**Interview with Avi – NY Public Library**

**Transcript from Live Chat
July 30th, 2003**

**NYPL:** Welcome to the third in our series of four on-line author chats. Today our guest is Avi, the winner of this year's Newbery Medal for the most distinguished children's book published in 2002. The book is *Crispin, The Cross of Lead*. It is the exciting story of a boy who lived in the Middle Ages who didn't even have a name.

**NYPL:** Avi, why don't you tell us the story of how you got your name?

**Avi:** The name was given to me by my twin sister. That's to say that I was given a perfectly nice and ordinary name and my twin sister wouldn't or couldn't say it and said something like "Avi," and it stuck. That's the name I've come to use and everybody calls me that. As for why I don't use my last name, that's a whole other story. In essence, when I was a kid in school, I was considered a very bad writer. When I announced in high school that I was going to become a writer, my family was very much opposed to it; not because they thought writing was bad, but because they thought my writing was bad. In a sense, to get back at the family, I decided to drop the last name. So it's just Avi.

**Kcpl:** How old are you, and how long have you been writing?

**Avi:** I am 65 years old, and I made up my mind to become a writer when I was in high school at age 17. If you want to do some quick math, you can figure out how long I've been working.

**Dianne:** My granddaughter, who is in grade 8, says that she hates reading. Her reading level tests out at grade 12, so it isn't as though she can't read. Do you have any suggestions as to how I can interest her in reading?

**Avi:** My guess is that the kind of reading that she's asked to do is not very interesting to her because she reads at such a high level. My suggestion is that you go to a public library or a bookstore and ask her to select books that she might like. In other words, let her find the things - either the kind of book or subject matter - that will interest her and give her the freedom to choose what she wants. My hope would be that she would be responsive. Another thing is to agree on a book you can read together, either separately or out loud, and engage in the kind of talk that always promotes the reading - "What is this character about?" "What do you think will happen?" Those are my suggestions to keep it informal.

**Curioser:** Is there any genre you haven't written in but would like to try?

**Avi:** Hmmm. I haven't written any science fiction, but I don't think I'll do that because you have to know a lot of science. I don't know if it's a genre, but the cowboy story is something I've never done but would enjoy doing. What else might there be? I would say the western would be the one I'd be most interested in doing that I haven't done.

**Shaniqua:** Your books are set in so many centuries! What's your favorite century to write about?

**Avi:** For many years, I wrote historical fiction that pertained to American history, but lately I've been doing medieval history, and I think I'll be working on that for a while because it's interesting to me.

**Doodle:** Which of your books did your kids like when they were young?

**Avi:** I have many children! We are a blended family, so there are five kids, and they range from age 14 almost 15 to about 38. They necessarily read them all. I'm trying to think what they might have all liked. "The Barn" has proved to be a favorite of them, and a book called "The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle." Maybe "Midnight Magic." I think those are their favorites if you take them as a whole. But they don't read them all. There are some kids who haven't read my Newbery book.

**Linz:** You used to live in New York City. Why did you leave? Do you miss New York?

**Avi:** I was raised in New York City and lived there until I went to college. Then I lived in lots of places and a few times moved back to New York. I've lived in Italy and England. I moved to Colorado because I met a lady and I fell in love with her and wanted to share my life with her. Subsequently we were married, and here we are. I have a son who lives in New York, and my granddaughter lives in New York, so from time to time I do get back and see them. New York is wonderful and Colorado is quite wonderful. They're very different worlds, and I'm lucky to have both in my life.

**Curioser:** Why did you write "Nothing But the Truth" in such a unique format?

**Avi:** "Nothing But the Truth" tries to tell a story about what we mean by truth. Therefore I wanted to tell the story in such a way that the author's voice would disappear and there would be many voices which the reader could choose from, so to speak, as to who and what might be the truth of the situation in the book. The style of the book is simply to allow the reader to see how difficult it is to know what we mean when we speak of truth. There can be different ways of looking at the same thing, and any one way is not necessarily a complete truth, but there is a mosaic of attitudes and ideas which suggests the way we look at the world. It puts the reader in charge of the story.

