

# Introducing the Novel

"Miss Doyle, please . . . I have something else to offer."

"No more tea, thank you."

"No, miss. It is this." He held out a knife.

With a scream I jumped back.

"No, no! Miss Doyle. Don't misunderstand! I only wish to give you the knife as protection—in case you need it . . . Miss Doyle doesn't know what might happen . . . A ship sails with any wind she finds," he whispered.

—*The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle*,  
chapter 2

*The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle*, published in 1990, is an adventure novel set in 1832. When the novel begins, Charlotte Doyle is a sheltered schoolgirl who knows only the wealthy world of her family. She is about to embark on a journey that will take her from her school in England to her family's home in Providence, Rhode Island.

From the moment she steps aboard the *Seahawk*, Charlotte Doyle has unsettling experiences. In the earliest days of her voyage, these experiences strengthen Charlotte's feeling that she should not be traveling across the Atlantic Ocean by herself on a ship full of strangers. The voyage cannot end soon enough for her. Charlotte has no idea that her time aboard the *Seahawk* will change her life forever.

Originally, Avi did not plan to focus this novel on one character. When he began to write, he was planning to create a mystery novel. He even titled his work-in-progress "The *Seahawk*." However, in working on the book, Avi found that he was drawn to the character of Charlotte. He began to care about how events might affect her. The element of mystery then became secondary to the story of Charlotte.

Of his writing style, Avi says, "I try to write about complex issues—young people in an adult world . . . in a narrative style that relies heavily on suspense with a texture rich in emotion and imagery." This style can be seen in his

characterization of Charlotte, his images of the ship and the sea, and his development of the story's events. Charlotte, like other characters in Avi's writing, struggles to find her true self in a world that is not always flexible or kind.

Suspense, vivid details, the believable characterization of Charlotte and others, and the emotional impact of its ending have earned this novel much critical praise and several awards. One reviewer described the book as a "sensuous novel evoking the sights, sounds, and smells of the ship and the sea; the moods of captain and crew; . . . and the nature of friendship and loyalty."

## THE TIME AND PLACE

Most of the action in *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle* takes place in 1832 on an old two-masted sailing ship, called a brig. The brig is traveling from England to the United States to transport cargo. Another setting, used later in the novel, is the wealthy, orderly home of Charlotte's parents in Providence.

Early in the novel, Charlotte tells readers that her father "engaged in the manufacture of cotton goods" and had been working at an American business located in England. At the time in which the novel is set, the manufacture of cotton cloth was an important and profitable industry in both England and the northeastern United States.

In the 1800s, some people were reaping the benefits of what is called the Industrial Revolution—the period during which machines replaced skilled workers and their handtools. The new machines were kept in large factories. Goods, such as clothing and furniture, could now be manufactured much faster than ever before.

The Industrial Revolution started in England around 1750 and soon spread to other countries. Cloth-producing factories, called textile mills, were among the first businesses to

use machines. Inventors developed machines that could quickly spin large amounts of cotton into yarn and weave the yarn into cloth. In 1790 Rhode Island became the first state in the United States to copy the cotton-spinning machines used in England. By the late 1820s, the manufacture of cotton goods was Rhode Island's most important industry.

The Industrial Revolution made nations wealthier, but this wealth was not shared by all the people. In many countries, the gap between the rich and the poor widened, and distinct social classes became more noticeable. It was difficult, if not impossible, for factory workers to lift themselves out of poverty and climb to a higher social level.

### Did You Know?

In addition to being an adventure story, *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle* is also a historical novel. In a historical novel, realistic details are used to show the conditions and the spirit of a specific time period in history. This type of writing may feature actual historical figures and events, fictional characters and scenes, or a combination of both. Avi believes that historical novels can help readers understand the past more effectively than can books that contain only facts. He says:

*Somewhere along the line, I can't explain where, I developed an understanding of history not as fact but as story. That you could look at a field and, with only a slight shift of*

*your imagination, suddenly watch the battle that took place there.*

Through descriptive details, Avi helps readers understand what life was like for sailors and passengers aboard a nineteenth-century sailing ship traveling the open sea. Readers can think of the fictional characters as representative of persons who actually lived in 1832 and had similar experiences. A nonfiction book might tell readers how a ship was constructed, what a sailor's job involved, and where ships traveled. In Avi's historical novel, readers understand what it feels like to climb a ship's rigging in hurricane-force winds; to sit in a dark, rat-infested ship prison; or to pull into a busy port after months at sea.

