Welwyn Wilton Katz's Response

• *Welwyn Wilton Katz* •

I would rather not try to respond to the separate people who have written in response to my interview with Marianne Micros, because I see their responses as all seeming to deal with different things, but which, when you come down to it, fundamentally address the issue of literary criticism in general. It is this issue that I will deal with in my general response here.

I am reminded of those antique tin cans of corned beef. Are any of you old enough to remember them? They came with a key, and you had to attach the key to a metal tab in the side of the tin. Then you turned the key, and kept turning it, and a horrible long strip of extremely sharp metal wound itself around the key and around it, and in the end there was that key wound about with sharp, wounding metal in one hand and an open "cap" which was equally sharp and dangerous in the other, while the meat lay temptingly inside. In this dialogue, I intend to begin the dangerous process of getting to the meat, which is literary criticism, while running great risk of damaging myself (and maybe you, too) in the process.

Some people felt bothered, offended, threatened, or hurt by what I had to say in the interview between Marianne Micros and myself in the summer 1998 issue of *CCL*. That is a pity, because it was the truth as I see it about the kind of reviews or articles a number of critics have written (or whispered) about my books. Along with many thoughtful, conscientious literary reviews that I have received on my books over the years (not all of which were positive, I hasten to add), I have received literary criticism that has bothered, offended, threatened, or hurt me very much as well. So, what kind of literary criticism do I consider thoughtful and conscientious? What kind do I consider offensive and hurtful?

In my interview, I said very clearly that I have written literary reviews of books myself and that sometimes I had to write negative remarks about the books I reviewed. I thought I made it clear that this happened when in the book the author had done something that for me broke the book's "magic" (that nearly indefinable thing that keeps me in the world of the book from beginning to end, that makes me believe I am there, that I am even one or

more of the characters). When I begin to write literary criticism of a book, I always begin by asking myself the question: Was there anything *inside* this book that took me *outside* the world of the book? And if I must answer Yes to that question, it is time for the all-important question #2 which is: "Did the thing that took me outside the world of the book do so because of the *author's* error, or did it do it because I am particularly aware of an issue in the world at large that somehow this book brought to my mind?"

If the answer to question #2 is that I was torn out of the book because the author did something wrong with point-of-view, or the events didn't connect in an overall cause-and-effect manner, or because the author didn't notice a terrible inconsistency in the logic of the events, or because the author made the characters his/her puppets instead of letting them be real people with needs and wants of their own that the author should have served (while allowing those needs and wants to dictate the course of the author's plot), or because the author preached to me, or because she/he didn't respect my ability to read and draw my own conclusions and so underlined what he/she wanted noticed in a thousand or even one too many ways, or if the author didn't bother writing dialogue that was consistent with character, etc. etc. etc. — well, then, it *was* the author's fault that the book world was broken for me and I have to say so.

But if I am drawn out of the world because I say to myself something like "Look, an archaeologist in Peru gets killed in this book by the Shining Path — arrgh!" (something of great personal interest to me because my husband is an archaeologist who will be going to the northern Andes of Peru to do archaeological survey work this summer) — well, it's not the *author's* fault that my husband is going there, is it? So I was drawn out of the book, but the book wasn't at fault.

Or let's say I've got this deeply-held personal belief about the way books should be written: never in the first person, never in the present tense. (I don't hold this belief — see my own short story "You Can Take Them Back" — but I prefer to use this less charged example instead of political correctness or voice appropriation.) So, let's say I really don't think anyone should ever write in the first-person present tense and somebody gives me a book to review that is written in the first-person present tense. Am I being fair to say that this book is no good because it kicked me out of its magical world, when, in fact, I never allowed myself to enter the book's magical world in the first place?

What I believe about literary criticism is that it must come from *within* the integrity (wholeness) of the book, not from *without*, where the critic's own biases or personal beliefs reside.

I always welcomed literary criticism that came from *within* my books, as I'm sure all writers do. The reason I always welcomed it when it came my

way was because often my themes or my characters' actions "push the envelope" in order to explore some of the raw edges of the human condition. If a reviewer notices that and deals with it in the review, then something important has been done for the book and for readers as a whole, and maybe even for the human condition.

Look at Mrs. McIntyre in *False Face*, for instance. How responsible is she for her own actions? That is one thing I would dearly have loved the critics to examine. It is an important question about the human condition generally. She has been "taken over"; so is she bad? Or is she just weak? Or is she not responsible at all? No one, not one literary critic, ever addressed this issue in *False Face*. And the ending: Laney has to stay with Mrs. McIntyre. Was I right to believe that that was the way things would have to happen? Was my decision there true to the book? Was it fair to Laney? Did Laney learn anything in the course of the book that made it even *possible* for her to keep living with her mother?

A mother who tries to kill her daughter: this pushes the envelope in fiction (though it happens all too frequently in real life). A daughter who has to continue to live with a mother who tried to kill her. This pushes the envelope in fiction. Why do I push the envelope like this? Well, it isn't because I'm trying to preach my own personal "truth" about an issue. If I knew the "truth" about such an issue what would be the point of writing about it? I learn from what I write: that is one reason I am a writer. I learn from what I write because I live the characters' lives as I record what the characters do and say and think and — yes — learn. I am hopeful that my readers, too, will learn something of their own from what I write. But I would be horrified if anyone thought I was preaching to my readers or deliberately teaching my readers what I have learned over the course of writing my book. What I want, really *all* I want when I push the envelope as I do in so many of my books, is simply for people to think for themselves about these issues, these dilemmas, these knotty human problems. And I do *not* want them to think about these things until they have experienced them for themselves fully; that is, until they have lived the world of my book and finished it and come out of it and become themselves again.

