

• Meet the Author •

Avi

Nick Glass of TeachingBooks.net interviewed Avi at his home in Denver, Colorado.



Photo from www.avi-writer.com/index.html

You have more than 70 books to your name (including a Newbery Medal- and two Newbery Honor-winning titles), populated with human, animal, and supernatural characters from all walks of life. Do you like the characters in your books?

AVI: Well, I don't *like* them all, but if you're going to write a good book, you have to love them all because you have to know them and feel for them and understand them and share their passions and their weaknesses. And if you don't, it's more of an intellectual exercise. In the end, I tend to think that a good story is about emotions.

You've been writing a long time.

AVI: When students ask me when I started writing, I say, "Well, when did you start writing?" They look puzzled by that, so I remind them that we

all begin to write somewhere in first or second grade. I made up my mind to become a professional writer when I was a senior in high school, so from that standpoint, I've been writing for more than 50 years.

Do you enjoy writing?

AVI: I'd rather read than write, because writing is hard for me. I always struggle. I'll be working on a book and thinking, "How am I going to get through this chapter? How do I get some movement, some life in this?" I've learned it's better to get something down than nothing, and then just start rewriting. It's all about the rewriting.

Please elaborate.

AVI: Well, I do a huge amount of rewriting. I rewrite each book 60, 70 times—over and over again. I just change things. I try to make the story balance and move and have life. It's a question of getting it right, and I don't get it right until I've rewritten it many, many, many times.

Is there a time when you actually feel it's done, or would you keep editing forever if given the chance?

AVI: I don't think there is such a thing as a perfect book. To tell you the truth, I never read

my books once they're published because I'll always find stuff that I could have done better, and that's frustrating to me.

Are you a stubborn writer?

AVI: Yes. When we authors talk to kids or anybody we say, "Yeah, you can do it. Work hard. You can do it. Have dreams." What people never say, but should, is "Be stubborn." You've got to be stubborn; I don't think it's just about writing. I think it's true about anything. You have to really want to do it and do it well. Persist, insist, continue, go to the batting cage one extra time. Have somebody hit the ball to you one more half hour. Read the extra chapter, whatever.

Do you have a reader in mind when you write?

AVI: The cliché I have invented is, "Writers don't write writing, they write reading," by which I mean that I'm not just writing memos to myself to remind me to go to the grocery store and buy yogurt. I'm writing something that somebody hopefully will read. It's all about getting the reader to turn the page, to become engaged, to care, to think about it. So what we writers do is for the reader, not for ourselves.

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I look at a classroom of kids and say, “I’m writing for you.” And I’ll point to this kid and that kid, and say, “I don’t even know you, but my job is to make it so that you will want to read this book.”

The advice you give people who want to write is simply to read.

AVI: Yes. If you really want to be a writer, particularly if you’re young, don’t worry about the writing. Just read. If you want to take a year out and develop yourself as a writer, it wouldn’t hurt to write some. But if you just read for a year, you would come out an even better writer at the end because what you’re doing constantly is measuring what you do against the written word, and that’s where you learn.

You have written a large variety of books: funny books, silent movie picture books, mysteries, ghost stories, adventures, historical, contemporary, animal adventures . . .

AVI: Yes, but I don’t think about that consciously. I’m a writer who simply asks, “What’s the best way to tell this story?” Since I read a lot, I’m willing to say this voice or that voice will work best for this kind of book. The old French writer, Gustave Flaubert, said something to this effect: “Style is a way of seeing.” I really believe that the way you tell a story is very much a *part* of the story.

When I studied writing as a young man, I didn’t take English classes. I’ve never taken a “how to write a novel” or a

“how to write a short story” course. I taught myself to write by reading.

I would read an author I liked, such as Shakespeare, and then try to write a play like him. I did this with Dickens and Hemmingway, trying to write like them, too. Of course, I couldn’t and never will. But out of that exercise came the notion that I could write in different ways. I never became wedded to one style, one voice. I like to be able to write in different ways.

