Censorship, Negative Criticism, Glitzy Trends, Growing Publisher Output, and Other Shadows on the Landscape of Children’s Book Reviewing:

A Panel of Discussion Moderated by Roger Sutton (RS), with Ilene Cooper (IC), Betsy Hearne (BH), Trevelyn Jones (TJ), Joanna Rudge Long (JRL), and Anita Silvey (AS)

RS: I’d like to introduce you to the five members of our panel. Trevelyn Jones has been the School Library Journal book review editor since November of 1982 and prior to that worked for 16 years as a children’s librarian on Long Island. Joanna Rudge Long has been the children’s and YA editor of Kirkus Reviews since 1986. She was also a children’s librarian at the New York Public Library and elsewhere before going to Kirkus. Anita Silvey has been the editor in chief of The Horn Book Magazine and The Horn Book Guide since 1984, and prior to that worked in children’s book publishing and as an assistant editor at The Horn Book. Ilene Cooper has been the children’s book editor of the American Library Association’s Booklist since 1990 and has been a book reviewer there since 1981. Before that she was a librarian at the Winnetka Public Library in Illinois. Betsy Hearne has been editor of The Bulletin of the Center for Children’s Books since 1985, before which she was children’s book editor at Booklist, with experience as a school and public librarian.

I’d like to start by giving the editors a chance to discuss a little bit of their philosophy of reviewing. Trev?

TJ: School Library Journal is a very practical journal, and our philosophy is practical idealism. We’re sifting, sorting, searching, and highlighting the best for each intended audience in terms of quality, appeal, and clarity of presentation. But we’re not trying to be elitist. We’re not trying to say, “Only the best.” We’re looking for things that kids will believe, kids will find popular, that will move, and that will
also give a nice breadth and depth to a collection. We want to inform readers of a book's strengths and weaknesses with enough information so that our readers can make up their own minds. A book is strong here, it's weak here—you decide. We're giving you the best information we can. We can't make up your minds for you. Basically, what we're trying to do is build solid, strong working collections.

RS: Joanna?

JRL: My ultimate goal at Kirkus is, of course, to get the books to the children, and I think I try to do everything Trev tries to do. Kirkus goes mostly to public libraries, and I'm always aware of that, though I'd like to talk more to school libraries. First of all, I tell subscribers what I think they need to know—and what they think they need to know, with a few exceptions. For example, I don't dwell on sex and violence in the book unless there's something extraordinary about the fact that it's there. I care a lot about what gets to the kids, so I proselytize a little bit. Just as a good book can illuminate beyond its immediate subject, a review can also offer insights beyond the subject of the review. While I'm identifying high quality or usefulness or whatever, I also deliberately choose books that one way or another are problematic. Flawed books by fine writers are interesting, as are books that exemplify one sort or another of wrongheadedness, such as not respecting the audience or not respecting the material. A book may vandalize The Elephant's Child, which is regularly done; or a book about sugaring might put the wrong bark on a maple tree (I come from Vermont); or a book could have a generic sort of portrayal. A wonderful British picture book author, Martin Waddell, wrote a pseudo-American Laura Ingalls Wilder book that was really bland, but it also made me wonder how Americans view other cultures, how we've probably been equally guilty and don't see it as well when we're the culprits. Basically, I want to convey useful information and also make my readers think.

RS: Anita?

AS: A friend of mine, upon hearing that we were all going to be here at this panel, said, "A book critic is someone who goes around battlefields shooting the wounded." That gave me pause to reflect. What is it, after all, that we're engaged in when we're trying to evaluate books? Reviewing books for children is one of the most complex and subtle balancing acts that I know. I can talk about the process easily enough. You read and reread a book, usually privately and by yourself. And then most of us, either in conversation or more formal settings, get together and talk about that book and try to determine what we're going to do with
it. What we consider when we review may be any one of a number of factors, and how important each factor is depends on the book.

I often think when I’m writing a review that there’s a committee that sits in my head nattering away at me all the time. There’s one member, the literary stylist, who may talk about the beauty of the writing, the quality of the artwork, how the book works as a piece of art. Next the pragmatist gets in and says, “Yes, but what about an index? What school curriculum will this fit into?” The pragmatist is shortly followed by the populist who says, “Will children read this? What children will read this? How popular will this book be?” There is the social scientist, or philosopher, who is arguing, “What does this book say to children? What values does it impart? What vision of life does it give?” And then, of course, there’s always the voice of the child.

I have to make a confession. I’m like many other people in this profession. I put on a hat and walk out and try to act like an adult. If I play dress up, maybe you’ll believe me. But within is that child who is always there, and that child’s voice is always balanced by the adult critic who says, “I didn’t like the last book by Gary Paulsen and I don’t like this one.” As an adult, what I have to do, after the nattering goes on, is to come to some decision about how all those factors are going to weigh in the review.

We have to give people enough information so that they can answer the question, “Do I want to take this book into my home, my school, my library, or bookstore?” All of the editors here have to produce journals and reviews under tremendous deadline pressure. We have to be able to walk, talk, chew gum, make phone calls, and write reviews at the same time. And then there you are, forever in print, with your best opinion of that book at that particular moment. The committee goes on meeting in my head. Children’s responses to the book will change mine. Other adults’ responses to the book will change mine. But the printed opinion remains the same.