I would like reviewers, when they review my books, to deal with the books from the *inside* the way I review other peoples' books. That's all. Just that. If I make mistakes *within* the book world I write, mistakes that tear readers out of that book world and make them shake their heads over those mistakes, I deserve to be taken to task for it. If I don't do that, but a reviewer approaches my book from an *outside* stance he/she has taken before even reading the book, *looking* for something she/he hates for whatever reason and so never allowing him/herself to be taken into the world of the book at all, then that, in my opinion, is unfair, unethical, and extremely wrong-headed criticism.

I do not accept criticism of the latter sort. I will never accept it. I will never, ever, let political correctness or postmodern desires to deconstruct (destroy) the integrity of my stories in order to prove or disprove someone's fancy theories about literature as a whole, affect what I choose to write or how I choose to write about it. Does that make me a controversial writer? Or am I just stupid? Or maybe — am I perhaps — just a little bit brave? Go figure.

I will always push the envelope, at least I will if I ever write another children's book. Critics should be glad of that. The reason they should be glad is because my pushing the envelope, my going to the very edge of the human condition and sticking the reader with its problems, gives the critics a lot to write about. But do they write about it? The good ones do. But so many do not. Oh, how I would love to see some of the "edges" I've explored in my books analyzed and thought about with the dedication that the deconstructionists and the voice-appropriation specialists have devoted to these same books!

I think critics are most useful when they don't just summarize the plot of a book and say whether they like it or not, but rather when they discuss the important moral issues that come to the reader's attention because of the strengths of the book, or the important moral dilemmas that do not get the attention the author should have given them. What is literature *for* if not to help us to think about the human condition? And so I push the envelope: I go to the nasty sharp edges of humanity, and there I begin to explore. I don't expect other writers to do what I do, and I don't review books from the point of view that they should. I just wish that the critics who review my books would pay attention to that aspect of my books, and decide from their own experience (having allowed themselves a fair stab at living in my book-world at least at the beginning of their reading), whether I was honest in my exploration and true to the characters right to the end, or whether I failed as a writer because something I did wrong kicked them out of the world I was exploring.

I might cut my fingers to the bone on the sharp metal edges of this one, but here goes. There is a mostly wonderful book on the market right now that for a hundred plus pages went right to the messy edge of the human condition. It was a "push-the-envelope" book, at least in its beginning. (Not that that matters to whether it was a good book or not.) You will all have read this book: it is *The Maestro*, by Tim Wynne-Jones. I loved that book, right up until the moment of the fire. And then, sadly, the book threw me out of its world. You see, to *me* (though clearly not to Tim, who is far too good a writer not to have thought of it and tried to deal with it with integrity) it was all wrong that the boy hero, Burl, saved his horrible father instead of the single copy of the sheet music of a genius. It seemed to me all wrong *not* because it is better to save priceless music than a callous, abusive drunken human

being, but because nowhere in the book before the fire could I see that Burl came to value *the apparently* valueless human being, which his father certainly seemed to him to be. Had I reviewed this book I would have spent a great deal of time on this issue. Yet as far as I know, no review or academic paper has ever discussed the issue of Burl's decision to save the father instead of the music in relation to Burl's development as a character and to the integrity of the book as a whole. Unless I'm way out of touch here, the hard questions about the relative value of things *and people* in *The Maestro* were simply not asked.

Now I am personally very happy to have read this book, even though it did kick me out of its world. As a person, it made me think about the relative value of priceless things compared to apparently useless people. As a writer, it made me wonder how *I* would have ended the book, if it had been mine to write and I had chosen to let Burl do what he really wanted and save the music. As a writer also, I imagined the battles I would have had to fight with the editors to be allowed to let Burl save the music instead of his father. Editors know what most people like to read about, and this is generally not someone letting someone else die merely to save some sheet music. People like their heroes to be noble. People like to think human beings are more important than sheet music. But are they really? Are *all* people more important than *all* things? I'm not saying they are, and I'm not saying they aren't. What I'm saying is that this is an important question about the human condition that was absolutely implicit to the integrity of *The Maestro*, and no one that I know about except *me* seems ever to have asked the question.

Literary reviewers have a responsibility to look past the surface of their own likes and dislikes, their own pet projects and personal peeves. They must first decide if a book is worth reviewing at all. Then they must ask themselves whether the book succeeds or fails. Then they must ask themselves why. (They could do worse than to ask my Questions #1 and #2.) Too many reviewers do not review the book from inside that book's integrity, its wholeness as a book. Too many bring baggage of their own from outside. And not enough, not nearly enough critics think deep and hard about what the book is really saying (or asking) about the human condition.

Welwyn Wilton Katz *is the author of ten books which have been published in many languages throughout the world. Besides winning the Vicky Metcalf award for her entire body of work, she has won or been short-listed for prizes such as the Governor General's Award, the Ruth Schwartz Award, and the CLA Book of the Year, among many others. Her latest work is a collaboration with Laszlo Gal, a retelling of* ***Beowulf.***