It probably makes your work more interesting.

AVI: I hope so. I know it works very well in schools. Aside from the sheer number of books I’ve published is the fact that different styles, different lengths, different kinds of books appeal to different kids.

Do you work on multiple projects simultaneously?

AVI: Yes, I work on different things at different steps along the way simultaneously.

Today, for example, I’m working on a new book. I’m about three quarters of the way through, but I’m also contemplating the next book. I had a talk with my editor today to make sure that we were on the same path with it and she knows what I’m going to try to do. We talked about how to convey a certain attitude.

She wishes that I would write a contemporary novel, and I was describing a situation that would take place about 50 years ago, and we discussed the question, “Is it historical fiction if I’ve lived it?” Well, if you live

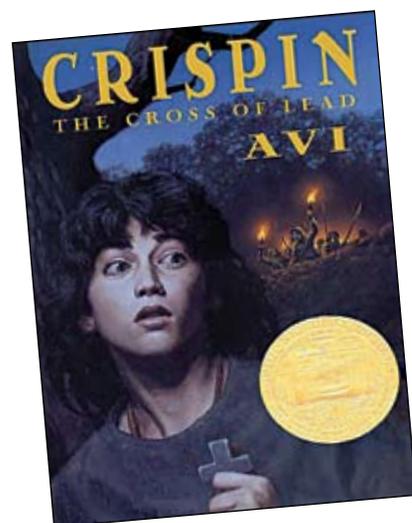
as long as I have, I guess maybe it is. But how do you convey that? So I’m working on that book. Down the road, there’s a strong possibility that I’ll be doing another graphic novel, so I’m thinking about that as well.

Why do you frequently have historical content in your books?

AVI: I’ve been interested in history for as long as I can remember. Maybe it was because my grandfather used to tell me stories about American history. He was a great storyteller. But I read history; it is full of great stories, and I love those stories. I’m looking at my bookshelves and I see 200–300 books about medieval history alone. They are the books I use for writing the *Crispin* books.

It sounds like the role of research is an important one for you.

AVI: Absolutely. But, it is important in different ways for different books. Take a book like *Midnight Magic*, which is ostensibly set in Renaissance Italy about which I know a little bit, but really not much. It’s costume drama, and it’s draped in some historical reality, but not a lot.



On the other hand, for a book like *Crispin: The Cross of Lead*, I did a lot of research and tried to get a real feel for medieval times. Better yet, take *Iron Thunder*, which is an account of the great Civil War battle between two iron ships, the *Monitor* and the *Merrimac*. I wanted to know every half hour of what was going on, every minute in the battle. I went to do research and read letters from the crew, log books, and other documents. So there are levels of research depending on the kind of book that you do, and I really enjoy it.

The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle is used in schools a lot. What drove you to write it?

AVI: There are often connections, at least in my mind, between one book or another. Here's how this one connects: I had been living in Los Angeles (a relatively new city compared to the rest of the world) for about a year. Then I moved to Providence, Rhode Island. By American standards, Providence is a very old city. I moved into an old house and got interested in the history of the city and the house I was living in.

I did a little research, and I began to concoct a ghost story partly set in the city of Providence. In learning about Providence's history, I discovered that Edgar Allan Poe had come there. There's a famous photograph of him that is replicated all the time that was taken in Providence. Working on that original ghost story, which was called *Something Upstairs*, gave me the idea to write a book

about Edgar Allan Poe, which was called *The Man Who Was Poe*. That photograph is part of the story.

Many people give Edgar Allan Poe credit for inventing the locked room mystery, so I was thinking about that as I was writing the book. Then, living where I was, sort of near the ocean, near boats, I began to think, "Well, what could be more of a locked room mystery, than a murder mystery that took place on a ship in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean?" Bingo, there you get the beginning of *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle*.

What's a little odd about that one is if you look somewhere in the *Man Who Was Poe*, I think it's around page 92, there's a scene in which the protagonist is talking to an old sea captain. At one point he says, "You see that ship out there? It's called Sea Hawk. I could tell you a story about that." That's absolutely the beginning of my thinking about *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle*.