# Meet Avi



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

—Avi

Fans of novelist Avi know that his goal is to create stories that are exciting and fun as well as thoughtful and well written. He has attracted a loyal audience of young readers, teachers, and critics and has earned numerous awards and honors. The thirty books Avi has written include tales of mystery, history, adventure, comedy, and fantasy. He says:

*I take a great deal of satisfaction in using popular forms—the adventure, the mystery, the thriller—so as to hold my reader with the sheer pleasure of a good story.*

Avi Wortis was born in New York City, on December 23, 1937, and he grew up in the borough of Brooklyn. His parents held strong political views and fought actively against racism and for women's rights. Avi remembers that his home was always filled with lively discussions.

Despite the author's love of reading and learning, school was a constant struggle for

him. Later in his life, he realized that he had a learning disorder that affected his ability to spell and form letters. Because at that time people did not understand learning disorders, Avi was criticized at school and told that he would never be a good student or a writer.

Avi, however, would not be discouraged. With the encouragement of his family and a helpful tutor, and because of his love of books and his own stubbornness, he kept writing. While still in high school, he decided that he wanted to have a career as a writer. Avi based the experiences of many of his later fictional characters on his own experience of feeling like an outsider.

After high school, Avi studied at the University of Wisconsin and earned two degrees. He then moved back to New York City and took a job with the New York Public Library. He worked as a librarian for the next twenty-five years, and he continued to write.

Avi became interested in children's literature after the birth of his own children. His first published book, *Things That Sometimes Happen* (1970), was a collection of stories based on tales Avi told his two sons. After he published his first novel, *No More Magic*, in 1975, he realized that writing novels for preteens and teens was what he wanted to do most.

Today, Avi writes full time and travels around the country to give talks in schools. He likes to share his story of success with students, particularly students with learning disorders. Avi believes that being in touch with his readers helps him keep his stories realistic:

*I think it's very important for me to keep these kids in front of my eyes. They're wonderfully interesting and hold me to the reality of who they are.*

**Wortis, Avi**

**Born:** December 23, 1937, in New York, New York

**Vocations:** Children's Fiction Writer, Librarian, Professor

### **Biography:**

Avi Wortis, writing under the pen name of "Avi," is an award winning children's fiction writer. Throughout his writing career, Avi has written more than 50 children's books—as many as four books per year. This esteemed children's writer was born on December 23, 1937, in New York, New York, to a doctor, Joseph, and his wife, Helen. According to *Something About the Author*, Avi was born into a family of writers: two of Avi's great-grandfathers were writers, and his grandmother was a playwright.

As he grew old enough, Avi attended high school at Elisabeth Irwin High School in New York, New York. Also, according to *Something About the Author*, Avi did not always want to be an author; the writer is quoted as saying, "My first desire was to become an airplane designer, then a biologist. After my junior year in high-school my parents were informed that I was in desperate need of a tutor for somehow I had never learned to write or to spell."

Avi had many interests while he was in college and pursued three different degrees, which would all become useful throughout his careers. He first attended Antioch University and then transferred to the University of Wisconsin where he received his B.A. in history, 1959, and M.A. in drama, 1962. The following year after graduating from the University of Wisconsin the second time, Avi married a weaver named Joan Gabriner. Soon after marrying, Avi went back to school for a final time at Columbia University where he received his M.S. in library science in 1964. According to *Contemporary Authors Online*, Avi and Joan eventually divorced in 1982 and the writer married another woman named Coppelia Kahn in 1983—that marriage also ended in divorce and Avi married his third wife, Linda C. Wright. Throughout the duration of his three marriages, Avi fathered six children (Shaun Wortis, Kevin Wortis, Hayden Kahn, Catherine Wortis, Robert Wortis, and Jack Spina), and had one step-child (Gabriel Kahn).

