

Notes from a Traveling Author – February/March 2008

Lynne Berry

A writer friend once told me a story to illustrate the importance of remaining acutely aware of the perspective of a child when writing for a juvenile audience. Here's the story she told me:

A man was driving his young son to school. Without warning, a squirrel dashed out in front of the car. The man slammed on his brakes, exclaiming, "Kamikaze squirrel!" His son asked, "What's kamikaze?" The man launched into an elaborate explanation of the Japanese kamikaze soldiers of World War II, their mission, the damage they did to Allied ships during the war. At the end of this monolog, the young boy looked up at his father, amazed, and said, "They taught squirrels to do all THAT?!"

During school visits, I often encounter questions that seem to arise from a similar gap in adult vs. child perspective; young students ask me, "How did you get the words in your book so small?" "How did you get your writing so neat?" "How did you get the words so dark?"

My guess is these questions stem from how we explain what authors and illustrators do; in describing the roles of author and illustrator, we tend to say things like, "The author writes the words in a book, and the illustrator draws the pictures."

Young children, in many ways, are quite literal in their thinking. In addition, from the perspective of a young child, the mechanical act of forming letters--neatly and within the lines--is quite an accomplishment! So, when we say to a young child, "The author writes the words in a book," the child, very logically and literally, concludes that the author 1) takes pen in hand; 2) settles down in front of a looming stack of blank books, or, perhaps, pre-illustrated books; and 3) writes the words of the story, ever-so neatly and ever-so carefully, on each and every page of each and every copy of the book.

I love this image, and find myself inclined to exclaim: "They teach authors to do all THAT?!"

Much as I love the image, I have modified my description of the roles of author and illustrator; I now say, "The author thinks of the idea for the story and chooses the words to tell the story; the illustrator reads the author's words and creates pictures to help tell the story."

In addition, I have developed some resources I hope might be useful in helping to explain what authors and illustrators do, along with the role of the publisher in the production of a book. Truly, the publisher is in charge of what seems to most fascinate most young students: the physical production of the book, including getting the words so neat and small!

The resources include materials to show and share with students, along with guides that provide suggestions and explanations for using these materials; please feel free to download the resources from my website, at www.lynnberry.com/howabookismade.htm. When visiting my website, please don't forget to check out the new (February/March) illustration contest, at www.lynnberry.com/contest.htm, for opportunities for students and schools to win autographed copies of my books. Winners of the December/January contest will be posted soon.