Would you say winning the Newbery Honor for *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle* launched your career as an author of books for young people?

AVI: The following year, I won another Newbery Honor for *Nothing But the Truth*, which is a radically different kind of book. Those awards established me as somebody who might be worth reading.

Please share where *Nothing But the Truth* came from.

AVI: *Nothing But the Truth* came from a completely different place. I happen to like board games. I played them as a kid, I've played them with my kids, and I've always enjoyed them. There was a time when I read books about them. I even began to collect the games that I remembered from my youth. I found them in flea markets for ten or fifty cents.

Once when I was roaming around a thrift market, I came across a mystery murder game from the 1930s that was miraculously intact. Inside were the kinds of things that a lawyer or a detective might have dumped on his desk. There was a telegram; believe it or not, there was a cigarette stub in a little cellophane envelope; a ticket stub . . . all these loose pieces of evidence.

In no particular order, you were supposed to sift through this evidence and make a determination as to who did the crime. There was an envelope in the back, and you opened it up to see if it was right. I thought it was pretty amazing.

Several years later, I found the same game, with exactly the same evidence, but in book form. Now, instead of looking at this documentary evidence and holding that cigarette stub, it was a *picture* of the cigarette stub.

When I began to form the story in my head about *Nothing But the Truth*, I thought, "Well, why don't I try to emulate that?" *Nothing But the Truth* is a series of random documents put in chronological sequence, but strictly speaking, there's no plot. The reader threads the little

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blocks of information together in one long train and makes a determination as to what happened. I look upon that book as a curious kind of game, not so much a “who-done-it,” but a “what happens.”

Please describe the format of *Nothing But the Truth* a little more.

AVI: The format, on the surface, consists of disjointed bits of dialogue, memos, letters, conversations—a whole series of tiny episodes that all connect to a central story. In the course of the story, a narrative develops. People in the story are struggling to determine what happened. The premise of the novel, and from whence the title appears, is the phrase that we often hear in a courtroom or courtroom dramas: “Do you swear to tell the truth, and nothing but the truth?”

There are two questions at the front of the book: “Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?” The second question is, “Does anybody ever say no?” Of course, we don’t.

We all tell the truth, but even as we all tell the truth, we all shade it somehow through our experience, our vocabulary, our perceptions, our judgments, our biases, our prejudices, and our desires. The truth is not quite always the same from one person to another. That fascinates me.

A Beginning, a Muddle, and an End is somewhat similar, isn’t it, where it explores the truth of the matter?

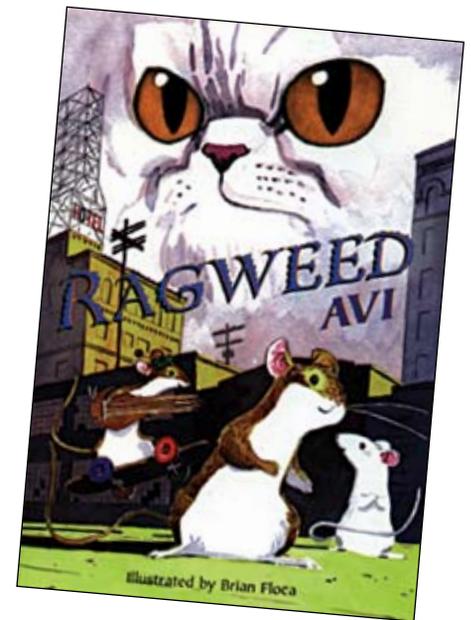
AVI: *A Beginning, a Muddle, and an End* is about writing. There’s a passage in it that if you read it one way, it says one thing. Then I rewrote it in exactly the same word-for-word sequence, but the punctuation is different, and it says exactly the opposite. The passage uses exactly the same words, but the punctuation is different, so the meaning comes out as absolutely different.

Please share a little bit about the animal adventures of *Poppy and Ragweed*.