While receiving his degree in library science, Avi worked as a librarian for the New York Public Library's Theatre Collection—he continued working at the library until 1970 when he transferred to Trenton State College's library. At Trenton State College, Avi also taught classes as an assistant professor until 1986. At that point in his life, Avi decided to leave the librarian and teaching career to focus solely on writing. He began writing for the *Library Journal* and *School Library Journal*.

As Avi pursued his librarian career, he began to publish children's books. A few of his books (novels and picture books) have received notable awards: *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle*, *Nothing but the Truth*, and *Poppy* have received the Newbery Honor Award and *Boston Globe-Horn Book Award* in 1991, 1992, and 1996, respectively. The picture book, *Snail Tale*, received the Best Book of the Year award by the British Book Council in 1973, and *No More Magic* was the runner-up for the "Best Mystery of the Year" by the Mystery Writers of America in 1975.

Avi wrote *Nothing but the Truth* in the form of a documentary novel complete with memos, excerpts from diaries, conversations, transcripts, and letters. The story is that of Philip Malloy who hums the national anthem in homeroom every day; however, he is suspended from school because he did not “stand at ‘respectful, silent attention,’” as is required. This documentary novel brings up the questions of respect, freedom, and patriotism. Adrienne Brausen, writer for *Voices from the Middle*, calls Avi’s book “attention-grabbing” and states that “all of the characters are described vividly, and their actions throughout the story ring true.”

*Poppy*, Avi’s 32nd book, is a story of a deer mouse living in Dimwood Forest which is seemingly protected by the scary (and huge) Mr. Ocax, a great horned owl. Avi uses the forest animals to show the benefits of courage, loyalty, and justice. Evelyn Freeman of *The Reading Teacher* reviewed Avi as creating “unforgettable characters and [a] well-crafted tale.”

Avi writes magnificent children’s novels from which readers have the ability to extract positive morals in an entertaining way. Throughout the progression of his chosen careers, Avi received many awards for his children’s books as well as other awards and grants, including the New York Public Library Grant, 1969; the Best Book of the Year Award, the British Book Council, 1973; the New Jersey Council on the Arts Grant, 1974, 1976, 1978; the Christopher Award, 1981; the O’Dell Award, 1984; the Newbery Honor Award, 1991, 1992, 1996, 2003; the *Boston Globe-Horn Book Award*, 1991, 1992, 1996; and the Randolph Caldecott Award, 2003. Avi also holds memberships with PEN, the Author’s Guild, and the Author’s League of America.

Recently, Avi published another book entitled *Crispin: At the Edge of the World* in 2006 which is the sequel to *Crispin: The Cross of Lead*, a Newbery Award-winning book. Starr LaTronica is quoted by Paige Wasson of the *American Library Association* as saying, “Avi masterfully creates a plot that sustains tension and suspense from beginning to end, while seamlessly weaving in details of daily medieval life” in comment to *Crispin: The Cross of Lead*. Avi currently lives with his wife in Denver, Colorado.

### Works:

- *Snail Tale: The Adventures of a Rather Small Snail*. (illustrated by Tom Kindron) New York: Pantheon Books, 1972.
- *Emily Upham’s Revenge; A Massachusetts Adventure*. New York: Beech Tree Books, 1978.
- *No More Magic*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1975.
- *History of Helpless Harry: To Which Is Added a Variety of Amusing and Entertaining Adventures*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1980.
- *Bright Shadow*. New York: Bradbury Press, 1985.
- *The Man Who Was Poe*. New York: Orchard Books, 1989.
- *Nothing but the Truth*. New York: Orchard Books, 1991.
- *Poppy*. New York: Orchard Books, 1995.
- *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle*. Evanston, IL: McDougal Littell, 1998.
- *Abigail Takes the Wheel*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1999.
- *The Secret School*. San Diego: Harcourt. 2001