I’d like to think that if there’s justice in heaven, Anne Carroll Moore and E. B. White are in the same book discussion group. Anne is now a passionate advocate of his masterpiece, Charlotte’s Web, and they’re the best of friends. But every time you go back to her review in Horn Book, here on earth, alas, ACM still disapproves.

I’d like to believe that with a great deal of humility, with a tremendous caring for the people who work with children and for children themselves, and with a passion for books, we do our work to the best of our ability. I don’t really think that book critics go around searching the battlefield. I think rather that what we try to do, in the
words of Helen Gardner, is to “light the lamp to illuminate the
 darkness,” first of all for ourselves, then for others.

RS:  Ilene?

IC:  With 6,000 children’s books being published a year, it’s sometimes
very difficult to think of each book as an individual title. Usually in
the spring and fall, you think of it as this gelatinous mass that’s coming
toward you, and it has to be cut into very tiny pieces. But my philosophy
is to make each book an individual book. At Booklist, one thing that
I have primary responsibility for is assigning books to reviewers, and
I think both publishers and authors would be surprised at how much
time I spend trying to get the right book to the right person, because
it’s a no-win situation if you just give a book to somebody at random.
If you give Anita that Gary Paulsen book, it’s not going to work. I
also try to assess the book the way it was written. I try not to assess
what I would like to have seen written or the better book that it could
have been. Each book is an individual, and that’s how you have to
see it.

I may be kind of prejudiced in this direction because I’m a writer
myself, so I’ve been on both sides of the reviewing process and I know
that it’s a lot easier to write reviews than it is to get reviewed. And
I often say what any other writer says, “Reviewers—what a bunch of
idiots.” Which then chokes in my throat.

RS:  Betsy?

BH:  What I would campaign for most in reviewing is critical
imagination. I think that we fault books for a lack of imagination and
originality, but too often we fault those books in words that are clichés
themselves. The most important thing is to stretch critically with every
book. Sometimes you don’t have to stretch very far, and the book itself
dictates a pretty low-level review. Even there, if you back off and get
some perspective on what the problem is and try to reach with your
critical imagination, you can find new ways to think and write about
a book. While we’re struggling with all this very seriously, we have
to keep a humorous perspective—and we have to keep deadlines. We
are always caught between the pragmatic and the ideal.

RS:  I began in the book reviewing field as Zena Sutherland’s editorial
assistant at The Bulletin when I was in library school. This was 10
years ago, and we were dealing with, maybe, 2,500 books a year. Now,
as Ilene says, we’re dealing with 6,000. I’d like to know how each of
you copes with that incredible amount of material: what you select
and how you select it. Also, if you could, tell me approximately how many books your journal reviews in a year.

**TJ:** We try and do as many as possible. Therefore, our reviews are very brief and to the point, and we try to keep plot and character description down. From January through October of 1992, we've reviewed 3,550. Figure 600 more for November and December, and you can see that we're reviewing around 4,100 a year now. Next year, we are increasing our page budget a little, so we will be doing more.

We review all individual titles from major publishers. There's no question about that. With a series coming in at 10, 20, or 30 volumes, I would do a selective sampling. I no longer promise to do every title in every series. With all of the new publishers coming up—and there are many of them—I try to do all of their first and second list and then I may have to ease off a little with their series titles.

**JRL:** *Kirkus* is doing about 1,500 a year; I don't have time to count. It's overwhelming because I'm sorting these by myself and sending them out by myself and I'm doing half the reviews or more; I don't count that either. I try to do everything people are really going to want to know about most. I can't possibly deal with all the series because I'm only one person, and they do begin to look an awful lot alike.

I think the individual books from the individual publishers are the hardest of all for me to let go, but sometimes I have to. I don't think I've given up on a *Henry and Mudge* book yet, but I did give up on *Amanda and Oliver Pig*. Is that right? The latest is a perfectly good book, but it's not that different from the others in the series. I try to sample all kinds of books—to do some negative reviews as well as positive ones. Obviously, I do mostly positive reviews because you don't want to know about bad books; you want to know about good books. But I do a few negative ones, partly because we don't always know until we review them how good or bad they are.

**AS:** When *The Horn Book Guide*, which is much more comprehensive than *Horn Book*, came into our lives, things got a little easier in terms of deciding what books to review, because we now have a series of checks and balances. The managing editor and I do an initial screening of all books. We then send those titles that we really find worthy out to our reviewers who are working with children. There is a staff of 10 book reviewers, and they are working with children in a variety of settings. Then we pass the book cart on to the editor of the *Guide*. Inevitably, she later comes into my office and says, "Well, you may have missed the Caldecott winner." She points out a few books that I've overlooked and that she really believes a *Horn Book* reviewer should see.
The remainder of the books we then send out to our Guide reviewers. We have close to 60 or 70 Guide reviewers, and most of them are busy reading all the time. They will do a reading and a review, and sometimes will say to us, “You know, this is good enough for The Horn Book Magazine. Maybe you should consider it.” Then we send it to a Horn Book reviewer.

I have no limit on the number of books I can review at Horn Book. I’d love to have a publishing season where I reviewed every book published, but realistically it is somewhere within the range of 15 to 20% of whatever is published. If the numbers go up, the percentage tends to remain the same, so the percentage of what we find really good seems to remain the same no matter how many more books come out.

