

# AVI

on writing

# CATCH YOU LATER, TRAITOR

**Today I encountered a man who said he would like to write a novel, but he discovered—so he told me—that he had nothing to say.** He was wrong. I know him and he has had an interesting life. The problem is he does not know how to share those things he has done as a writer.

In my experience, writing about what you know best is one of the hardest things to do. Think of it this way: Someone might ask me how to drive from San Francisco, to where I live, a tiny community called Clark, Colorado, high in the Rocky Mountains. Population: thirteen. It would be easy to explain and describe the major highways to take going east from San Francisco. That would be 99 percent of the trip. However, when you get within a hundred miles of my home, it gets complicated—narrow, winding roads, often unmarked, and with deep, dangerous gullies on all sides. My community is not found on most maps. The mile long dirt road that leads to my front door is on no maps of which I am aware. Do not even go to Google Maps. It is not there.

Now, since I know how to get to my home, and do so on beautiful days, snowy days, and at night, the drive is not a problem for me. However, since you do not know the way, I have to give very detailed directions. The closer



Katherine Ward

**AVI** is the author of the Newbery Medal novel *Crispin: The Cross of Lead* and the Newbery Honor books *Nothing But the Truth* and *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle*, among many other books for young readers. *Catch You Later, Traitor* was inspired by his own childhood in Brooklyn during the Red Scare. He now lives in Clark, Colorado, and his website is [www.avi-writer.com](http://www.avi-writer.com).

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you come, the more detailed I need to be to get you here—“When you hit the tiny (three-inch) twenty-nine-mile marker (on your right) our road is fifteen feet beyond (on the left), but if you pass a sign (on the right) that reads ‘slower speeds ahead,’ you have passed our road.”

It is the same when you write about things about which you are very familiar. You know it all so well, it is easy to forget that readers know little or nothing about what you are writing. Since these things are so familiar to you, the writer, you forget to offer the reader the details. Therefore, when you write about what is most familiar, you must learn to look at those things as if they are not familiar. You need to be a stranger to your own life and experience—you need to be a recording tourist to your own life—to notice what you know.

*Catch You Later, Traitor* is full of my memories of the year 1951, when I was growing up in Brooklyn, New York: school, family, radio, baseball, and talk about the politics of the day. I have many memories, of course, but I found it necessary to look at old magazines, photographs, advertisements, and newspapers, not just to push my memories deeper but also to relive them so I could describe them.

Consider one of the key characters in the book, the blind man, Mr. Ordson, with his service dog, Loki. When I was a boy—perhaps thirteen or fourteen years of age—I worked for just such a man, visiting him twice a week in his apartment and reading the newspaper to him. I got the job through my Boy Scout troop. The man I worked for—his name was not Mr. Ordson—was not very important in my life, though I tried to do my job as well as I could. When, however, I decided to put him in my book—as an important character—I had to remember what it was like working for him more than sixty years ago! What did he look like? How did he talk, and listen? How were his eyes? How did his dog act? What was his apartment like? How did I feel working with a man who could not see me? What were my thoughts when I saw him read Braille books? What was it like to see him write in Braille, something I did not include in *Catch You Later, Traitor*? Then, of course, I had to describe all that so the reader could experience it, too.

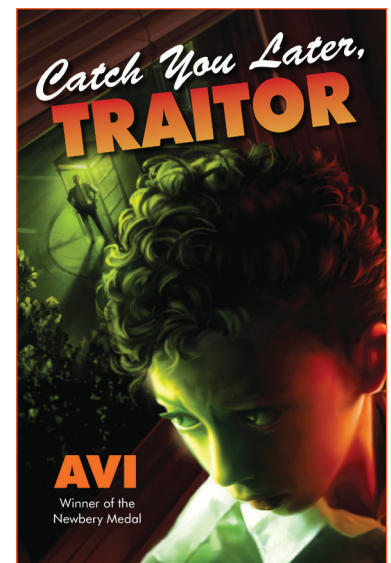
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Remember that.

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