**Kcpl:** Who are your favorite authors?

**Avi:** There are many writers. What I love about writing and books, actually, is that I don't have to pick a favorite. Like many readers, I could have a favorite for a period of time, and forget about them and find another favorite. But some of my favorites among writers for young people are Katherine Paterson, a wonderful writer, Bob Cormier who's no longer alive, Kenneth Graham, and Robert Louis Stevenson. Among writers today, people like Bruce Brooks and Rachel Vail. I could go on and on and we could have a long discussion about many writers. Among adult writers - Charles Dickens, Ernest Hemingway. A lot of the British 19th century writers I like very much.

**Discobabe:** Use ten words to describe yourself.

**Avi:** How would I describe myself? I work very hard, and I work a lot. I try to think of myself as a kind person. I have a great deal of emotion. I'm an emotional person. I'm a person who is not physically very adventurous, though I've had my share. I love new ideas. I hate injustice and cruelty and violence. I like to think that I'm a sympathetic and giving person as well. I'm sure I don't always succeed. As my wife would say, I never stop thinking.

**Valerie:** My 14-year-old daughter has big conflicts with authority figures, both at school and at home. Do you think "Nothing But the Truth" would be a good book for me to give her? Why or why not? Which of your other books would be appropriate for her?

**Avi:** "Nothing But the Truth" would be very interesting. The new book "Crispin: The Cross of Lead" deals with that. An older book called "Smuggler's Island" could deal with that. A book called "Beyond the Western Sea," and maybe best of all a book called "The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle" But many of my books deal with that kind of issue.

**Lila:** If you had a million dollars, what would you do with it?

**Avi:** I'd pay off the mortgage to my house. I would build myself an office that would be very quiet. I've always wanted a backyard pool and never have had one. I guess I'd be able to pay for my kids' college.

**Kcpl:** Where do you get your ideas for your books?

**Avi:** The way a writer gets ideas for books is by becoming a person who thinks about stories all the time. After a while you begin to think in terms of a story, so when you meet somebody, hear something or see something, you see it as a story. You think of it in a different way. Let's imagine a street with trees and cars and houses. If a botanist walked down that street, they would notice mostly the trees - what kind of trees, their age, and maybe the flowers in gardens. An architect walking down that street would notice the trees, but would look at the design of the houses and would probably guess when they were built, things like that. If I were a car mechanic going down that street, I would notice the trees and houses, but mostly I'd notice the cars - what kind, how old, unusual cars, and so forth. I'm a storyteller. When I walk down that street, I see stories where other people saw trees or houses or cars. It's the way you look at the world, and a writer is somebody who thinks of stories in terms of words, because there are many ways to tell a story. I have a son who writes songs, so he experiences life in terms of music. I think of it in terms of the written story.

**Mary:** Hi, my name is Mary and I have just written two short stories. I am now on my third story. I have tried to get my stories published but I am having some difficulty. What does a publisher want in a story?

**Avi:** First of all, no book publisher is going to publish one short story; you have to submit to a magazine. Without looking at your stories, I can't tell you what they have or do not have, but I would venture to guess that a good short story needs to be original. That is to say it must be different from other stories, must have characters who come alive, must have writing that is interesting and perhaps even clever, but most of all it has to have a story that lots of people would find interesting with an ending that is satisfying, surprising, and perhaps even clever. My suggestion would be to go to a collection of short stories or read the short stories in magazines that are put together for young people, Stone Soup for example. Read as many as possible and compare your work with those that are published.

**Inwood Library:** How did you start writing?

**Avi:** Well, everybody these days goes to school, pretty much most of us anyway, and we all write or are taught writing in school. That's the way I began - the way everyone else did. Usually writers begin by reading a great deal and trying to imitate the kinds of writing we enjoy, and I'm no different than that. The most important part of the process is reading. If you're interested in becoming a writer, it's more important that you read a lot than you write a lot.

**Yaniri:** When do you write?

**Avi:** I tend to like to work early in the morning. I like to be at my desk at 5-6 AM, and I can work all day, but I think my best work is in the morning.

**Shaniqua:** I read that your favorite hobby is photography. What do you like to take pictures of?

**Avi:** I like to take pictures of anything. Of people, but you have to be very quick and I'm not very quick. There's nothing in particular. What I do best because I'm slow is what we would call still life or landscape, but I do love to take people when I can.