IC: Booklist, as many of you know, has a recommended-only policy, although we push the limits of that quite a bit: We do have a lot of negative criticism in the reviews, and we do occasionally review a book and say that we are not recommending it. Usually that’s because either the subject matter or the author is so important we think you would like to know about it. We review between 3,000 and 3,500 books, and we deal with our series books in a unique way, I think.

All the series books are looked at, but then they are put in a series roundup, which has saved us, and we hope you, an enormous amount of work. We may be doing the same thing with series fiction—listing titles that we will not review, as a service, so that you will know if the next Sweet Valley High or Baby-Sitters Club has come out.

No journal is ever going to have the number of pages in a telephone book, and so, though we get more books to review, we are still going to be able to review only a certain percentage of them because we all have page budgets.

I think one of the nice things about Booklist is that we have an in-house staff that reviews approximately 50% of the books. We have about 20 outside reviewers to whom we can also send books, but it’s particularly helpful, with books that we want to discuss or argue about, to have an in-house staff so we can all read a book and each get our say.

BH: The Bulletin reviews about 1,000 books a year, which used to be close to half and is now closer to a fifth or a sixth of what is published. It’s something that I’ve been wrestling with lately, like Jacob wrestled with the angels. Fundamentally, my instinct is to be more selective and to keep the reviews critically imaginative. I think that we can no longer maintain the ideal of doing everything that we used to do. As children’s literature becomes more like adult literature, we have to seek instead more venues for reviews. The problem here is that for practical use and critical consideration you have the same reliance on a very limited number of review journals, and yet you have this literature that’s
burgeoning in both numbers and in a kind of star-studded author/illustrator/best-seller syndrome. We're really at a crossroads and can no longer assume what we used to. We're going to have to make different choices and suffer the consequences. The more the publishers put out, the less we're going to be able to review because our pages basically have to stay the same, without expanded budgets and staff.

In terms of practical detail, Roger Sutton, Deborah Stevenson, and I do almost all the reviews, with occasional contributions by a school or public librarian. We select books for varied reasons. One reason is new trends. You all remember when books about child abuse appeared where there had never been books on that subject, or suddenly there were books about AIDS. I think we all try to pick up the books that might spearhead those trends.

We also review books that are important to curricula in schools, that are by important authors and illustrators, or that are first novels, because we want to encourage the development of new writers. We have begun to pass over those titles that appear to be gorgeous coffee-table books with little substance and text. If Barry Moser brings out 15 books a year, he is going to have to realize that there will be an effect. They may all be gorgeous, but we're going to have to be more and more selective about which gorgeous books of his we choose to review.

We choose books that we think will be controversial, and we also have an obligation to speak to those books that we think will be highly popular with children even if they stink critically. Any time there's a serious disagreement on the staff, we feel that that would probably represent a disagreement in the population, so we try to review that book.

We review negatively when we think that a book presents a problem important enough to take up space. Just to pick up another mediocre book and spend a lot of time saying what's wrong with it is not worth the space, but picking up a book that represents an issue and examining it is important.

**RS:** How do you handle disagreement? Whether it's a review from an outside reviewer that comes back and you think, "Did I read the same book?" or if it's someone in your office who, in fact, you respect a lot, but this time you just can't seem to come to an agreement? Who gets the last word?

**TJ:** *School Library Journal*’s reviewers, as you probably know, are all volunteers. There are about 350 of them from schools and public libraries. I really respect their opinions, because they're the ones who are out there with the kids. We can sit around the office and say, "Is anybody going to read this?" and can call the reviewer and get an answer. We have three reviewers on almost every book: The reviewer reads it, our associate editor Luanne Toth reads it, and our freelancer who comes
in once or twice a week also reads. There is no book, fiction or picture book, that has not been read by one of our staff members and the reviewer. (That's not true of all the nonfiction because we have specialists, and I wouldn't begin to tackle it all.) If one staff member disagrees with the review, the other one reads it. If the other one agrees with the reviewer, we let it go. If we both disagree with the reviewer, we call and basically ask the reviewer to explain a little bit more about his or her position. We're not really trying to talk them into coming around our way but trying to get more into their thinking, what they're seeing that we're not. If they give a very solid reasoning for their review, if they give us a point that we have not really thought of, we will go with that review. If we find that there's a hidden agenda there or that the reasoning is really not grounded in fact, or the reviewer is saying, "I really don't like this book and I don't know why," or "I'm really not willing to come out with a negative review. I don't want to hurt anybody's feelings," then we will say, "Look, I'm sorry, but this is not really a book for you," and it will be taken over in the office. That might happen once or twice a year. Almost always we come to an agreement.

**JRL:** Even though there are a number of people who contribute reviews to *Kirkus*, I revise the reviews a great deal more and standardize the prose probably more than anyone else here does. It's not that I don't rely on the reviewers for their judgment. I'm most likely to entirely overrule somebody who's new, who maybe will grow to work better, or maybe we'll give up on each other after a few tries. When I get to know a reviewer very well, sometimes if I find I'm in disagreement and I trust the reviewer's judgment, I'll say, "Well, heck, you know, it's time for this reviewer to have his or her say," and I'll go with their judgment even when I disagree with it—not if it's a major philosophical difference, but if it's of a lesser degree. But basically I have the final say, and I do make a lot of changes.