AVI: *Poppy* is one of the great joys of my writing life because I would say that the characters in the *Poppy* books really came to mean a great deal to me. This is because in some respects, it’s an autobiographical series. Not that I’m a mouse, but it’s all predicated on family history and my own family experience. In *Ereth’s Birthday* there are elements of my step-fatherhood. How *Poppy* meets *Rye*—sort of love at first sight—I often think about me and my wife, and so on. Not that I have done that consciously, but the books are permeated with a sense of my own family.

How did you come to write the *Poppy* books?

AVI: I was wandering in a bookstore, something that I often do, and I found a book written by a naturalist who had found an abandoned baby owl. He rescued it, nurtured it, and brought it back to full life. He then recounted in this book how he did all that, and then how he taught it to go back into the woods and be wild. Along



the way, he tells many things about owls and their history and their folklore. It was just a really charming book.

It gave me the idea of writing a book in which the main character was an owl, and so I set out to do that. *Poppy* begins with the owl, Mr. Ocax. What happened, however, is owls eat mice, and I got more interested in the creature that Mr. Ocax was eating than the owl himself, so *Poppy* stepped on the stage.

At the end of *Poppy*, there’s a curious jump in the narrative and, at the end of the book, she is already married to *Rye*, and it says, “But that’s another story.” I was already thinking of a sequel.

I first wrote *Poppy*, and then I wrote *Poppy and Rye*. After that, I realized that I had to go back and write about *Ragweed* because his spirit hovers over all of these books in one way or another. So I wrote, in essence, book number one, the prequel to *Poppy*, called *Ragweed*.

Having done that, over a period of years, I realized that the character that my young readers really loved was *Ereth*,

the porcupine, who is grumpy but very sweet and lovable at the same time. I was clever enough to stumble upon that; writers sometimes get lucky. Readers particularly love the way Ereth talks. He swears a lot, but his swearing is nonsensical—it's just words, but the kids love it. So I wrote *Ereth's Birthday*, which is my favorite of the series.

Then I wrote *Poppy's Return*, and decided to write one final one called Poppy and Ereth.

What challenges did you face in writing your final Poppy book, *Poppy and Ereth*?

AVI: I certainly didn't want for my readers to experience the death of Poppy. Mice only live two and a half to three years. I did want to end it in a kind of definitive way, though, and came to the idea that the environment in which Poppy lives changes. There's a great fire in Dimwood Forest, and Poppy has to go away. There's a sort of regenerative element in the story, and that's the way the book ends.

People tell me it's a book that makes them laugh and get teary at the same time, which is exactly the way it should end.

What's is a defining element of the Poppy series?

AVI: I began the series 10, 12 years ago. I like the idea of six books because many teachers tell me that they read the series throughout the school year.

That's interesting because I remember reading to my kids the Laura Ingalls Wilder Little House series. I spent a year

reading that to my older boys. During that time, Laura's family became a kind of extra family for us, and they dearly loved the stories.

In a sense, I was trying to do somewhat the same so that there's a whole arc of the life of Poppy. It begins when she's very young, and ends when she's old. It's all about who she is and what she is.

Sometimes the setting is dominant for you, but in the Poppy books the characters are dominant. The forest exists, but it's more of a container than a part of the story.

AVI: Right. I think the books have meaning for the adults who read them to young people. Sometimes we writers of books for children can get very, very lucky and can simultaneously appeal to the older reader, the teacher, the parent, as well as to the real target audience, the young people. The books are very emotional, I think. They're all about love and caring and funny times—and family.

Crispin: The Cross of Lead is another, different style of book.

AVI: That's typical of the way I write. I live in Colorado, and we live in a log cabin way up in the mountains 200 miles away from Denver. It can be a long ride, so we obviously listen to music and listen to tapes and talk and what have you.

Once we got hold of a series of lectures by a charismatic professor at UCLA. This was an account of the late medi-

eval period. His voice and his anecdotal history of the period captivated me, and the information made me want to explore more. I began to think that I could write something about that period, so I began to read and got totally engaged with medieval times.

