

Interview with Avi

Q. Did you make a conscious decision at some point to devote your career to writing for young people, or is that just kind of how it turned out?

A. I made up my mind to be a writer when I was a senior in high school. (I know the exact date because I recorded my decision in a diary.) Back then, I wanted to be a Broadway playwright. I wrote many plays, not good ones (though once, someone did want to put one of my plays on Broadway). It was when I had kids of my own that I moved to writing books for young people. That said, my playwriting years have influenced my writing.

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A. *Things that Sometimes Happen* was first published in 1970. A reissued version is still in print. That book was written for my first child, Shaun. Writing it and sharing books with my kids brought me back to my childhood reading, which, thanks to my mother, was extensive. Having rediscovered books for kids, I realized how much I loved them. From then on, I devoted my writing to books for children.

Q. Has publishing changed over the years?

A. From where I sit, the big changes have been in the writer-editor relationship. The old way was with remarkably close working bonds. Those kinds of bonds—particularly since the covid pandemic—for the most part, have been weakened.

Q. You've been honored with some of the most prestigious awards for children's literature. Has that changed the way you approach writing?

A. If anything, writing has become harder, as my own standards keep going up, and I think expectations of those who review, react, judge, etc., go up too. There is more uninformed criticism (blogs and the like) and less knowledge of good writing.

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Q. Why have you written so many different types of books in so many different genres?

A. I never studied writing in any formal sense, so I was not taught to find a “voice.” I taught myself to write by reading, and by imitating what I was reading and enjoying. Every book is its own book.

Q. You were going by just the name “Avi” long before Madonna, Prince, or Beyoncé became one-name celebrities. How did you decide to use that name for your writing?

A. As a young adult, I was a reader of French literature, which has that one-name tradition: Moliere, Racine, Anouilh, Gide, and so forth. Then too, Avi (which is not my birth certificate name) was given to me by my twin sister when we were infants, and it stuck. Then my family was opposed to my becoming a writer because they considered my writing poor (which it was, then). By using my own name (Avi), I was having my revenge on my family.

Q. You were born in New York and now live in Colorado. How does “place” affect your writing?

A. I do not think it does very much.

Q. What is a typical day like for you?

A. My writing day starts early and does not really stop. One writes, one thinks, one reads, one lives, one connects with the world—all that is writing.

Q. How do you connect with your readers beyond the books themselves? Can you tell us about one or two times you were especially moved by, or amused by, making a connection with a young fan?

A. I have been touched many times by readers who find some special connection between their lives and something I have written: The Danish girl who read something of my mine in Danish, and struggled to communicate that in her halting English; the autistic boy, who somehow found something meaningful about my books that reached his own inner life; the women who have told me how much *The True Confessions of*

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Charlotte Doyle meant to them when growing up; the boy who felt a new sense of courage after reading Crispin. In short, from those kids (and adults) who find themselves in my work. Then there are the adults who read my books when younger, then rediscover them as parents, teachers, and librarians—and let me know how meaningful they were to them.

Q. Educators and librarians form a vital bridge between children’s book writers and young readers. Is there a message you hope to pass along to those educators and librarians?

A. Beyond parents, teachers and librarians can be the most important people in a kid’s life. To create, share, and support the gift of reading and literature is to give young people the gift of many worlds, within and without.

Q. Were you a big reader as a kid? Did you like to write?

A. I was a big reader. I was not a writer. In the 1940’s—when I went to school—writing was not really encouraged, much less taught.

Q. What do you like to read now?

A. Fiction and history.

Q. What’s something that readers would be surprised to learn about you?

A. Writing has always been hard for me. It still is.

Q. Is there anything else you’d like to share?

A. Writers don’t write writing. They write reading.