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Nothing But the Truth by Avi

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SUMMARY



When detectives and lawyers work on a case, they try to gather together all the evidence so as to get to the truth. That collection of evidence is called "Discovery." Discovery was the title of this book when I was first working on it. For what I set out to do is put the reader in charge--like a detective--by presenting all the evidence pertaining to an event that happened--or did not happen--in a school. It's all fiction of course, but it reads very realistically.

What's more, it asks the reader to decide what really happened in the story. You have to decide for yourself. You have to read very carefully to decide what actually happened. After all, when you're asked to swear that you will "tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth," every body says they will. And yet they do not agree about what happened. That's what this book is all about, the complexities of truth. - Avi

<http://www.englishink.net/literacyzone/page12.html>



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



I was born in New York City on December 23, 1937, along with a twin sister. I am five minutes older than Emily. It was Emily, for reasons no one knows — she certainly doesn't — who called me Avi. It stuck. It's the only name I use now.

My father was a doctor, and my mother, later on, became a social worker. Every night I was read to. Every Friday we were taken to the library. I always received at least one book for my birthday. I have a few of them yet. Early on, I had my own collection of books. I loved to read. Still do.

I came from a family of writers, artists, and musicians. And today we have all that, plus filmmakers, actors, and theater and TV directors. (Two of my sons are in the rock music world. The third is a journalist.) When we get together there is much talk, disagreement, and laughter. Growing up in Brooklyn, I went to a public school, and sat in the same class with my sister until eighth grade. I hated that. My older brother was considered a genius. He isn't, but he did go to college at the age of 15. My sister was very smart too. Guess who wasn't thought to be that smart?

When I went to high school I wanted to be a designer of airplanes. But flunking out of the science high school brought me to a small private school that provided some of the attention I needed. I got it when an English teacher insisted I get some help with my writing.

I did get help, and that help led me to think that I might become a writer. I made up my mind to focus on this when I was 17 and a senior in high school.

I began by writing plays, and wrote a lot of bad ones. It was only when my eldest son, Shaun, was born, that I took to writing for kids. Since then, I've never written anything else. My first book was published in 1970. I've published over 30 books since then.

For some 25 years I worked as a librarian, first at the New York Public Library, then at Trenton State College in New Jersey. My life has

always been with, around, and for books.

"I want my readers to feel, to think, sometimes to laugh. But most of all I want them to enjoy a good read."

Though the topics and the style of Avi's books range widely, one common thread unites them: They are all invitingly readable, even to the most reluctant readers. Avi explains, "I take a great deal of satisfaction in using popular forms — the adventure, the mystery, the thriller — so as to hold my reader with the sheer pleasure of a good story."

Honored with the Newbery Medal for *CRISPIN: CROSS OF LEAD* and a Newbery Honor for *NOTHING BUT THE TRUTH*, Avi is the acclaimed author of several works of historical fiction, including *THE TRUE CONFESSIONS OF CHARLOTTE DOYLE* and *THE MAN WHO WAS POE*. Avi faced and overcame many difficulties in his effort to become a writer. He suffers from dysgraphia, a dysfunction in his writing abilities that causes him to reverse letters or misspell words.

"In a school environment," Avi recalls, "I was perceived as being sloppy and erratic, and not paying attention." Still, in the face of unending criticism, Avi persevered. "I became immune to it," Avi says. "I liked what I wrote."

Now an award-winning author, Avi enjoys visiting schools. He identifies with children who are lonely, frustrated, and isolated. "I always ask to speak to the learning-disabled kids. They come in slowly, waiting for yet another pep talk, more instructions. Eyes cast down, they won't even look at me. Their anger glows. I don't say a thing. I lay out pages of my copy-edited manuscripts, which are covered with red marks. 'Look here,' I say, 'see that spelling mistake. There, another spelling mistake. Looks like I forgot to put a capital letter there. Oops! Letter reversal.' Their eyes lift. They are listening. And I am among friends."