What did you first envision for your book *Crispin: The Cross of Lead* and subsequent related titles?

AVI: In a certain sense, each Poppy book came out serendipitously without forethought. But when I was thinking about *Crispin*, I envisioned a multi-volume saga from the outset.

I sat down to write *Crispin: The Cross of Lead*, and really became engaged and fascinated by the period and the language. The year 1377, when the story takes place, is a hugely important period in not just European history, but in the history of the English language.

It's the time when the English were speaking what we would call Middle English—when Chaucer, the English language's first really great writer and poet, begins to write, and when many of the elements that constitute English and ultimately American society begin to emerge.

There's a great upheaval in 1381 called the Peasant Revolution, where the notion that all men are created equal is articulated. So there are all these elements that just fascinate me, and it was wonderful to write that.

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What challenges did you face when writing *Crispin*?

AVI: One of the great problems was the language because they were speaking Middle English, which I certainly can't read or write. So I read a fair bit of poetry from the period: Chaucer, Langland, Gower. I realized that those writings had a certain rhythmic structure, so when I wrote *Crispin*, I actually wrote it a good first third to half of it in verse using the structure of the time.

My agent or editor, I forget who, said, "Are you nuts? You can't do that." I didn't not do it, I just didn't present it as poetry in terms of versification on the page. But if you read it out loud, you'll hear that it has a pretty clear, rhythmic structure. I think that is one of the keys to the book, trying to make people understand what it was like in that period of time.

Again, one gets lucky. I came across this character, Bear. While *Crispin* is key to the book, and he's very important, it's really Bear that's the engine for the story. He's become a loved character, and he really makes the book go.

The opening of *Crispin: The Cross of Lead* is one of the best openings I've read—the image of this mother ...

AVI: Right, but that's not the way the book originally began. There must have been 12 openings to that book. That was simply the one we finally settled on. My editor kept saying, "No, that's not going to work. Try something different." So it's ironic that you would say that,

because that was not even my favorite opening.

What did you enjoy most about researching *Crispin*?

AVI: When the book was accepted for publication, I went to England to do some research, and in the British Museum was a whole case of lead crosses that were distributed during the plague years. Amazingly, the very title of the book (*Crispin: The Cross of Lead*) derives from something that was not in the original draft. That's very typical of my work. I work along, and then suddenly somebody says something. Maybe it's an editor, or it could be even my wife or myself, and it gets me thinking, "Wait a minute. I could work this into my book."

What is one thing you learned from your research for *Crispin*?

AVI: One of the things that I learned about the period, and it fascinated me, is that a sense of individuality is not a given in all of human history. It's something that happens in the modern era—the notion of, "we are individuals"; the notion that we are, on the one hand, responsible for ourselves; that we are who we are and, therefore, have an individual fate, a choice . . . All this is a relatively modern phenomenon.

Crispin was originally entitled *No Name*, about a kid who doesn't know who he is. He meets this charismatic figure in Bear who teaches him.

How do you account for *Crispin's* appeal to today's young readers?

AVI: In a historical sense, European culture went through the same adolescence that modern youth experience. I think that they can identify with that. Who am I? What am I? Where do I come from? Where am I going? I think that's the core of the book.

And now *Crispin* has gone on to become somewhat of a serial.

AVI: Yes. The Poppy books are a series; there's a separate storyline in each one. For the *Crispin* books, there's continuity. When you get to the second book, *Crispin: At the Edge of the World*, it literally begins ten minutes after the other book ends. There's a continuity of character and drive. The whole story is what happens to *Crispin* and how he emerges.

Please share something about your serial, *Beyond the Western Sea*.

AVI: I've always been fascinated by serialization. I don't know why. I have an interest in Dickens, in forms of story. I listened to radio series when I was a kid. The structure of many early children's books are in a serial form—chapter by chapter—and I write like that.

