



Ten Golden Rules for Critics of Children's Books

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Robert Leeson and **Jean Ure** on the quality of children's book reviewing.

by **Robert Leeson & Jean Ure**

First **Robert Leeson**

I was a critic before I was a published writer and can say truthfully that one reason why I began to write children's books was a critical dissatisfaction with existing output.

So I know the game from both sides and, in 25 years as a literary editor, I often acted as umpire. During those years I worked out Ten Golden Rules for reviewers ... because it turns out that what annoys the author often bothers the editor. And a well-made review ought to help and please the author, too.

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Here they are:

1. Don't skim read - a critic's vice. Read to enjoy.
2. Know the publishing history of author and book, or try to find out.
3. Do not say 'I could do better', or worse 'anyone can write this stuff', unless you have tried.
4. Beware of using your review to show you know more than the author.
5. Beware of taking against a book, then rationalising a personal dislike into objective criticism by nit-picking.
6. Beware of making statements about what is in the book which you cannot back up if challenged.
7. Don't review too many titles at a time, even if round about Christmas time the Literary Editor becomes desperate.
8. If reviewing several books, you may look for a common theme. This makes for an interesting review. But recognise when the theme wears thin and don't fit books into an argumentative framework where they don't belong.
9. Don't make gratuitous attacks on the style of the book when what you dislike is its content.
10. Write usefully first and foremost - to inform is the first function of a review. Let wit follow wisdom.

And, I might add an eleventh rule - if you aren't ready to sign the review, don't attack the book.

Follow all these rules and you'll be at peace with yourself. It won't guarantee that all the authors will love you. Some of them are quite unreasonable...

Some More Golden Rules

Are these notes enough? And how do they work out in practice? For a personal comment **BfK** went to a children's author who's had more experience than most of being on the receiving end:

Jean Ure

I heartily endorse all ten of Bob Leeson's Golden Rules, but would like to amplify one or two and add a couple more to the list. If I use reviews of my own books to illustrate my points, this is simply because I tend to read my own reviews with a more jaundiced attention than I do other people's. I don't think I can be alone in this ...

Golden Rule No. 10: 'Write usefully first and foremost'. Yes, most certainly - but that doesn't mean do a re-write of the blurb and call it a review! This is a particularly annoying habit. Expound the plot by all means, but unless there's a critical summing up or expression of opinion this doesn't qualify as a review.

Golden Rule No. 6: Not only 'beware of making statements about what is in the book which you cannot back up if challenged' but *don't make authoritative pronouncements if you're not prepared (or haven't the space) to back them up at the time.*

Here I speak from recent experience: the wound is still raw! I had a review which was truly excellent (in other words, *favourable*), fulfilling all the reviewing criteria that even the most demanding of authors could lay down - until it came to the punchline. The punchline was:

'If only Ms Ure had a literary style to match her insight she would be right up in the first ranks of writers for the YA.'

Now, I accept that it's any reviewer's right to find fault. What I do not accept is that it's a reviewer's right to cast a slur on a writer's style (by which very largely hangs or falls a writer's reputation) without giving at least some examples by way of justification. Reviewers are not there to play God. We all *know* opinions are only personal opinions, but personal opinions can be devastating, and I take it as no part of a reviewer's brief to devastate, certainly not without good *and demonstrated* cause.

Golden Rule No. 3: Under the heading of reviewers' claims to being able to do better than the author under review, I'd instance the following: '*a brilliant and powerful book in many ways - but I'm glad it's not my name on it.*' This, by implication, is saying that the reviewer is every bit as capable as the author of writing a brilliant and powerful book - and so indeed he may be, but is it seemly so to puff himself up whilst reviewing another writer's work?

Two other Golden Rules which I find difficult to encapsulate but feel I must attempt...

Extra Golden Rule (i): Don't be dogmatic. By this I mean, don't put forward what is essentially your own reading of the work as if it's a statement of fact, e.g. '*Comprehensive school teachers might like to read this book, because it has been carefully thought out with their needs in mind.*'

Oh? Who says so? The reviewer says so! But what right has a reviewer to make any such assertion? Reviewers should stick to reviewing and not make unwarranted assumptions.

Finally, **Extra Golden Rule (ii):** Don't review a book solely in terms of your own ideology. This is perhaps a refinement of Bob's Golden Rule No. 5. I include it as a separate issue only because I've noticed a growing tendency for people with axes to grind, albeit perfectly good and respectable axes, to lose all sense of perspective.

When writing books I do not consciously consider that I must take care not to offend any of the currently accepted canons. I am, after all, writing novels, not polemics. My own philosophy of life will inescapably come across, and this, I

believe, is as it should be.

