

## **Tough Crowd: One Writer's Experience at "A Writer in Every School"**

By M.B. Partlow

I can make small talk with the hearse driver from the funeral home. I can make my doctor laugh during the dreaded yearly exam. I can talk zombies with anyone. I've even learned how to speak to my favorite published authors without biting my tongue or sounding like a stalker-in-waiting. But the toughest crowd of all? Stand up in front of a room full of fifth graders and tell them what it's like to be a writer.

The pre-puberty crowd doesn't really care how much money you do or don't make. They want to know how you get your ideas, where you get your inspiration, and—in one boy's case—what your favorite quote is.

Note to self: Next time, have some cool quotes written down or memorized.

Fortunately, the fifth graders in Mrs. Law's class at Stratton Elementary are a dedicated and enthusiastic bunch of readers. When I asked them what they like to read, answers ranged from newspapers to the Harry Potter series to Agatha Christie mysteries to *National Geographic* magazine. They love a good series—one they can sink their teeth into and read book after book.

Naturally, the kids wanted to know about what I'm writing. My book is not one I would consider suitable for my own fifth grader, so I summarized it with, "*Sweet Teeth* is a book about a vampire who has this incredible sweet tooth. He craves sweets all the time, but he can't have any because he can't eat real food." That satisfied them.

Note to self: Practice log line on fifth graders. If it isn't succinct and doesn't make sense, they'll let you know.

One of the first topics I launched into was how one goes from having an idea for a story to holding a published book in one's hands. This was the part where twenty-odd pairs of eyes began to glass over and I started talking faster and faster. Because ten-year-olds don't really want to hear that once you write a book, you're going to rewrite a lot of it. More than once. Nor do they appreciate the difference between trying to find an agent and trying to find a publisher.

Note to self: Next time, summarize the process better.

After explaining that an agent might ask for some changes and then the publisher might ask for some changes, one boy raised his hand. His question: "If you make all these changes for all these people, it's not really your story anymore, is it?"

Note to self: Don't cry in front of the children.

Moving right along, we talked about where ideas come from. I explained that ideas come from anywhere and everywhere. Dreams, movies, books, magazines, newspapers, songs, overheard conversations, daydreaming, and the all-important "what if." I explained to the kids that at any given moment, they can stop and ask "what if." What if they could make it stop raining at recess time? What if they could make the cafeteria serve exactly what they wanted for lunch? What if they could get someone else to do their homework? What if their dog or cat could talk? What if the characters of their favorite book lived in a different country or on a different planet? Ideas were whizzing around the classroom faster than I could write them down.

Then we moved to the part of the presentation the kids like best. Every story, I told them, has the same basic idea. Somebody wants something, but someone or something is in their way. I illustrated what I meant with quick examples from Little Red

Riding Hood and Harry Potter. Then it was time for the writing exercise. I don't know if high schoolers might groan at something like this, but the fifth graders tackled it with glee.

First, they wrote down three characters and whether they were male or female. We got Bob the Alien, Capricorn the human, characters from some established book series, and an animated blue puff ball. Next step, write down something these characters want. The results were everything from slaying the evil overlord (no political intrigues here, just straight to killing the bad guy) to eating lunch to getting married. Then the kids listed what stood in the way for their characters. We got a very complicated love triangle that involved Bob the Alien, empty cupboards and a wide variety of seemingly insurmountable problems.

Of course, the final step was surmounting those problems. Fifth graders, it seems, have no problems blending genres. The love triangle was solved by shooting one character with a laser gun. Another with a distinct fantasy setting was solved with a tactical nuke. We had interplanetary war and assassinations.

What did I take away from my hour in the fifth grade classroom? It's incredibly energizing to talk to kids about writing because they're so enthusiastic about both reading and writing. But the real benefit came a couple of days later, when my daughter brought home a sack full of thank you notes. One card contained an illustration, where I'm sitting at a table in a bookstore next to a wall full of my books, and a reader is saying "Wow! This book is really good." Or how about the boy who said, "Now I actually enjoy sitting down to a desk and writing. Although I don't like writing on a prompt, it's still better than grammer [sic]." Best of all, "The activity with the planning was also a lot of fun, and it helped me learn about how to write."

Note to self: Sign up for "Day on Writing" next year.

*Oct. 20 was the National Day on Writing, and D11 initiated the program "A Writer in Every School" to celebrate and get kids at all grade levels excited about writing.*

*Originally appeared in The Pikes Peak Writer, Volume VIII, Issue 6,  
November, December 2009*