**AS:** Our review staff gets together and we hash all of this out in a review meeting where we decide what's going to go into each issue of the magazine. The reviewers present the books they're going to review and have to convince the other reviewers and me that they should review them. These meetings are very lively, as you might imagine, and we really argue books out. If we can't reach a consensus at that point, we pass the books around to everybody, go back and read them, and come back again and argue about it. However, even with all of that, in the end there's going to be disagreement over books.

My general philosophy is that if a reviewer can really present a strong opinion as to why that book should be reviewed, and they are
personally enthusiastic, I know there are going to be other readers out there who are, too. I believe book taste is individual taste. In the same way, if somebody's unduly prejudiced against a book, I will quickly move it to another reviewer. The minute they say, "I just hate cat books," I say, "Thank you for sharing that with me," and give it to someone else.

I had to pull The Relatives Came from a lovely reviewer. She thought there was too much kissing and hugging, and I knew it was just the wrong match. Things like that happen, but we really try to take care of it up front and fight it out with each other. The books that end up making a great impact are usually the ones we fight about the most. We fought like cats and dogs over Where the Wild Things Are—very often controversy about a book is a good sign.

Our reviewer of The Stinky Cheese Man says it's a masterpiece, and when she brought it to a review meeting, she was surprised to find that some of her colleagues thought it should be rejected outright and never see the light of day. We fought about it. There were some people who thought it was too adult, too sophisticated; it's making jokes that kids aren't going to understand. When we have that kind of disagreement, we take it back to the classroom, back to the library; we test our theories.

I don't know about you, but if I love a book, I can sell it; and if I hate it, I can make it not go. When we are this passionate about books, negative or positive, even testing the book may not be the best case. The reviewer who hated it is in a working-class public library, and she said it's great for private school students but it'll never work with her kids. She thought it was a class thing altogether. She had no success with it in the library. A private school librarian, who loved it, said that all she would have to do is get up and sell it. And somebody who was in between had a little success. Now again, these are different audiences, different kids, different responses. So that didn't solve our dilemma with the book at all.

In the end, as I said, we star by consensus. I have to have a strong consensus. The majority of the reviewers really loved this book. They think it's terrific. My guess is that if I've got six out of ten reviewers who like it, probably six out of ten subscribers are going to like it, and the other four of you are not going to be enthusiastic about it at all and will wonder why in the world all of these journals are starring this particular book. I think every review journal has starred The Stinky Cheese Man, but my guess is it's going to be one of the titles about which somebody is going to say, "What do these reviewers smoke at lunch?"

IC: At Booklist, there's occasionally blood in the halls, but not too often. We each have our own books to review. The in-house reviewers
generally make their own decisions, although there's certainly a lot of discussion. If people ask our opinions, they get them. The outside reviewers all live in the Chicago area, so it's pretty easy to call them up. But Stephanie Zvirin, Sally Estes (the manager of the department), and I do the editing. If a book comes in and we're looking at the book and it doesn't seem to match the review, we take it to one another and say, "What do you think?" If there's a disagreement, we then call the reviewer, and, as the others have said, see if he or she can make a strong case. Reviewing is an individual decision. I very rarely override somebody unless I have a strong opinion or else I'm not getting a response from them that satisfies me. Usually, it's amicably worked out in a phone conversation, to my satisfaction anyway.

**BH:** The first thing I say is, "Prove it. Give me the evidence for your opinion here," which is an old academic trick that makes people articulate more clearly what they mean. And if they can do that, then even if I disagree, I would let that opinion stand.

I try to give the book the benefit of the doubt in the sense of giving it to the reviewer who I think would treat it with the greatest respect. But when I hear all of what we're doing—this cross-checking and consensus and coddling that's going on here and compare that to the way adult books are treated—I'm amazed.

What I'd like to speak to is the lack of negative reviewing in this field. Publishers are shocked when they read negative reviews of children's books, partly because they're not used to it. I know that the publishers in the audience will probably disagree with that, but compared to adult books, which get slammed up, down, and sideways by somebody from way out in left field who has no expertise in the subject whatsoever, we are dealing very carefully and idealistically with these books, giving them a lot of time and a lot of space.

At *The Bulletin*, the three of us fight about books all the time. I, for the first time in a long time, had to abstain this week from taking a vote on a book, *The Huron Carol*, by de Brébeuf. It's a perfectly decent book in terms of both art and historical text. Here's a hymn about the baby Jesus put into Native American terms by a French priest in the 17th century—and I just go haywire. That's my first signal: watch it. I'm saying, "How dare he. How dare this priest come in and lay his religion on these people and some publisher says, 'Oh, this is great. We'll put it in a children's book,' instead of actually taking the Huron mythology itself and putting that in." Well, I knew immediately, as soon as I heard myself say this, that I had gone around the bend. It doesn't mean that I gave up my opinion, but it does mean that I let Roger review the book and say . . .
RS: I loved it.

BH: He's Catholic!

Anyway, I'd like to raise an issue beyond this specific book, which is the conflict between aesthetic criteria and political correctness.

RS: Well, I have a question from the audience, which I think none of you would like to deal with, but let's: "Richard Peck said at an ALA conference that we judge a book by the race of the author, and that's horrifying. I heard someone comment that we've been doing that for years, it just isn't working in his favor right now."