I had written *Beyond the Western Sea*, and I had been living, up to then, on the East Coast. I moved out here to Denver, and became associated just by living here with smaller newspapers. So I thought it'd be fun to write a book that would be serialized in the local paper. In *Beyond the Western Sea*, the chapters are very short. It was written as if it were serialized

because I wanted to write this huge book, almost 800 pages.

I think the metaphor that my editor and I used was that the chapters would be sort of like salty peanuts—that each one would have an excitement to it and a cliffhanging ending so that you'd just say, "Oh well, they're short chapters. I'll read another one. And, I'll read another one," and then you're halfway through the book.

I thought I could replicate that in a newspaper context, so I made contact with a newspaper in Colorado Springs, and they were interested. I knew somebody who worked for a newspaper up in Wyoming, and they were interested. Then, all of a sudden, it began to grow. It grew so fast that I got to about 60, 70 papers, and it was beginning to take over my life. I said, "I've got to get out of this. I can't do it." It was just a huge amount of work, and there was very little money involved—it was a lot of fun, but it wasn't really going to support me or my family.

At the point when I was about to give it up, my wife said, "Let me take it over and see what I can do for a while."

She turned it into something radically different. At one point, she had 36 million readers of the serial in newspapers all over the United States and around the world.

The authors she and you brought in to that project were amazing.

AVI: Yes, it was Katherine Patterson and Linda Sue Park and Joe Bruchac and Brian Floca, and many others. My wife was, at one point, probably the most widely read publisher in the United States. But newspapers have collapsed, and with that went the project.

You seem to be quite passionate about the concept of Reader's Theater.

AVI: Well, that also has a long history. Charles Dickens, who, at the latter part of his life, used to go on tour performing, became a huge celebrity by virtue of these apparently extraordinary readings that he did in front of thousands. They say that he hastened his own death by his enormous engagements and loss of energy doing the readings.

For years, I was trying to get writers to do readings with me. I hired a theatrical director and a voice person here in Denver, created my own show, *Forgive Me Like Dickens*. I do a solo reading.

Please describe your Reader's Theater performances.

AVI: I read dramatic readings of excerpts from my books. I wanted to go beyond that, so a group of authors and I were

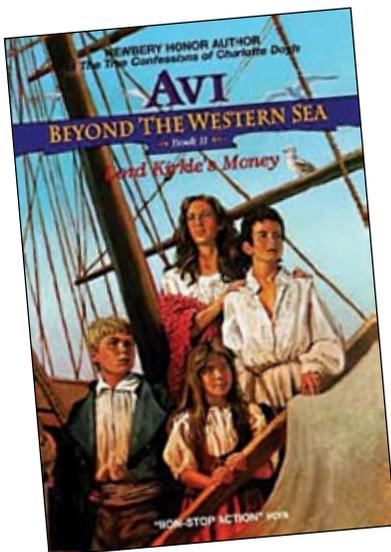
doing Reader's Theater performances every year at IRA. Some of the people who were doing that said, "Can't we do this on a regular basis?" The original troop was Sarah Weeks, Sharon Creech, Walter Dean Myers, and me. That has expanded, and it's wonderful fun.

I don't have to give a speech, which is one of the things I love about Reader's Theater—you just share the work. We have all learned to edit our scripts and dramatize them.

I always do a brief introduction, and I love to quote a line from Robert Frost who once said, "The ear is the best reader." I love reading out loud and sharing books that way and hearing them. In a way, it's storytelling at its most primitive, but also in some ways it's the most sophisticated. It's a voice telling us a story, and when it's done by somebody who reads well, it's wonderful.

And what's your take on the educational connections to Reader's Theater for schools?

AVI: Teachers often ask me, "What can I do to help my kids write better or read better?" Become a great reader in the classroom. I'm deeply, deeply committed to the notion that kids should be read to every day, all the time. It's not very difficult to learn to become a good reader. Some of it is just learning how to relax your voice, and pausing and breathing and so forth. I'm always telling teachers, take voice lessons. Learn how to read aloud. Make your stories dramatic, and your kids will listen.



