

Secrets of Success for Reviewers

BOOK REVIEWS AND COLLECTION DEVELOPMENT

By Ellen G. Cole, Levine Library, Temple Isaiah, Los Angeles, CA

Description: This session will look at how to write book reviews and how librarians can use the reviews to help with acquisitions.

Ellen G. Cole, librarian of the Levine Library of Temple Isaiah in Los Angeles, is a well-known reviewer of Jewish books for children and adults. She is the 2007 recipient of the Fanny Goldstein Merit Award. Ellen is the just-retired co-editor of the Children's Review Section of the *AJL Newsletter*, a past chairperson of the Sydney Taylor Book Awards, and a speaker on children's books and creating home Jewish libraries. She taught the 2004 CEU class on Colonial Jewry. Ellen served two terms as president of her chapter, AJLSC, and is currently a board member; she is the honored recipient of their 2001 Dorothy Schroeder Award for outstanding service. Ellen received her MA from the Johns Hopkins Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, her BA from Goucher College, and her library training from HUC in LA.

THE news is that reviews are HOT news

Major Am newspapers in Big cities are cutting reviews

LA, Chicago, Atlanta, Raleigh, Cleveland, Dallas, Orlando

So many that

Speeches about it at book expo this year

Terrific article in *LAT*, my hometown paper

Points: 1) Book reviews – natch – sell

Pubs do not give most books an ad push

Esp. new authors find an audience from revws

2) Importantly – Reviews promote reading

Same fear in book and newspaper business:

Fear that people will stop reading

Readers of print are in dire risk of extinction

People who read books read newspapers

Fostering books fosters reading fosters papers

A Loss leader to build subscription base

If reviews for secular books are being reduced,

Think!

Ads and Reviews of J Children's Books are rare and getting rarer

Need professional journals or on line sources

Work done by AJL reviewers is vital

When you write a review you do a good deed for your colleagues, the author and the reading public

I have some ideas or secrets. Fewer than the 10 commandments - Only 4:

Know Thy Audience
Know Thy Publication
Know Thy Book
Know Thy Self

Secret 1: Know Thy Audience

I assume that this group
Is Composed of would be reviewers
For AJL and our Librarians who
 Look to your opinion as
 Their sound advice on what to buy
 Means budgeting choices and quality lit choices
 Can mean blame if choice tanks
These are Jewish readers who share your identity and click into your references
 Saves words for other points when need not explain

Need to be sensitive to all three branches of Judaism - and
You need to be aware that the *AJLN* now has a larger audience
 AJL reviews have a second mission
 Spread the word on fine Jewish books to a general audience
 Through the web
 All *AJLN* children's reviews are now mounted on the
 CLCD: The Children's Literature Comprehensive Database
 JBW reviews go on Amazon
Does not mean you lighten your Jewish emphasis
Does mean you write about style, content and character considering
 universal literary standards of excellence
A bad book with good Jewish content is still a bad book

Secret 2: Know Thy Publication

The Quarterly *AJL Newsletter*
 On Line w/ the (CLCD)
JBW from the JBC (on Line w/ Amazon reviews)

Similar Rules for Review Writing for both Publications
2003 AJL Task force brochure
disclosure: I was on that task force as (?was our moderator Cheryl?)
 as was
 AJLN Children's co-editor Linda Silver
 Current children's editor of *JBW*, Lisa Silverman

Brochure called:

Excellence in Jewish Children's Literature

Subtitle says it all: Guide for Selectors, Reviewers and Award Judges

Copy Here for you today (**HAND OUT**)

You can:

Find it on AJL's website

Once there, click on Publications, then click on the brochure's title

2007 Revised Guideline list by co-editors Linda Silver and Anne Dublin

The editors send each review book with Guidelines suggesting style

Rules focus and hinder, but you need to follow:

They will give you format – which ISBN

They suggest your choice of vocabulary

NO starting with “this”

NO insertion of the personal pronoun “I”

They suggest content and

which factors to evaluate in fiction and non-fiction,

picture books and chapter books.

They mandate writing with a **word constraint**

Tough control on your expression of your opinion

Helpful in producing a review for the publication you are writing for!

Secret 3: Know Thy Book

Let me count the ways!

First way: Decide:

Is this for children? Does it belong in the other / adult section?

Shifting to the right section is a fast way to honor your commitment

Second way: Decide:

Is this Jewish?

