



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“If Horn Book, that bastion of literary excellence, cannot be trusted to honestly critique children’s books, then what are we, as readers and purchasers, left with to help us?”

-Letter to the editor, *Horn Book*, March/April 2006

I love the letters to editor in the *New York Times* Book Review. That is where maligned or misquoted authors, friends and family of authors, or knowledgeable readers complain about inaccurate, misleading or critical book reviews. I love them because they remind us that a reviewer can only express one opinion: his or her own.

Book reviews are a big part of my job as children’s librarian, since most of the time when I order a book I haven’t seen it. And because the book ordering is done online, many of the reviews I read are online, too. Unfortunately, these online reviews don’t have the rebuttal aspect of the *Times* letters to the editor, and so I can only hope that there will be several reviews and the reviewers either agree or fiercely contradict each other. Either way, I learn something about the book.

There are some publications, such as *Horn Book*, that I trust more than others and so I look for their reviews. My

library subscribes to this magazine and so there may be some of those helpful letters to the editor, too. By reading them, I am hoping that somehow I will learn the truth about a book – whether children will like it, whether the illustrations are cutesy, whether the book will be a worthwhile addition to our collection. But of course there is no one truth, because it depends on the taste and writing ability of the reviewer. I have ordered books that were favorably reviewed, only to be disappointed when they arrive.

I know it is tricky to write a review. One of the classes I took in library school required us to write five picture book reviews a week and I quickly discovered there are different levels to enthusiasm. We were encouraged to look at all aspects of the book: the cover, the font and the illustrations, as well as the actual meaning of the words. This was enlightening, because I could start out liking a book yet by

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the time I finished analyzing it, my enthusiasm would have waned or even disappeared.

The ideal, of course, would be to actually see every book on the list. To pick it up, imagine reading it aloud to a child or handing it to a middle school or elementary age reader and recommending it. It is impossible to truly represent a book by describing it – even when there are direct quotes from it, although those can be helpful. Imagine trying to tell someone about *To Kill a Mockingbird*. What could you say that would impart the underlying southern feel of those characters? How could you explain why it is so powerful when Scout says the simple words “Hey, Boo”? It becomes a matter of faith – faith in the reviewer or the librarian or the parent. It is an accumulated faith, based on previous experience.

There are many regular

children’s book reviewers and they have their own views of quality. I have come to know their personalities and their preferences and I am gradually learning to separate their taste from their critiques. And some of the reviews are so beautifully written they are excellent writing in and of themselves. For instance, one of my favorite books – *Chicken Boy*, by Frances O’Roark Dowell – has come out as an audiobook. Here’s how *The Horn Book* reviewer, Kristi Elle Jemtegaard, begins her review in the May/June 2006 issue: “The voice of Tobin Macauley – a blend of pain leavened by hope and humor layered over heartache – carries this story of a broken family from its bleak beginning to its optimistic end.” Perfect.