**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 review 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*)
Publishers 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