If no – make it clear Still do review for *AJLN*:

If editors rec'd or req'd a title as a J book

Then they send it to you as a J book

Because it looks like a J book, but it is not

Many could buy it in error

Third way: Decide: Where Am I?

Am I considering this for older or younger children

If you have a **picture book** consider if

Pics and words are on an equal grade level

Some books confuse this issue

Mix can be useless BUT

One can be useful that is: text **or** pic

Librarian needs to flag this confusion. Your revw helps them do it!

Ex. Greer Cashman's *Jewish Days and Holidays*

Adult oriented vocab and language – if use, teachers rephrase
Illustrated by Alon Frankel w/ super cute tykes like the “potty books”

Many Holocaust books are now pic books

Consider the time and place of the story

Ex: if in a camp is it a liberation story like

Let the Celebrations Begin:

Horror is over - Literalness of art can be digested

There is a place for smiles despite the shaved heads
and time for dolls without being phony or scary

It is different capturing a story in the midst of war

Maturity apparent in *The Cats in Krasinski Square* by Karen Hesse

The plot **and** the art are for older readers

A Jewish girl passing as an Aryan Pole plays with cats in the Sq

Her older sister is part of a resistance group smuggling food for

Jews in the ghetto into the city by train

Gestapo soldiers with snarling dogs line the station platform

The Jewish girl and her friends take the cats to the station and
deflect the dogs

The pictures are serious and colors somber

Lack of food and high walls conveys the predicament of the Jews

People doing courageous things are frightened; see it in the faces

Clothing and furniture convey the early 40's skillfully

One point in reviewing Hesse:

Flaps tout her Newbery, but not her 1992 STA (*Letters from Rivka*)

Pubs list books that ‘almost won’ secular prizes rather than the

Jewish book that did win. (*Cats* was an ‘04 Honor Book)

This is a common disease of our STA winners. Set in right in your revw

I note another example to help guide you in weighting words and pics

And **consistency** with reading level

Consider two picture biographies of Anne Frank

David Adler's 1993 book

Stresses Anne's nature and buoyancy in hiding

Very few stars on clothes

Only a few pictures show faces with distress

Adults are thoughtful rather than scared

Not until the end is their sadness or fear in this picture book

End is not Anne's end (not upbeat)

End is smiling liberated faces w/ people in prisoner's striped pj's

A fine example of delivering a hard topic to readers in grades 2-3

Josephine Poole's 2005 book

From the start the dominant grey color warns of depression & pain

Clothing bears obvious yellow stars

Bodies droop from pressures of ghetto living and hiding

Every face in every picture reveals worry, fear, fatigue, sorrow

Anne's face borders on tears

Faces with smiles are in pics life prior to the Nazis
The details of Anne's life include the horrors in the outside world
Brilliant example delivering a tough topic thru words & art for gr 4-6

If it is a teen age novel

Plot and characters should reflect a genuine adolescent experience
What does a teen think - not what does an adult think
Language needs to be age appropriate
Reviews need to warn of sex, violence, or death
Many parents and some kids do not want this (they will say – ex. Holo)
Check with your own teens or students if words or situations don't sit right

Fiction for children must not take short cuts because grown ups are not reading it
Fiction can give us more truth than history
Fiction reveals the human condition and dilutes the sense of being alone
This sense of community is necessary at any age

Fourth way considers how do I best describe this book?

Worry Not

It's spelled out in the afore mentioned *Excellence* Brochure
Use it and it will solve a lot of problems and help you describe

Plot and Characters

Language and Writing skills

Illustrations and Lay out

Authenticity

Jewish Content

OK if fiction is light on J content (mainstream novels)

Mainstream novels reflect the lives of many Reform J
children and Validate their identity

Bios of famous people are light as many

No longer practicing Jews

Imp as:

1) Give Role Models who are J

2) Stress possibilities open in the US for minorities

Our libraries should claim marginal Jews even if Sendak is less J
than Einstein and Gehry is less than Sendak

Secret 4: Know Thy Self

Did you like the book?

Say why or why not - or both if occasion arises

Remember reviewing and judging are fancy words for opinion

That opinion is namely yours!

Critical opinion is a good thing and that includes your critical opinion

Do not be afraid to of your tastes

your years of experience or

your newcomer status of fresh eye & novelty

Think of your review as a conversation with a colleague and friend

Where you are sharing your opinion to help

With this secret in mind -

The writing will flow and you will find yourself

Promoting fine Jewish Lit

Drawing attention to authors

Pleasing editors and publishers

And Helping fellow librarians make choices and serve readers

Thank You