**Beth:** Who has been your biggest influence?

**Avi:** I don't really know. Perhaps the person who influences me most is my wife, I would say, at this stage in my life. She's a very smart lady and always has lots of ideas about one thing or another. Yeah, I would say my wife.

**Reyna:** When you were young, what did you want to be when you grew up?

**Avi:** There's a family story to the effect that the earliest occupation that I wished to do was a garbage collector. Over the years, I wanted to be an engineer, an inventor, an archeologist, and probably a few things I forget, but those are some of the things. If you look in my office, I think garbage collector is the closest that I've come to.

**Oscar:** How many books have you written?

**Avi:** I believe I've published 54 books. There are other books in progress and maybe a dozen books that I've written which were never published because they weren't quite good enough.

**Curioser:** Which of your books gets the most fan mail?

**Avi:** It changes over the years, of course, but these days I get most letters about a series of books called "Tales of Dimwood Forest." People call them the Poppy Series.

**Shaniqua:** Do you write every day? Do you write with a pen or on the computer?

**Avi:** I do try to write every day and in most circumstances I do that even when I travel, working with a laptop. I do work exclusively on a computer, but when I do revisions, I work on the manuscript directly.

**Kcpl:** Do you enjoy writing books for kids?

**Avi:** I do! That's all I do! I do enjoy it, and I like the way kids read and I love the way kids respond. They're loyal and passionate and they have very good critical sense. They like what they like, and if they don't like it, they don't.

**Kipling:** What was the first book you wrote that made enough money for you to live on? How old were you?

**Avi:** It took a long time before I could make a living as a writer. One book can make a difference, but I've written many books, and most of them are still in print, and it is the cumulative aspect of writing that has enabled me to make a living of it. I would say that I had written maybe 15 books before I could think of supporting myself, much less my family. It probably wasn't until I won a Newbery Honor Award for "The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle," and then the next year I won another Newbery for "Nothing But the Truth," that I was able to support myself and family. Maybe I was 50.

**Strappy:** When you think of your books, did the right ones win the biggest awards?

**Avi:** I would say I don't know. It's quite common for writers to have a favorite book which nobody else much likes, and books which other people enjoy a great deal are not necessarily their own favorites. I think that's a reader's judgment, not a writer's judgment. I'm happy to get the awards, and I don't know what is my so-called best book. I don't know if there is a best book.

**Reyna:** I am a fan of yours. What kind of ice cream is your favorite?

**Avi:** Hmmm. Given a choice, I think I prefer coffee ice cream.

**Cowgirl:** What do you like to do when you aren't writing?

**Avi:** When I'm not writing, I'm very much involved with my family. I do all the cooking in the house. I love to watch movies, and I love to read. But I think most of all I like to sit around and talk with people. I try to swim every day. We have a log house in the mountains. I love to be there. I lead a fairly ordinary life.

**Shaniqua:** What do you like to write best, comedy or serious stuff?

**Avi:** I guess what I really like to write most is a good book. I do love to write funny books, but they're hard to write, and I wish I could write more of them. A serious book I take not so much as a serious book. I do like to write an emotionally engaging book, but most of all what is important is to write a good story.

**Joanne:** Will you ever write a sequel to "Nothing But the Truth"?

**Avi:** I don't think so. I don't think there's a story to go beyond that which exists there because that's a story which is as much about a story as it is a story, and having done it that way, I don't see extending it. I could see myself writing another book in that style, but not with the same characters or subject.

**Kcpl:** When you were in school, did you ever act like the character in the book "Nothing But the Truth"?

**Avi:** No. That character has nothing to do with me. Maybe it's a little bit like one of my sons, but I don't think I would have ever acted that way.

**Curioser:** What advice would you give to young writers?

**Avi:** The most important thing that you can do as a would-be writer is read, and I would suggest that any would-be writer read and read and read some more. And then read and read and read some more. After all that reading, read and read some more. And then read and read some more. If you still want to write, go ahead! The point is that you want to teach yourself to think in terms of a written story and so the more you read, the more you will do that. Reading is a form of practicing writing.

**Xander:** What do you like most about yourself?

**Avi:** My modesty! I don't think of myself in those terms. I would like to think I'm a nice person. And that's the most important thing.

