point on which they agree. But when

he disagrees, he must give his own grounds for doing so. Otherwise, he is treating a matter of knowledge as if it were opinion. Rule 11, therefore, can be stated as follows: Respect the difference between knowledge and mere personal opinion, by giving reasons for any critical judgment you make. Incidentally, we would not want to be understood as claiming that there is a great deal of "absolute" knowledge available to men. Self-evident propositions, in the sense in which we defined them in the previous chapter, seem to us to be both indemonstrable and undeniable truths. Most knowledge, however, lacks that degree of absoluteness. What we know, we know subject to correction; we know it because all, or at least the weight, of the evidence supports it, but we are not and cannot be certain that new evidence will not sometime invalidate what we now believe is true. This, however, does not remove the important distinction between knowledge and opinion that we have been stressing. Knowledge, if you please, consists in those opinions that can be defended, opinions for which there is evidence of one kind or another. If we really know something, in this sense, we must believe that we can convince others of what we know. Opinion, in the sense in which we have been employing the word, is unsupported judgment. That is why we have employed the modifiers "mere" or "personal" in conjunction with it. We can do no more than opine that something is true when we have no evidence or CHAPTER 10. CRITICIZING A BOOK FAIRLY 102 reason for the statement other than our personal feeling or prejudice. We can

say that it is true and that we know it when we have objective evidence that other reasonable men are likely to accept. Let us now summarize the three general maxims we have discussed in this chapter. The three together state the conditions of a critical reading and the manner in which the reader should proceed to “talk back” to the author. The first requires the reader to complete the task of understanding before rushing in. The second adjures him not to be disputatious or contentious. The third asks him to view disagreement about matters of knowledge as being generally remediable. This rule goes further: It also commands him to give reasons for his disagreements so that issues are not merely stated but also defined. In that lies all hope for resolution