TJ: I heard that speech, and I must say I agree with Richard's point, that an author has a right to create a character the way he wants to, as he wants to, whatever race, whatever nationality, whatever sex. I think that we're getting a little bit too involved in political correctness in terms of the author's rights, and I'm seeing it particularly in novels. It seems that these days, you simply cannot have a villain who is black, you cannot have a villain who is Native American, you can't have a villain who is a boy, you can't have a villain who is a girl. Nowhere can you have a villain but in science fiction and fantasy, if they're aliens! I think we're taking too many rights away. I certainly think we should maintain our standards of sensitivity, but let's remember that people have a right to create what they want to.

JRL: If someone who is white cannot create a black character, or someone who is black can't create a white character, we can't have multiracial casts in any single book. Books will become segregated. I think we treat all children's books rather tenderly, and I think we treat books that come from minority groups or historically underprivileged groups with particular tenderness when it comes to reviewing them, partly because we are so desperate to have books in these areas and we want to nurture the authors and the illustrators, but partly because it's become a habit, and we need to take care about that and begin to impose the same sorts of standards there that we do elsewhere.

RS: I was asking an editor I know about publishing books on minority subjects and she said, "Yeah, we will publish a book on a minority subject, even when we know it isn't up to our usual standard." Do you feel that the review journals coddle a book because of its subject or the need for the book?

AS: Whether it's books on minorities or books on semiconductors, I think there's always that tendency for us to say, "Well, it's the only thing we have, and therefore . . . what do we do with it?" We tend to give something like that a little extra credence. But we need to get
involved in the artistic questions of this. Are the characters believable? Who cares who created them—do they have authenticity? It's those sorts of things which we really try to address rather than looking at the back flap to see whether there's a picture of the author.

**IC:** I can tell you two recent anecdotes. I was reviewing a book called *Where the Broken Heart Still Beats*, which is the story of Cynthia Ann Parker, who was a white woman abducted by the Comanches and then returned against her will. Her family found her and made her go back with them to Texas. The author, Carolyn Meyer, gives a very harsh picture of the Comanches. They're scalping, they're keeping slaves, they're being Comanches, I guess, according to the way she was describing them. Now, of course, she did have Cynthia Ann Parker longing to return to her people, to her Indian people, so there was a balance there, but I found myself getting very nervous about this. And I didn't like that feeling . . . "Well, is this right? Is this politically correct?" Another book came in, a picture book about an African-American family, and they're on a picnic. They were eating catfish, and in the pictures, they were shown to be barefoot. One of our white publishing assistants came to us and said, "This is a terrible book. You can't review this book. It's politically incorrect. I think this review is absolutely wrong." Well, the review had been done by an African-American reviewer who thought it was a charming book.

**BH:** I don't like that word, charming.

**IC:** It was a lovely book.

**BH:** One of our typical arguments. But seriously, the Carolyn Meyer book was full of villains; most of the white people were unsympathetic characters, too. I was at a conference and I heard a whole series of Native American speakers get up and say, "Stop idolizing us as these wondrous nature-loving, ecologically perfect, 19th-century beings." It reminded me that the greatest cultural portrayals, the best-crafted and most deeply realized characterizations, always involve good and bad. When you see a portrayal of a perfect person—and there are way too many too-good people in children's literature—you know that this writer has not gone to the next level, hasn't peeled off the skin of the onion. That has to be criticized, no matter what color the reviewer or what color the writer.

**TJ:** I would just like to add one point to that. We realize that a lot of our subscribers are desperate for minority books. That doesn't mean that we're going to give those books a positive review. It doesn't mean we're going to say that they're good books. What we will say is that
this is a book about a black or Native American family, but if it's a mediocre book, the decision is in your ballpark. We're not trying to make up your minds for you. We've given you the information we think you need to make up your own minds.

**BH:** I think that a lot of current publishing takes advantage of nervousness about political correctness. I cannot tell you the number of revisionist Columbus books I reviewed over the last year. Some of them are very solid research, but some of them are so calculating in playing on p.c. sensitivities that after a while, you just sit back and say, "I'm going to have to be pretty calculating about this review." Ultimately, I base my judgment on aesthetic criteria. One book that I liked quite a bit but still had some trouble with was *Morning Girl* by Michael Dorris, which was a fantastic portrayal of a Taino family, but which I thought introduced unnecessarily, at the very end, an excerpt from Columbus's journal, which says something to the effect that maybe these people can even learn to speak someday—ironic after the family's complex, rich development. It seemed like a gimmick, and I didn't think he needed it. There are a lot of reviewers who disagree with me about that.

I also had trouble with Patricia Polacco's *Chicken Sunday*, which is a real pitch for intercultural understanding, but I thought it worked way too hard at intercultural understanding and not hard enough at portraying individuals.

**IC:** I disagree with some of those, but I'll go on to my own pet peeves. I review a lot of the religion books at *Booklist*, and I think in general both publishing and reviewing do a pretty poor job on religion books because nobody wants to get into too much controversy and nobody wants to take a stand, so you get lots of versions of Noah's Ark and not much else.

We receive letters asking, "Why don't you review more Christian books?" We are making an effort. Obviously, our subscribers want to have those books reviewed. And, of course, some are well written, some are not, and each has to be judged on its individual merits.

