Out from Behind the Byline:
The Secret Life of the Reviewer Revealed

By Carol S. Surges

Hundreds of people work to bring each issue of Library Media Connection to you filled with current articles on the always changing work and role of the school library media specialist. A majority of that group are the reviewers, who help you make solid purchasing decisions within your limited budget. In spite of a byline, you probably don’t know our names and you wouldn’t recognize us on the street or at a conference. But truthfully, we’re a lot like you. We manage school libraries, teach classes, and perform other professional roles just like you. That, in fact, is what qualified us for this part-time job! As reviewers for Library Media Connection we work as volunteers. So what keeps us performing this task month after month, year after year? How did we get started and why? Read on to uncover our secrets.

WHO NEEDS REVIEWERS?

Review sources are always looking for a new voice to review. Most reviewers get started by responding to Library Media Connection’s occasional ad that accompanies the reviews. Some sources have online application forms to simplify the process. Library Media Connection prefers a sample review, for others it’s mandatory. Potential reviewers are asked for their interests and any areas of expertise. A preference of formats is also requested. Every year reviewers can express an interest in reviewing any of the genres and formats that are covered. I skew towards nonfiction, but I have reviewed a few picture books, some DVDs, several Web sites, and now and then a professional resource. Others feel more comfortable with fiction or one of the other areas.

Review materials arrive two or three times a year. The unexpected arrival of an unmarked package on our doorstep is always exciting. When asked about their reviewing experiences several reviewers, including Suzanne Lay, referred to the package of review materials as “...[it’s] like getting a present. The box comes and you know it’s some sort of book or media, but you don’t know what. What can be better than that?” Sometimes the package will include two or three individual titles. Sometimes there will be a series or two. Occasionally, we’ll find a DVD or login information for an online resource. Along with the new review materials are instructions including the very important submission date for the completed review.

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THE REVIEWER’S “JOB”

Each job is as seductive as a new relationship. We want to know everything we can about our new interest. We pore over the details, looking for its best qualities and hoping there are no flaws. Nothing about the resource is knowingly left unexplored. Within approximately four weeks, we become an expert on the material. Not only do we learn the content of the item, but we also research the author, illustrator, and sometimes even the publisher. We do background checks, spending time researching other materials on the same topic and other items by the same author. Plus we read and re-read the book, checking for accuracy, verifying data, and checking sources. The visual aspects of materials are evaluated too; the overall design of the book and its appeal to potential readers. We pore over illustrations, considering their role and relationship to the text. We verify any back matter, checking the bibliography and URLs for appropriateness. Whenever possible, we share the book with students and teachers and ask for their reactions and observations. Sometimes we are only looking for confirmation of our opinions and other times we need their expertise. When the book doesn’t hold up to our expectations we’re disappointed, but when things go well, it’s like we’ve made a new friend whom we get to introduce to the rest of the world.

The writing process is the moment of truth, and for the majority of reviewers it brings the most challenges. Within one brief paragraph, a reviewer must try to include everything he or she has learned, and everything the reader will need to know in order to make an informed purchasing decision. If the review is positive, 250 words are allowed to summarize the plot or the content, comment on the writing style, illustrations, overall layout of a book and any additional features. Adding suggestions for integration in the curriculum or a comparison to other titles is desirable and requires more finesse and more words. Putting everything together in a fluent paragraph takes time.

Each review is unique because every title is different, but reviews do follow a certain protocol. Library Media Connection has a list of criteria for the content in their reviews. I refer to it regularly but I also find that comparing my original review to what is ultimately published is most informative. Over time, this practice has helped me and other reviewers hone our skills. Recently, for another publication, I was asked to review approximately six series, each covering the same general content. In addition to writing the reviews, I was asked to include a conclusion that compared the series and made recommendations for purchase. Not an easy thing to do, but this time 100 words was the suggested limit. Needless to say, every word counted. Ruthless self-editing skills are an absolute must for a reviewer.

THE OCCASIONAL NEGATIVE REVIEW

Another must-have is the ability to analyze a book or other resource for its appeal and usefulness to the intended audience. Most librarians have developed their intuition about which books will be well received and which will stay on the shelf; which will work within the curriculum and which will fall short. That gut reaction is usually accurate, but it is not enough for an accurate review. As much as we’d like to occasionally say “trust me, save your money,” we need to back up our opinions with sound reasoning. In 150 words (the maximum for an Additional Selection or Not Recommended review), we must politely justify why the book is not worth the paper it’s printed on. Many reviewers confess that writing negative reviews are the ones they obsess over the longest and writing a negative review about a highly-regarded author’s book is the most difficult. Heather H. Henderson explains the dilemma like this, “It’s... hard to be the dissenting opinion
on a book, especially if the writer is well-known or has received many awards... it's like, who am I to contradict this expert? But even experts can miss the mark. Still, I feel like I am wading into treacherous waters...” Clearly, giving a thumbs up or thumbs down to a book can be an unnerving experience—particularly when it's the latter.