I recently learnt, however, from the US **Interracial Bulletin**, that my philosophy as perceived in a light-hearted book called **A Proper Little Nooryeff**, is shot through with `subtle bigotry??` *For instance, Jamie is convinced to help with the ballet show not because of the artistic value of ballet (oh, boy!) nor even because of the exercise he would get (But, Jamie, think of the exercise!) but because the show's proceeds will go to persons with disabilities. (Bad, bad, bad!) More specifically, the money will go to Fairfield, a segregated (no, they don't mean racially) institution where his cousin resides... it is never mentioned that the money would be more appropriately raised for a program which encourages mainstreaming, employment, accessible recreation or independent living.'*

Along the way, with almost total disregard for any other qualities the book may have, I'm also taken to task for classism, sexism, remedialism and sissyism? *The greatest failure of the book is its finale. The fact that Jamie has survived the ridicule of ruffians doesn't convince him to pursue his talent openly and with pride. In the end, he worries only about how he will face his sex-polluted slob of a bestfriend, Doug. Does Jamie fear that Doug will think him a sissy, or perhaps worse, gay?'*

Yes! Yes! Yes! He does! *Imagine...* the horror of it!

We come here to the age-old question ... is one delivering political messages or is one writing books about people living in the real world? The standard retort, of course, is that OK, in the real world people *might* be classist, sexist, racist, genderist, sissyist, homophobe, but we, the right-minded ones, are trying to change all that. Should we therefore be including such wrong-thinking characters in our books?

My answer is a very firm yes, we should - but not without making it very clear where we personally stand on such issues, which is precisely what I did in **Nooryeff**. Unfortunately, the most well-meaning and high-minded of people, such as I'd suppose the reviewer for **Interracial Bulletin** to be, can be as raddled with prejudice as any blimp. If I had space I could refute every one of the charges made against **Nooryeff** save for the handicapism, to which I plead guilty. But let us think ... how could I have handled it?

Anita: But, Jamie, it's for charity! It's for *Fairfield*.

Jamie: Sod *Fairfield*. The money would be more appropriately raised for a program to encourage mainstreaming, employment, accessible recreation or independent living.

Anita: Oh, Jamie, you're so right! We should not be supporting these segregated institutions for people suffering from cerebral palsy.

Jamie: Now that you've seen the light, I will dance for you.

Anita: Oh, *Jamie!*

See what I mean?

The question inevitably arises: how much notice should a writer take of reviews?

I don't feel inclined to lay down rules about this. There are writers who claim - indeed, I know one personally - to be totally incurious about their reviews and pretty well impervious to either praise or criticism. I find this difficult to comprehend, but who shall doubt that this is their right? For myself I readily confess to being made of weaker stuff. After twenty-odd years as a professional writer I still remain naively eager to hear other people's opinions of my work. I care what my readers think - and my readers include my reviewers. I am made happy by good reviews, cast down by bad ones; not, after all these years, to any incapacitating degree, but sufficient for me to take note of what reviewers say... usually.

For instance, I largely (largely but not *entirely*) dismissed the above-mentioned **Nooryeff** review on the grounds that it

came from the standpoint of ideology rather than literature.

On the one occasion when I did take criticism to heart, it rather rebounded on me. This was when I allowed myself to be riled by a scathing review of **Nooryeff** in the then **Gay News** (ideology again) in which it was somewhat irritably suggested that the book would have been far more interesting had I made my '*butch, attractive, muscly, fantastically gifted, sexy ballet dancer*' gay. Now, I had originally toyed with this idea, but dismissed it as being too much of a stereotype: **Gay News** made me wonder whether perhaps a straight ballet dancer was a stereotype? Thus, in the original draft of the sequel, I did the next best thing and made my fantastic, etc., hero bi-sexual. Unfortunately, there was such an outcry at my publishers - 'Not *Jamie!*' they wailed - that I was forced to listen to editorial pleadings and have a re-think: my hero reverted to being madly butch.

Gay News had, I think, folded by this time, so I never got a second scathing review, which I should have enjoyed; instead I received a panic-stricken letter from my US editor saying that the ending of the book would have to be changed or they would be inundated with hate mail from the gay lobby. (The sequel, y the y, was rather aptly named **You Win Some, You Lose Some...**)

So have I learnt *nothing* from reviews during my ten years as a children's writer? I've learnt what sort of books win prizes, what sort of books reviewers wet their knickers over, what sort of books put their hackles up, what sort of subjects throw them into a state of uncritical swoon - but as regards my own personal writing, I'm afraid the answer has to be no; not a lot. Perhaps I'm asking more of reviewers than they feel able (for a whole variety of reasons, space and economics not least among them) to give. But then this entire article has been intended as a plea for both *more* reviewing and more *critically informed* reviewing, which must surely be in the best interests of us all... isn't it?

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