<http://www2.scholastic.com/teachers/authorsandbooks/authorstudies/authorhome.jhtml?1768&collateralID=5091&displayName=Biography>



BOOK REVIEW

To begin a discussion of the Bill of Rights you can use Avi's novel *NOTHING BUT THE TRUTH*. It shouldn't take more than one class period to read it aloud to fifth or sixth graders. Subtitled *A DOCUMENTARY NOVEL*, this book is almost guaranteed to provoke discussion, certainly the incident around which it revolves did so. We follow the plot through a series of documents: memos, journal-entries, newspaper and talk show stories and written conversations as a simple incident grows.

The truth, as I see it, is that a ninth grade student, annoyed by a teacher's perceived inflexibility, decides to annoy her in turn by humming the National Anthem when it is played over the loud speaker during opening exercises even though the rule states that students should "stand at respectful silent attention." The teacher, a sincere and dedicated woman, rises to the bait, and throws the kid out of her class. From then on things just grow bigger and more and more out of focus: a man running for school board grabs it as an election cause; the story is picked up by the national press; a talk show personality gets people even more roused; there are telegrams and letters to all concerned.

Has free speech been violated? Whose? The results are calamitous for both teacher and student. Who's wrong?

This review by Carol Otis Hurst first appeared in *Teaching K-8 Magazine*.

<http://www.carolhurst.com/titles/nothingbut.html>



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. YA lit like Children's lit relies on a particular narrative technique. Keeping this technique in mind, discuss the relevance of Avi beginning the book with a "Memo" addressed to all homeroom teachers. Look specifically at the motto, "Where our children are educated, not just taught" and at #3, "Please all rise and stand at respectful silent attention for the playing of our national anthem" (1). The structure of epistolary, "confessional," or reporting style of *NOTHING BUT THE TRUTH* is part of the theme and style of this YA novel. Discuss.
2. Avi begins the first sentence in Philip Malloy's diary with "Coach Jamison saw me in the hall and said he wanted to make sure I'm trying out for the track team" (3). This desire Philip is aware of. Discuss what other problems, needs, desires emerge from his first two diary entries (3-4; 9-10). Refer to specific quotations.
3. Difficult economic situations further create problems in this book. List quotations which illustrate several areas where this is true. What about Philip's college fund? Look carefully at the irony here, not just for Philip but for his father.
4. The book points out different types of literature being read. Discuss the problem here (if you perceive any) and give examples from the book to support your views. What are some of the themes in the literature?
5. Communication between parents and their children, between students themselves, and certainly between Philip and his peers seems to be dysfunctional. Give specific instances of this miscommunication. What happens to Philip and his peers, to Philip and his parents? Is there a positive example given in the book?
6. Discuss the difficulties with the discipline procedures that occur. Are these procedures connected with the relationship which is described between the school board, the parents, and the teachers? What are some of the tensions inherent in this situation? Is this common today? Give examples. What about the principal's actions?
7. Discuss the pros and cons of the media's role in this book. Look at

specific examples (120-21 ?). Give a current example. Discuss the implications for Ted Griffen's actions and reactions. How does his intervention escalate the problem?

8. Mr. Duval asks at the end of the novel, "Ma'am, do you think there's some reason that this has happened?" (207). What do you think?

9. Should Ms. Narwin have taken the sabbatical which Dr. Gertrude Doane offers her? Is the problem tenure as Griffen implies (187)? What different decisions should/could Ms. Narwin have made along the way? What might you do in similar circumstances? Is her decision connected to her teaching style? What are the differences in teaching techniques between Lunser and Narwin? Is this relevant to Philip's game plan? to education?

10. Can this novel be considered a YA tragedy? Why? Look closely at Philip's own development? Does he sense some self awareness, some inner knowledge of events gone awry? Give quotations and examples to support your view. What might be some of the criteria for a modern tragedy for YA?

http://theliterarylink.com/questions_otherbooks.html

<http://www.kidsreads.com/clubs/club-holes.asp>- accessed June 15, 2005



AUTHOR INTERVIEW

I'm sitting in my office, which is located over the garage of my house in Austin, Texas. My dogs, Lucky and Tippy, are here with me. They are the only people allowed in my office when I'm writing.