Anyway, the book that I had problems with is called *David's Songs: His Psalms and Their Stories*. Colin Eisler has taken about 46 of the psalms and rewritten them. Some people have a problem with dumbing down the psalms, and I am one of them. A psalm about being jealous—David's looking at people who have more that he does—has the last three lines rewritten as, "Whatever they say is mean and nasty. How could they get so rich when they are so bad?" There's a clonker for you. It's just not quite the way David might have written it. Yet it's actually a beautiful book. The pictures are quite lovely, and it's a prime
piece of bookmaking. So here was a publishing effort that really went the extra mile, tried to produce something that was original, did a very nice piece of bookmaking, as I said, but . . . was the concept wrong to begin with? When we get a book like this, we really have to judge it on all of those elements and discuss them in the review. We try to give all the information, and then it's up to the librarian to be the final arbitrator. The kids are the ultimate readers, but the librarian makes the decision about buying the book. Hopefully, we don't confuse you more than enlighten you.

**TJ:** What do you do when two of your favorite books of the year seem to be without an audience? Either because of format, design, subject matter, or mixed purpose? The writing is magnificent—witty, clever, everything you could ever want. Unfortunately, it doesn't seem to fit the audience. This is the problem I found—first of all, with William Brooke's *Untold Tales*, which I wish I could say was the next step up after *Stinky Cheese*. It's the story of a prince, and Beauty and the Beast, and the Sleeping Beauty. You will all love it. I will say even seventh or eighth graders might love it (although I'm not sure how much they are into middle-age marriages gone stale). Unfortunately, the format is not going to attract anyone in seventh or eighth grade. My reviewer did try it with kids, and she could not get it off the shelf. She could booktalk it, and she could read it aloud, but she couldn't get anybody to want to take it out and read more. They were happy with what she read to them, but it was, "No, no, thanks."

Another book that falls into very much the same category is Bruce Brooks' *What Hearts*. This is obviously written from the heart. It must have been a very painful book to write, and I think that fact has made some holes in it that are going to leave great gaps for kids. It's also, I think, the type of book that you read, and you look back, and you understand what he was going through. But without the experience, I don't think you would. I'd love anybody else's thoughts on this one because I like the book so much. I'd like to be talked into the fact that it could be a children's book.

**RS:** As you may know, at *The Bulletin* we have a code system. And we have the code SpR—that's sort of our "way out" clause. It basically means, "We like this book a lot, but we wonder who else will."

My own agenda for the big problem these days is picture books for adults. They're labelled as picture books for all ages, but I think that "all ages" probably starts at about 35. *Orpheus*, by Charles Mikolaycak, is a very sexy, glamorous, sterile—I think—retelling of a Greek myth. Or there's the *Messiah*, with fancy pictures by Barry Moser. Keep in mind that of all the journals here, at least one of them has
liked one of these books, so there’s no agreement on what books actually fall into this kind of glitzy category. We all have our favorites.

Moser’s illustrations accompany the text that Handel and his librettist used from Bible verses, and they really don’t mean anything without the music, and they certainly don’t mean anything to young children. “Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion, shout, O Daughter of Jerusalem; behold, thy King cometh unto thee: He is the righteous Saviour; and He shall speak Peace unto the Heathen.” It’s beautiful, but what’s it going to mean to a nine-year-old?

**JRL:** Then don’t give it to a nine-year-old. I gave it to the conductor of my chorus, who’s directing the Messiah. There are a lot of people who’ve sung the Messiah, and there are a lot of kids who won’t listen to the Messiah. I think it’s too bad to fault a book for the audience that it never sought—if it is a fine book, doing what it set out to do.

**TJ:** Our reviewer felt that this was definitely a book for grades nine and up. I think we have a problem when we start insisting that picture books be only for preschoolers or primary grades. As adults, we go to art museums, we appreciate art, but suddenly picture books are supposed to be for someone third grade and under. I think there are plenty of them for older readers. One of my friends uses picture books with her junior high class. I think that for books like this we need to find the audience.

**AS:** Is there no audience, or is there simply a small audience? And if there’s a small audience, is it worth getting the book to those special readers who might appreciate the art? I think there is a core of books which need some attention drawn to them and which, put in the right hands, can make a difference with readers. We have to stay away from making book evaluation a popularity contest. If it were, we would all review the same things, and we all know what they would be. (I think it’s terrific The Bulletin can do that special reader code, by the way.) But I would agree with Roger on these picture books. I’ve not a lot of patience with any of them. It’s an unfortunate use of the picture book format.

**IC:** The trend I’ve seen that I find so discouraging is picture books with wonderful art and no story. I’ve talked to publishers about it; I know that some say, “Look, we want to keep these artists in our stable, and they don’t want to share royalties with an author. . . .” It can be a financial thing. But to have beautiful artwork and no story with it is, I think, a waste of paper and a waste of all our time.

**BH:** I also see a very calculating use among children’s book publishers of big adult names to do mediocre work, such as Amy Tan’s The Moon Lady and James Michener’s South Pacific. If a child had never heard
South Pacific, this book would not make him or her want to. The text is like lead falling, clunk, clunk, clunk to the floor on your foot. The illustrations are awkward; the people look like there's something wrong with their limbs.

That's another great problem I have today with picture books. Too many artists can't draw, especially the human figure; what we see over and over is amazingly awkward drafting. It's hidden in this particular book by a lot of wild color, just as the poor writing is hidden by a story for which many adults have great nostalgia. I think this is a perpetration of fraud on children.

The Amy Tan story was terrific in context. It originated in The Joy Luck Club—but it has been re-rendered into a picture book that's awkward and much too long, without the tonal shades of the original. It's all right to encourage responsible adult writers to try to write for children, but remember that this is done at the expense of developing unknown writers and illustrators with enormous talent to work with children's literature, within children's literature. The star-studded system is a real danger. The idea that you pay huge advances to people who you know are going to bring in a lot of money because of their name is something relatively new to children's literature, and it's scary.