Being the conscientious group that we are, reviewers want to do their best for both the hard-working author and the budget constrained library media specialist. Knowing that school librarians rely on review sources for book selection, reviewers write honestly about new materials so other SLMS won't make purchasing mistakes. As fellow reviewer Sandy Scroggs explained, “I like the fact that the reviewers are in the trenches and give honest opinions or guidance if [an] item is worthy of consideration.” Many LIBRARY MEDIA CONNECTION reviewers list that desire to help their fellow library media specialists as their primary inspiration for reviewing. Laura D’Amato explains it this way, “I think I am more critical about books I review than when I purchase books because I know my review will help other librarians make decisions about where to spend their budget dollars.” Having this role is not easy as Stephanie Bange points out, “I feel terrible saying bad things about someone’s creation—after all, it’s their ‘baby!’ But if it is incorrect or poorly done, I think it’s important for colleagues to know that there are problems with a given item and to warn them.” Even when a book may not be to our personal tastes or reflect our ideas, remaining objective is crucial for a good review.

PROFESSIONAL SERVICE AND PERSONAL REWARDS

Those are altruistic motives and commendable qualities for a reviewer, but there are other more tangible reasons many of LIBRARY MEDIA CONNECTION's reviewers have been on duty for decades. For many it's the thrill of being in print. Like Emily Rozmus, says, “It is exciting to see my name in print—in the magazine, online and even on Follet’s Titlewave! The experience has been a great professional boost for me.” Other than the unobtrusive byline, most reviewers remain happily anonymous, but not always. Some reviewers have received grateful emails from authors of reviewed books. Ruth Clark knows that experience firsthand, “Having an author email me and thank me for a review or to discuss a comment I made in a review is better than any monetary payment could be.” Others have been complimented by other library media specialists at conferences.

Reviewers get to keep anything they review. Most titles come in their final binding or format—except, of course, the occasional Web site. When titles come in galley form, LIBRARY MEDIA CONNECTION supplements those by sending an alternate gift title. Over the past decade I personally have donated hundreds of quality books totaling thousands of dollars to my school and other schools in my district. Daniel Beach says, “Over the years I have been able to add to my school library hundreds of dollars worth of materials that I didn’t have to spend school money on. That is a huge benefit for any library...” Having “free” books to add to school collections is a benefit with a capital “B” for most reviewers.

If reviewing is rarely for fame and never for fortune, why do reviewers continue to add an additional deadline to already busy lives? A key reason is staying current; seeing the newest titles before anyone else and getting to know and promote them first. Missa Bergin is one of those happy reviewers, “I think it’s fun when you get a really good book—something that you know is going to be big. It’s tough in a way, because I always second guess myself as to if it really deserves that highest rating. Is it really that good, or did I just like it? But I reviewed Twilight (Meyer), Book Thief (Zusak) and Son of the Mob (Korman) and for each of those I knew I had read something fantastic. I couldn’t wait to share them, and it was fun to be able to talk about them and get them into people’s hands as the buzz was breaking.”

Self-development is another benefit many people include on their list of reasons to review. That list is as individual as each reviewer, but it often includes improving writing and editing skills, learning something new from the latest nonfiction, discovering a new author or illustrator, developing critical-thinking skills, keeping sharp, giving back to the profession, and practicing writing and editing. Some regularly update their principals on published reviews and use their writing to meet professional development requirements. Others use their skills to teach their students about reviewing. The list goes on.

Whatever the reason, reviewing can become habit forming. Many reviewers list more than one publication on their resumes and reviews editor Shelley Glantz boasts that it’s not uncommon for a reviewer to stay with LIBRARY MEDIA CONNECTION for 20 years and longer. For me, I have to agree with everything the other reviewers have said. Reviewing fills my creative urges, rounds out my book budget, offers me a small bit of notoriety but bottom line, it goes back to that word “seductive.” The possibility that the perfect book will be the next one keeps me looking forward to those occasional packages on my front doorstep. Besides, how many people get to have a little Christmas more than once a year?

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"Not only do we learn the content of the item, but we also research the author, illustrator, and sometimes even the publisher. We do background checks, spending time researching other materials on the same topic and other items by the same author."