"Lucky seems to understand that. He growls at my wife or my daughter if they try to enter. Maybe he senses me growling on the inside. I don't like being interrupted. Writing is a kind of self-hypnosis. Interruptions break the spell, and it's sometimes hard to get back.

"I generally write for about two hours a day, the first thing every morning. After two hours I find myself losing energy and concentration. It's best to quit while I'm still excited about the story. Then it will be easier to get started tomorrow.

"I couldn't write for a longer period, even if I wanted. Tippy has learned my schedule. After two hours, she taps me with her paw, barks, howls, and otherwise lets me know it's time for her walk.

"I never talk about a book until it is finished. It took me a year and a half to write *HOLES*, and I never told anyone anything about it during all that time. I do this for a variety of reasons, but mainly motivation. By not allowing myself to talk about it, the only way I can let it out, is to finish writing it.

"I write five or six drafts of each book. I start with a small idea, and it grows as I write. My ideas come to me while I'm write. The story changes greatly during the first few drafts. By the time a book is finished, it is impossible for me to say how I got the various ideas.

I was born March 20, 1954, in East Meadow, New York. My father worked on the 78th floor of the Empire State Building. When I was nine, we moved to Tustin, California.

"I went to college at the University of California, as Berkeley. During my last year there, I helped out at an elementary school—Hillside School. It was my experience there that led to my first book, *Sideways Stories from Wayside School*, which I wrote in 1976.

"I attended Hastings College of the Law in San Francisco and graduated in 1980. I worked part-time as a lawyer for eight years as I continued to write children's books.

"My wife's name is Carla. When I first met her, she was a counselor at an elementary school. She was the inspiration behind the counselor in *There's a Boy in the Girls' Bathroom*. We were married in 1985. Our daughter, Sherre, was born in 1987. She was four years old when I started writing the Marvin Redpost series. That's why Marvin has a four-year-old sister.

"In my spare time, I like to play bridge and tennis. I'm a much better bridge player than tennis player. The other evening, I played tennis with a teacher. She clobbered me. When I found out she was a fourth-grade teacher, I told her who I was. She was very impressed. She couldn't wait to tell her class she had killed Louis Sachar playing tennis!

"One thing I always want to know about my favorite authors is who their favorite authors are, so I will end with that. My list includes E.L. Doctorow, J.D. Salinger, Kurt Vonnegut, Kazuo Ishiguro, Flannery O'Connor, Rex Stout, Katherine Patterson, and E.B. White.

From KidsReads.com
<http://www.kidsreads.com/authors/au-sachar-louis.asp> - accessed June 15, 2005



If you liked *NOTHING BUT THE TRUTH* by Avi,
you might like the following books, too!

THE SKIN I'M IN by Sharon G. Flake
GRUEL AND UNUSUAL PUNISHMENT by Jim Arter
BUFFALO BRENDA by Jill Pinkwater
BLOSSOM CULP AND THE SLEEP OF DEATH by Richard Peck
DAUGHTERS OF EVE by Lois Duncan
TARGET by Kathleen Jeffrie Johnson
SLEEPING FRESHMEN NEVER LIE by David Lubar
THE CRIMES AND PUNISHMENTS OF MISS PAYNE by Barry Jonsberg
WHAT MR. MATTERO DID by Priscilla Cummings,
THE DATING GAME: A NOVEL by Natalie Standiford
DETOUR FOR EMMY by Marilyn Reynolds
KALPANA'S DREAM by Judith Clarke
THE PERKS OF BEING A WALLFLOWER by Stephen Chbosky
BREAKING POINT by Alex Flinn
THE NINTH ISSUE by Dallin Malmgren
THREE DAYS OFF by Susie Hoch Morgenstern
GIRLS IN LOVE by Jacqueline Wilson
CAUGHT IN THE ACT by Peter Moore
BEEN CLEVER FOREVER by Bruce Stone
THE LAST CODFISH by J. D. McNeill
SIMPLY ALICE by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor

Visit Avi's Website: <http://www.avi-writer.com/>