

Introduction

In 1967, when I became a reviewer for *Booklist*, a grande dame named Edna Vanek had been the editor in chief since the year I was born. I thought she looked like the stereotypical librarian. Now I look exactly the same way, but then I was wearing bell-bottom jeans and wailing over the cartons after cartons of books that kept coming in. Finally, when five boxes of Franklin Watts books arrived on the same day, I went and flopped down in her office and said, “What am I going to do with all these books?” She looked at me with steely eyes and not a hair out of place and said, “Just take them one book at a time.”

I still have the same problem today with all these books, and I don't know that I have a better solution. I've been a professional children's book reviewer for 25 years—which means that I've edited 20 volumes of book review journals and have dealt with about 100,000 new juvenile trade books outside of those I encountered in my earlier work as a school and public librarian. For 15 of those years, I have been in the acutely uncomfortable position of being reviewed as well as reviewing—which has occasioned some hypersensitivity about both camps. I've also spent 24 years being the parent of one or another young child, a phenomenon accounted for by having children far too far apart. And now I teach children's literature to college children who think that they are grown up, or I expound upon the importance of children's literature to university administrators and faculty members who think that *they* are grown up. And through it all, I continue to review about

seven children's books a week. One a day. Just like I take my vitamins. Outside of the occasional nervous rash, the surest thing I have gleaned from all this is an awareness of seasonal, social, economic, and aesthetic cycles in children's books.

Juvenile publishing is in an unprecedented success cycle, which causes, ironically, unprecedented problems for creators, reviewers, and consumers of children's books. A popularized market has dictated more quantity and less quality control than ever before. Financial bonanzas have generated more glitz and less durability. Librarians, teachers, and reviewers come close to being overwhelmed by the sheer numbers and by the subsequent pressure to make choices quickly but effectively. Yet the process of evaluating a book takes just as long as it used to. The process of reading a book to a child takes just as long as it used to. And balancing a book budget takes a lot longer.

Selection now implies more selectivity than in any other time in the history of children's literature. In children's literature, selection depends primarily on reviews. Few professionals have access to examination centers that receive all the juvenile books published every year. Reviewing at every level, from the published journal to the list annotated by a librarian or school library staff, is more basic to this field than it is to any other. We are too new to have established a traditional canon, a Pulitzer Prize, a reliable best-seller list, or even a steady foothold of attention in the media. Yet children's literature has always been central to children's librarianship, and it has become, commendably, more central for teaching children in public and private schools. Evaluation is central to children's literature, and evaluation is most often evinced in reviews.

To review means, literally, to look again, from the French *revoir*. It is a reviewer's work to read a book, to look for deeper understanding, and to find a clear expression of that understanding. I would argue that all persons involved in evaluation and selection are, to some extent, reviewers. All reviewers must resist the pressure to slide over the surface, must push beyond the practical to reach critical perception.

Let me outline some of the problems I see in reviewing books, evaluating books, and consuming books. How do seasonal rushes and publishing cycles affect our reactions and even our judgment? How do we juggle points of view when the critic, reviewer, librarian, parent, and child voices within ourselves don't always agree? What do we do when quality, popularity, and usefulness conflict in the evaluation of a book? How do we weigh a summary recommendation when text and illustration vary in quality? How do we deal with interesting failures versus mediocre successes in reviewing children's books? How do we detect new trends, cycles, subjects, and styles? How do we deal with glamorous packaging and celebrity names? How do we stay in touch

with kids? How do we balance immediate effects with long-term durability when speed and quantity pressure our reviews? How do we deal with social and political bias in a book? How do we deal with our own subjectivity? How do we deal with what we decide are controversial elements without censoring the book at the reviewing stage? What do we do as review editors when someone submits a review that we have real trouble with in terms of basic judgment? How do we avoid ruts and jading as reviewers? How do we deal with a broad scope of needs among our subscribers? How do we deal with subject specialties such as physics and hard sciences? And finally, lately, how do we balance aesthetic criteria with social pressures to be politically correct? We'd like to address some of these questions in the course of our conference on evaluating children's books. There are many answers to some, and there are no answers to others. To most questions, each reviewer—that is, each of us—must find her own answers—the more carefully considered the better. Welcome aboard.

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