**Reyna:** What's a recommendation of a book you've written? Would you recommend "Crispin" for me? I'm 8. I've read "Who Stole the Wizard of Oz." It's great! What's that book called again? "Romeo and Juliet û Together (And Alive!) At Last."

**Avi:** I would say you might want to wait for "Crispin" until you're a little older, but you might enjoy a book such as "The Good Dog." Or you might enjoy reading "The Tales from Dimwood Forest."

**Inwood Library:** Are you going to publish another book?

**Avi:** I have a book coming out next month. It's called "The Mayor of Central Park," and it's an animal story set in New York City. It takes place in Central Park. I think it's sort of fun. That's a book that would appeal to those people who read "Tales from Dimwood Forest."

Beth: Do you ever plan to retire from being an author?

**Avi:** There are times I think about retiring. Writing is very tiring, but I don't have any plans. In fact, I owe my publishers about eight books, so I'm not going to retire for a while.

**Sleepyhead:** How did you know how to write about Crispin, a boy from the Middle Ages?

**Avi:** To write that book required a very large amount of research. I must have read in part 200-250 books on the subject.

**Shaniqua:** Why did it take you 14 years to write "Bright Shadow"?

**Avi:** Sometimes when a writer gets an idea for a story, it's because it has some personal meaning for themselves. In this case, "Bright Shadow," it was a kind of personal problem that I was trying to work out for myself. I would say that problem is when you learn that you have a gift or a skill which is somewhat unusual (in my case writing), how do you learn to live with what you're good at? Because sometimes when you're good at something, it also sets you apart a little from other people, and that can be uncomfortable. So learning how to be different and how to take responsibility for being different is what I think that book is about, and it took me a long time to figure that out for myself.

**Mariann:** Where did you start working?

**Avi:** I learned to write originally in school and then started writing and reading a great deal and have been doing it ever since I was a teenager in New York City. In fact, I worked for the New York Public Library for quite a long time - more than 10 years, and I was a librarian.

**Kcpl:** Where did you get the idea for "Who Stole the Wizard of Oz?"

**Avi:** When I was working in the library, I came upon an atlas, which as we know is a book of maps, and usually obviously maps of real places. This book that I came upon was a collection of maps of imaginary places, such as the Land of Oz or Narnia or Alice in Wonderland, etc. And I got to thinking about imaginary places and maps. I like maps and books - they always interest me - and out of that evolved the story "Who Stole the Wizard of Oz?"

**Vista:** What is your favorite book that you read this summer?

**Avi:** The best book that I read this summer was a history of the dark ages, and that was quite fascinating to me. That's the period in Europe that follows the collapse of the Roman Empire, until about the year 1000. I also read a wonderful book called "The Quiet American" by Graham Green. It's a novel. I've been reading some Lloyd Alexander. I also reread "The Fellowship of the Ring," the whole thing. That was fun.

**Krystie:** Did you always love to write?

**Avi:** Since I was a teenager, the answer is yes.

**Xander:** Where is your favorite place in the whole world?

**Avi:** My favorite place in the world these days I guess would be our mountain log cabin which is in the Rocky Mountains. It's about 9,000 feet up and it's in the middle of a national forest, and it's very quiet and very beautiful. At this time of the year, it's surrounded by wild flowers, deer, elk, hummingbirds, and fox, and it's very, very beautiful.

**Meghan:** What kind of obstacles did you have to overcome to fulfill your dream to become a famous author?

**Avi:** I think it's hard for anybody to write well. Writing is difficult for everyone. It's a very hard thing to do. In my particular case, I have and have had what are known as syndromes of dyslexia. I don't have dyslexia; I have aspects of it. It makes my spelling pretty bad. I don't always see clearly what I'm writing, and I have to check myself very carefully. Particularly when I was a kid in school, I was always being told that I was a bad writer, but in fact it was because of this other thing. That's the most difficult thing, but I would stress that this is something that's still with me. I was just today purchasing a used car for the family, and I was writing a note to thank the person who helped me buy it, and I said, "Thank you for helping us buy that card." But then I caught it, and it's "Thank you for helping us buy that car." That's the kind of thing that happens to me all the time still, but it's a nuisance.

**Chat:** How long did it take you to write "Poppy"?

**Avi:** I would say that on the average it takes about one and a half years to write a book, but sometimes longer and sometimes shorter. That one probably took about a year to write.