IC: Although I agree that this is very calculated by the publishers, I think that libraries are probably not the audience they're looking for with these books. They're looking for the bookstore audience. Parents and grandparents who walk into a bookstore will go for Amy Tan. And then there's Whoopi Goldberg's picture book. The story is a horror, but the artwork for it is great. I said in my review, "Gee, at least we get this brand new artist who should go on doing books, and Whoopi Goldberg should go back to doing talk shows." But the bookstore is the primary audience for a lot of these, because librarians will read the reviews that ask, "Why is this book in existence?"

BH: Yet when people come into the library and ask for these books, it's a library's dilemma, after all. And a teacher's dilemma.

JRL: Whether it's the publisher who initiates it or the best-selling author who wants to write a children's book, there seems to be no conception of what a children's book is or what a child is. These books are often condescending and clichéd, as if, "I'm doing it for the little ones now, and I throw everything I know about writing out the window."

IC: In the publishers' defense, sometimes these adult authors say they want to do a children's book, and the publishing company doesn't want to offend them and says, "Okay, do a children's book."
AS: We could tell the publishers something very important if we all reviewed, bought, and gave a lot of attention to new authors and illustrators, but the reality is that we don’t buy new authors. And we don’t give new authors the review attention that we give the new Chris Van Allsburg.

RS: I think great picture books do fine whether they’re by veterans or newcomers. But I don’t think fiction by anybody—hardcover, children’s, or YA fiction—is doing well at all. And here’s a question from the audience on nonfiction: Does the need for subject outweigh flaws in style and other literary aspects?

BH: I think that reviewing any piece of nonfiction is a very delicate balance between how useful it’s going to be and how good it is. As a librarian in a school where teachers said to their students, “You have to have three sources on this, that, and the other,” at some points I would have bought almost anything—in spite of my critical training. I hate to say that about myself, but I think it would be the same story now. As a reviewer, I have to factor that experience in. On the other hand, the critical voice still plays, and the only thing you can do is say, book by book, “Here’s what’s good about this, here’s what’s bad about it, I wish it were better organized, but for those of you who need it, here it is.”

TJ: The reason we do only a few titles in a nonfiction series, rather than list all of them, is that we find so many differences in quality, in accuracy, and in the ability to present information. Rather than just list them as a series and say, “Here they are,” we’d rather do a few and show you the varying quality in them. We’ll say, “This one’s good, this one’s bad, this one’s mediocre,” so that you can really see that they’re not all of the same quality.

IC: When we look at our series roundup, we simply discard the books that don’t meet our standards.

RS: Now, let me introduce a question from this audience about an earlier point. “Why do European-Americans always want to take the right to create books about people of color, no matter how stereotyped or reflective of long-standing cultural oppression? If people of color did not protest these, we would have lots of books of the ilk of Ten Little Niggers, etc. Look around. Look who selects what to review and how it is reviewed. Look at this audience. This is one reason the Coretta Scott King Award was established. The dialogue you hear is what happens all the time. Look who is deciding what is, quote, ‘politically correct.’” Any comment?
**AS:** When we review, we really try, in all instances, to get a reading from someone of the group that's being represented. The review may not be written by a person from that group, but we will get input. We're all white women editors, of a particular age and background. If we want books for all of our children, we have to reach out for those with other sensibilities.

**JRL:** I have sent books for review to people of the relevant group, and I worry about it when I can't, which happens sometimes because of time constraints. I imagine that's why I tend to be overthoughtful—I worry about it a lot.

**TJ:** We try to get an ethnic book to librarians who are working in communities with that ethnic group. It may not necessarily mean that the librarian is of that ethnic group, but at least we are trying to reach the communities where he or she will know ethnic patrons and be able to test the book. Don't forget that our 350 reviewers or more are out there. We're reviewing fewer than four books a month in-house. Everything else is reviewed by librarians in the field.

**IC:** We also have librarians in the field, as Trev said, working with various cultures, and we do try and get a reading. We also have men—that other minority. You can never have the balance you want. But we certainly do our best to see that the book gets out to the people who want to know about it and who can give us a good reading on it.

**BH:** I think it's racist to feel that all the members of any particular group would agree on a book. I am reminded of *Jake and Honeybunch Go to Heaven*, which split the African-American urban community of Chicago every which way. Some hated it, some loved it, some resented it. I think it would be insulting to hand a book about the African-American experience to an African-American reviewer and say, "Do this because you're African-American, and this is about African-Americans." Every group has a great range of individual voices.

The reason all of us up here are women is because, traditionally, men would not have the job. The reason that publishing for children is dominated by women is because men thought children were women's work. And now that publishing has become so financially profitable, a lot more males are being attracted into publishing, writing, and illustrating for children—so, there is a power operative here, a power of politics.

But I am not happy with the idea that in order to write a book about lizards, you have to be a lizard, or in order to review a book about lizards, you have to be a lizard. There is a valid criticism to be leveled against reviewers or review editors who don't listen to a lot of different voices. You can only be what you are, no matter what color or what religion, and you have a right to an opinion, but your opinion
acquires more validity the more open-minded you are and the more you listen to other people.