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Reader's Theater in the classroom is a wonderful way to engage kids to write the scripts, to engage in the story, and vocalize what they're reading. To the extent that kids vocalize good writing, it affects their writing and the way they think about words. They have to talk with their peers and ask, "Do we want to say that?" They edit the words of us authors into scripts. Then they have to ask themselves, "How do you emphasize this word, or what's the keyword in here?" I mean, it changes everything. It makes the text dynamic and alive.

Kids love to perform, but with Reader's Theater, you take out huge gobs of the stress of memorization, costumes, sets. It's all in the head. It can be wonderfully exciting when kids read to kids. Older kids can read to younger kids, they can read to each other in hospitals . . . it opens all kinds of possibilities.

Were you a practicing librarian? If so, how did that come about?

AVI: Yes, I have a librarian's license. When I was beginning as a writer, I had to make a living. I was living in New York City and writing lots of bad plays. I was a carpenter. I slung hash in a diner—all that kind of stuff that one does.

I inquired about a job at the New York Public Library. They said they had a lowly position as a clerk in their theater library. They also told me that the library would be expanding in a few years, and they'd be looking for more people. I suddenly realized what this meant.

It meant that I could get a real job that had some stability.

So I took the job, and within two, three days, I was enrolled at Columbia University to get a library degree so I would be ready for the new hires when the library expanded. I went to night school for three years while I was working and writing—those kinds of things one does when one has the energy of youth—and became a librarian. Sure enough, it worked out. I got a full-time position with the theater collection. I was there for almost ten years.

Then, I began to realize that I was writing bad plays, and if I wanted to be a writer, I would have to switch what I was doing. It was no longer imperative to be in New York City or to work in the theater collection. So, I took a job as a librarian in a college in New Jersey and stayed there for 15 years. Yes, I was a librarian for about 25 years.

What was it like being both a librarian and a writer?

AVI: You have to have a certain amount of ego to be a writer and a librarian because you have all these books around you, and you think to yourself, "Are you really going to write another book? What do you need another book for?" On the other hand, it's a good place to work.

Do you think being a librarian influenced your writing?

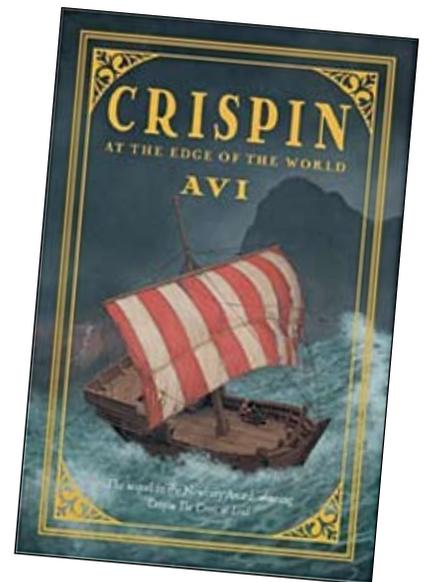
AVI: I was a reference librarian, and I taught research to students in a college library.

During that time, I learned how to do research in a very efficient, easy way. A lot of people find research very difficult. I find it very easy. And I can teach anybody how to do research so that it's easy. It certainly had an impact on how I do research for my books.

What was it like to win the Newbery Medal for *Crispin*?

AVI: It was surprising. It wasn't what I expected. I had won a couple of Newbery Honors, and people kept saying I was going to win the Medal that year. Well, I've taught myself that, first of all, you don't write a Newbery book. The award is given to you. It's a gift, and you're lucky to get it.

I got the call telling me I'd won (at 5:00 in the morning), and I was already at work. I had to put down the phone and burst into tears, which was another surprise. It took me a long time to figure out what was going on there. I mean, obviously I was very happy, but I also felt a sense of relief to have won.



Why did you feel relief at winning the Newbery Medal?