**Kcpl:** Are you religious and if so, what religion?

**Avi:** I'm not a religious person. I find religion very interesting and when you read the history of people, religion is often very much a part of their history, sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worse. The medieval period is full of religion, but religion is a complicated subject and means many different things to many people. Sometimes belief in religion has lead to enormous cruelty and loss of life by people against other people, and sometimes religion has produced beautiful things like paintings, music, and architecture. But it's a very complicated subject and I like to think of it as an intensely personal one. Public religion is not something that I'm engaged in. My beliefs are very private, but I don't think of myself as a religious person, even though I do write about religion. Glitterbug: What kind of book do you think you are best at writing?

**Avi:** I think I write best when I have a strong story to tell. A story I think is what I do best, and what I mean by that is a plot that engages people, and then out of that emerges strong characters. But people might say my historical fiction has been my most successful. One of the reasons that historical fiction is fun to write is that you're allowed to engage in language in very interesting ways because you have to invent a language that replicates a language that no longer exists. And that's a really interesting thing.

**Shaniqua:** You write about animals all the time. Do you have any pets? What's your favorite animal on the planet?

**Avi:** I don't write about animals all the time, but I do write about them often. We do have a dog, a big Alaskan malamute, and he's really my son's dog. His name is McKinley. He appears in that book I wrote called "A Good Dog." McKinley is a sweet dog and we all love him. I think I love cats the best, but my wife is allergic to cats, so we don't have one. It's my wife's only serious fault.

**Mariann:** If you had one wish, what would it be?

**Avi:** If I'm going to be selfish about it, I guess I wish I were younger but kept all the knowledge I have from being older.

**Xander:** Do you have a funny fan story you can share with us? What's the weirdest thing a fan has done?

**Avi:** I don't have such a story. I once got a letter from a reader, a fan I guess, who told me that she liked one of my books called "The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle." She said it was the only book she ever read, and that's the only book she ever wanted to talk about. She'd read it 16 times, and her mother forbade her to read it any more, so the girl was writing and asking me to write a sequel so she could read another book. That's as strange as I've gotten. Another strange story - some young reader wrote to me, furious because a character in one of my books died and that was her favorite character. She was so angry at me that she swore she'd never read another book of mine again. So people get passionate about their books.

**Meghan:** Some authors listen to music while they write. Do you do this? What kinds of music do you like?

**Avi:** When I work I need absolute silence. I love to listen to music, but it has its rhythms that are different than the rhythms of my writings, so I find it difficult to listen to music when I work. In fact, if it gets too noisy around the house, I have some of those industrial earmuffs on my desk, so it can be quiet in my head anyway.

**Curioser:** Do you have any horror stories from your librarian days?

**Avi:** No. I can remember once when somebody knocked against the bookcases and they all went down like a row of dominoes. Something like you might see in a movie. But there it was. That was pretty dreadful. I had to clean it all up and put all the books back. A lot of work.

**Inwood Library:** I like books by Robert Louis Stevenson and Jules Verne. What books did you like as a kid?

**Avi:** The first book that kept me up reading all night was Jules Verne's "20,000 Leagues Under the Sea." I couldn't put it down until dawn. And Robert Louis Stevenson - nobody has written a better book for young people than "Treasure Island." So those are my favorites, too. I read and was fond of Thornton W. Burgess who wrote animal stories. One of my very favorite books was "Wind in the Willows," but I read lots of Hardy Boys and cowboy books - what used to be called "boy's books." I liked adventure books in particular.

**NYPL:** Thanks for a great chat! We are almost out of time, so do you have any parting words for us?

**Avi:** It's always a pleasure to talk to my readers. It's gratifying that they have enjoyed my books, and I love the fact that my books become part of libraries all over the world, personal and public libraries. Writing is a wonderful thing and when you can write a story that pleases many people, it's enormously satisfying. I thank my readers and hope I can keep writing the books that they enjoy.

**NYPL:** Avi, we are running out of time. I wish we could go longer, but I want to thank you for being with us and for answering so many questions about your writing and the influences in your life that led you to be a writer. I know your readers have appreciated this visit with you and will be looking for more of your books as fast as you write them. Again, thank you.

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