

Fiction Book Review (excerpt from a 12-page review)

Strengths

1. There are several interesting aspects to this book and overall a high level of drama, such that the reader becomes engaged in the story and the characters early on and remains engaged through the end of the book. Several passages and themes draw the reader in and arouse the reader's emotions: the separation of children from their parents, Agnes's loss of Frank, the dangerous ocean crossing, Sarah's attempt to save herself in the water, and many others. Thus there is a relatively high degree of reader involvement in many parts of the book.

One of the major themes, the evacuation of the children, is relatively unfamiliar to most Americans and therefore likely to be of high interest to them. Bringing Churchill into the story and showing his thoughts about the evacuation is interesting.

2. The story consists of a number of different threads, and you show skill in holding those threads together, always bringing the reader back to them just in time.

3. The events and different settings are likely to be of interest to American readers as they are outside our everyday experience. In particular I would cite the setting of the story in World War II London, the Irish roots of the O'Hara family and Michael Mallory and their Irish dialect, the theme of the evacuation of the children from London, the crossing of the Atlantic and the bombing and sinking of the *ship*, the war room, Churchill and his cabinet, and others. The richness of the settings and events is a strong point.

Additionally, you demonstrate good technical knowledge of these settings and events: the war, the evacuation of the children, fighter planes, and fishing, for example. This shows good research and/or prior knowledge. 4. Some of the characters are strongly drawn from the point of

view of their thoughts, emotions, behaviors, and speech. You show skill at entering into the psyche and mannerisms of a wide variety of characters. They come to life as individuals—even the pet duck has an individual personality, and she is an interesting presence!

5. You show skill with dialogue, conveying both dialects and individual personalities. In general the dialog flows naturally.

6. Michael Mallory's intervention at the end of the story (saving Sarah in Canada as well as his message to Jordan about their chess game) is interesting. I'm not sure it can be justified stylistically (see below under *Weaknesses*), but you handle it skillfully in terms of the dialogue.

7. There are several passages that are handled well in terms of your writing skill. Some that come to mind are the portrayal of the duck and Sarah's relationship to her, Agnes and her relationship with Jim, Sarah in the water as mentioned above, Churchill learning that Coventry Cathedral has been destroyed, and Michael's conversation with Sarah in the woods.

In summary, the book's strongest points are the drama, interest level, the evacuation topic, characterization, and dialogue.

Weaknesses

Listed in order of importance.

1. *Molestation theme*

Molestation is the major theme of the book—that is, it is the main subtheme through which the larger theme of evil, cruelty, and loss of innocence is conveyed. Unfortunately, molestation is the least successful aspect of the book. Its inclusion in the book and the specific

way that it is handled undermines and overshadows the book's strengths to the point of jeopardizing the book's eventual publishability.

Part of the cause of the weakness of the molestation theme is the *failure to clearly identify the book's audience*. Audience is crucial to every aspect of a book: the plot, characters, dialogue, style—all depend on knowing for whom you are writing. There are several aspects of the book that would appeal to adolescents: the war (if presented in a way that would be appropriate for teenagers), the ocean crossing, children going to a new home, Sarah herself, and the duck. But the molestation theme is presented in a way that is simply unacceptably jarring even to jaded adults. Therefore the story and the style are inconsistent, varying between passages that would appeal to children as young as ten or eleven and passages that are traumatic for adults.

It might help you to imagine your book being produced as a movie. Who could comfortably watch this movie? Who could be moved by it, learn from it, enjoy it? The audience must be the same from the beginning to the end of the movie. The audience doesn't need to be content throughout the movie, but you must be able to say at every point, "This scene is appropriate for this specific audience."

2. *Too many plot lines*

The book takes on too much. There is simply too much happening: the German education system, the Blitzkrieg, the crossing of the Atlantic, and the molestation theme. In that sense, the book's strength of having a variety of events and settings is taken too far.

The result is that in the end none of the themes can be covered sufficiently and carried to a satisfying resolution. For example, we are drawn into the interesting story of Agnes and Frank, which is well written in several places. But we then leave Agnes permanently, without learning

how she coped with Frank's death, what her further emotional development was, what happened to her over the course of the war and later in life. She is dropped from the story to make way for the molestation theme.

This is also the case for Sarah. She has a very traumatic experience on the boat when she is captured by Fred Hanson and then Miss Jones is taken prisoner by him. But that horrible event is taking place at the same time as the boat is being bombed and sinking. Because Sarah must get off the ship and save herself (and you must describe her doing that), we don't learn about how her capture by Fred Hanson affects her. There isn't room to develop both of those events simultaneously. By necessity, you are often choosing to emphasize one aspect of the story to the detriment of another.

It's also too much for the reader. The reader is overwhelmed by the task of holding in mind Sarah's capture, Miss Jones's murder, and the bombing and sinking of the ship.

4. Shifting voices A major stylistic weakness is the shifting back and forth between a literary and an academic voice. There are two books here: a work of fiction and a work of historical documentation. The strength of the book is in its fiction aspect, so the academic aspect needs to be eliminated. The academic parts of the book are not necessarily original in that they report facts available elsewhere; it is the work of fiction that is original and must be brought out more. Your goal of communicating to the reader facts about this historical period must be achieved in a fiction voice rather than an academic voice.

Essentially the difference between the two voices is that an academic work conveys history as facts, while a fiction work *personalizes* history, it creates individual characters and tells their personal stories in a historical context. For example, on page 80 Agnes is riding the

bus through London and passes through the rubble of the bombed buildings. Here is an opportunity to describe *through Agnes's eyes* what Hitler has done to England. This passage could be very profitably expanded.

In chapter 12 Churchill is angry with his cabinet about the evacuation plan. This is a good example of presenting history in a fiction voice. There is a very good dramatic moment when Dickerson arrives to tell Churchill about the bombing of Coventry Cathedral. But this chapter could be greatly expanded by adding the type of description that would not find a place in academic historical writing: the setting (room, furniture, view outside); the day, time, season; characters' appearances, voices, clothing, mannerisms, facial expressions. Academic writing presents facts. Fiction writing paints a richly detailed picture.

In chapter 12 there is a sudden change in voice on page 69. Dickerson rushes in, whispers his fatal message to Churchill, the room grows quiet. The next paragraph is a list of facts and figures about the bombing of Coventry. The reader feels this sudden shift in voice as jarring and alienating: we do not want to be drawn away from the emotion of the moment by these facts and figures.

5. Insufficient literary description

You tend to focus on events but do not sufficiently situate those events within a specific setting of place, time, weather, and so on. For example, we learn almost nothing about the island and town in Canada where the children are taken.