AVI: As a young person, I struggled an enormous amount with writing. I have what's called dysgraphia, and I flunked out of one school and had to take tutoring and all that stuff. I was told I couldn't write.

So when I got this award, I was swept away with emotion of goodness. It was almost as if, "Hey, I finally showed that I could write," which was immediately followed by, "Oh, my God. I better write something else good because this was probably a mistake or something." Writers have these two elements. They have these big egos, and are terribly unsure of themselves.

What has winning the Newbery Medal changed for you?

AVI: It changes everything and changes nothing. It changes one's sense of self and the way other people think about you. They think you know what you're doing, and you don't. It's not an accident that the next book I wrote, *A Book Without Words*, was one of the most difficult projects I have undertaken. I'm sure it had nothing to do with the project itself, but my own expectations and the expectations of other people.

What I've come to say is that being a success as a writer gives me patience to deal with my failures. I can just say, "Come on. Keep working. You've done it before. You can do it again." You win a Newbery, and it's wonderful. But it doesn't write the next book for you. It's satis-

fy, but you just have to keep working.

Do you have the Medal in a place of honor in your home?

AVI: The award is somewhere here on my desk. I'm not sure where. It's buried under papers. In a certain sense, that's a metaphor for what winning the award does. I have it, it's on my desk, but I can't see it at the moment. It's buried.

You have been Skyping. What are you up to with that, and how is that going?

AVI: The Skyping comes about due to a confluence of a couple of things. I'm less willing to travel. It's hard to travel these days—it can be very tedious and time-consuming. And schools have little funding for author visits. But this way, through Skyping, I charge only a very small fee.

I'm learning how to Skype more and more. Bear in mind that I've been visiting schools since 1970, so I'm very experienced. I'm relaxed in front of kids, with talking to kids, with thinking how to phrase things, and how to compose myself.

While it does not replace my being in the classroom, Skyping does afford the opportunity, in a financial sense, and a sort of cosmic sense, for me to go anywhere.

What is a typical workday like for you?

AVI: I guess my job is to make the coffee in the household, then I go sit in my office and work. I go for a run in the middle of the day for an hour.

What do you do when you get stuck?

AVI: Jogging is one of the most helpful things for me to do. It truly jogs my mind.

When I'm writing, I think ten times more than I actually put down in words. It's what you do all the time. When I get stuck, I just think some more, and sometimes it takes quite a while to figure it out. I've learned to just be patient. I give myself time, knowing I'll get there.

Sometimes I just go read a good book, and it's like going to an oxygen bar, I guess. I read some Hemmingway short stories. What could be cleaner or simpler than that? They are clear air.

You talk to a lot of students. What do you like to tell them?

AVI: First and foremost, I tell them to read. I like to tell them how difficult it is for everyone to write. In schools, the kids are given books to read, but they don't see the process. I love to ask kids what they think writers are. What do they do? A lot of kids think authors pay to get a book done!

My main concern is that when students look at books, the books all seem to be written so effortlessly and, in many cases, so beautifully. Students may think to themselves, "Well, I can't possibly imitate that." They think of themselves as lousy writers. Guess what? They're not very good, because they're 12 or 13 or 15 years old. They're not very good writers, nor can they be or should they be, yet. The irony is that we give them these books that are

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well written. In some ways, it must discourage kids.

My message is essentially, "Hey, I was a lousy writer. When I was your age, I had to struggle and learn. And I still struggle, and still try to learn, constantly try." I've been reading books about writing lately, trying to always learn more.

You talk to a lot of educators; what do you like to tell them?

AVI: I urge them to learn how to read aloud well to the kids, to read every day, and to read what they love so that it's a motive.

I tell them to stop teaching classics. Read books, particularly in the young adult world, that kids can respond to from their own experience, so that literature becomes experiential, not rote.

I say, "If you have a child in your classroom, and by the end of the time that they are with you, that child likes to read more than they did when they arrived, you get an A. But if they like to read less after spending a year with you, you've failed. Your job is to make reading a joy. The rest will come."

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