**RS:** “What can reviewing journals do to help librarians deal with self-censorship and precensorship pressures?”

**IC:** This has always been a really sticky question because you don’t want to damn a book, but you want to give a fair representation of what it is. I think we’re not doing our job if we don’t tell our readers, “This is in the book,” or “That is in the book,” whether it’s obscene language or incidents—in the briefest way possible sometimes. The thing we get the most unhappy letters about is not telling librarians about something in the book that is going to be a surprise to them when the parent comes and objects to it. If a mention of controversy is in a review praising a book, I don’t think that’s going to kill the book. But you make the decision. You know your patrons, you know your library; I just think it’s our job to alert you to what you can expect, and what your patrons can expect.

**JRL:** Yes, but the line keeps changing, and we all have to keep renegotiating that line. I just got a complaining letter from somebody about a review published in 1975.

**AS:** Obviously in reviewing we’re trying to be as honest as we can about what’s there, but I am amazed at what people find in books to get upset about. Daddy’s Roommate might become the great controversy on television, but we had no trouble reviewing it at all. We gave it a five in the Guide and just said, “If you have to have material on this topic, it’s probably the only thing available.”

**RS:** Is a five good or bad, Anita?

**AS:** It’s bad. Six is the lowest.

**RS:** Why did you give it a five?

**AS:** I just wasn’t a good story, but we had no problem with the subject. The things that will be upsetting in one community are not the things that are going to be upsetting in another community.

Chris Van Allsburg has taken on the whole witchcraft/devil issue with his book, The Widow’s Broom, and we will no doubt have a lot of people objecting to it in certain places. But all we can really do is talk about that book as we see it.

I sometimes assume that most censorship cases come from people who are not very literate because they don’t see something in context, or they don’t see something in nuance, or they don’t see subtleties. But even people who are literate and used to reading books can never
read a book the same way. You try to be as honest as you can about
the content of a book. But my guess is you yourself won’t even know
what book in the collection is going to cause controversy.

RS: But when we say, for example, something about page 19 where
Deenie masturbates, etc., there are librarians out there who are going
to say, “Whoa! I’m not getting near this book!” either because of personal
distaste or knowledge that someone in their community will have trouble
with it. I’m not quite sure how we can avoid that because we can’t
lie to make you buy a book and have you surprised at what might
pop up inside.

TJ: Just one more thought on it: Read a lot of reviews if you’ve got
a censorship case. Don’t be afraid to buy a book if it’s gotten good
reviews, and if you get into problems, call us. We have backfiles and
can support you with reviews. So, don’t feel like you’re out there all
by yourself because a book you bought three years ago backfired. I
just got a complaint about Greene’s I Know You, Al, published in 1976.

IC: We got the same one. It’s interesting, when I looked up our review
of I Know You, Al, it said, this is a wonderful book, and funny, and
there are scenes and language that are going to upset some people.
Now I’m not sure what the librarian will do with that, but the review
was honest.

RS: Trev said something that I would just like to expand on for a
moment. You can’t rely on one review source, and I think none of us
would say, “Just read us.” I remember Hazel Rochman telling me that
she ran into a woman once who said, “Oh, when I see ‘HR’ at the
end of a review, I know I can buy it.” And Hazel said, “I pity that
woman’s library.” So you really do need to keep widely abreast of the
different journals.

One more question: “How do you separate liking a book because
you are personally interested in the subject and liking it because of
its own qualities?”

BH: Actually, it’s not that big a disadvantage to be personally involved
in the subject. I get all the southern books, and I probably give them
the benefit of the doubt because I’m interested in that region, and
obviously from it, as you can hear from my accent when I get tired.
What you have to watch more closely is what you hate. You can begin
to feel what triggers overreactions. Then you back off and give the
book to another person.

IC: I think one quality a reviewer should try to acquire is the
willingness to be surprised. Sometimes we take books on subjects we’re
not particularly interested in to see if the book will grab us. It's almost a better test of a book than picking a subject that you like. And if it does grab you, then it certainly says something about the book.

**AS:** Reviewing is a balancing act. All of us have something we're irrationally passionate about. I love American history. I love to read it and review it and work with it. If you read a lot in an area, you can become a better reviewer. The great advantage to having passions is that you know an awful lot of books that have been done in that area, and you know how to rate them.

But I sometimes hear in my own voice a tone that warns, "Wait a minute, maybe this has more to do with me than it has to do with the book." If you're lucky, you know your own blind spots, and the longer you review, the better you learn them. Yet things come up and grab you by the ankles; a book you would never predict might upset you. I am amazed at what sets me off. What's so important in reviewing is having colleagues you can talk to, who will keep you in line, who will tell you that this little fluffy bunny book is just a fluffy bunny book. "I know you like bunnies, Anita, but . . ."

**JRL:** Reviewing is a great job. You have to know everything, and you have to go on trying to learn everything forever and ever. I learn some really neat things by doing books on subjects I know nothing about; at least I can tell if they're clear. But what's caught me up sometimes is doing something I thought I knew a lot about, like where I grew up, and finding I have to do a little fact-checking on myself to make sure I'm still right about these things I thought I knew. It turned out, for instance, that there was more than one kind of a mule's tail. When I complained, "That's not a mule's tail, that's a horse's tail," somebody found me a photo that proved the children's book was right, in spite of the fact that the drawing in the dictionary looked just like what I thought it should. Hunh!