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Reading, writing and creating characters

Local author teaches Sparta fifth-grade students about creative writing process.

*By Julia Bishop
Parent & Family*

Louise Jackson brought a few of her friends to school Nov. 15 - Ephraim, his dog Brownie, horse General and friend Finnis.

Jackson, an author from Springfield, visited the fifth grade classes at Sparta Elementary and shared her ideas on developing interesting characters, descriptive writing and how to jumpstart a good story.

Jackson brought along her most recent book, "Gone to Texas - From Virginia to Adventure," which the 53 students of Jane Ann Collier and Claire Draffen's fifth-grade classes have been reading over the previous six weeks. This tale of historical fiction was based on true-life boyhood experiences of Jackson's grandfather - Ephraim.

The story focuses on 14-year-old Ephraim (pronounced EE-frem), recently orphaned and chomping at the bit to experience life's adventures versus becoming a Virginia farmer. Ephraim, his dog Brownie, horse General, and friend Finis set off to the far wonderlands of Texas.

Students were enamored by Ephraim's character. One student asked Jackson, "Why is this considered fiction when it talks about real events?"

She explained that when writing historical fiction, you've got to do a lot of historical research, so that you keep all the facts straight. "However, it is important not to burden the reader with a multitude of facts, however. You can do all the research in the world, but if the story is dull it won't make a bit of difference," she stated. "Facts always underlie the story, but shouldn't be the focus."

What makes any book interesting? Why its characters, of course. When these fifth-grade Sparta students were asked to name some of their favorite parts of the book, the answers dealt with the quirky personalities or experiences (both good and bad) of Ephraim and his rag-tag group of friends.

Jackson noted that when she is developing a new book, she goes through an extensive process in "giving birth" to characters. She passed along a few helpful tidbits to the Sparta students.

"Type into the computer or write down ideas about characters. Manipulate them into someone that people will like. They don't have to be good or bad - they just have to be intriguing.

"The next important step is to delve deep into the heads of your characters. What does he or she want or need? What drives them? What do they want most out of life? That is how you're going to have characters in your writing that will interest people," she said.

When Jackson was asked, "How do you get ideas for your books?" there was no hesitation.

"Go with what you know," she said, then coyly grinned and said, "I have a weird mind," and the students laughed. "I take ideas from my life experiences, my family's, my friends', you name it."

She said that she keeps a small notebook, chock full of personal notes, remembrances and newspaper clippings. "They are good ways to springboard story ideas. Write down everything you can think about," she stated.

Sparta Elementary students are expected to start "creative" writing as early as kindergarten.

"There is no more multiple choice. We want kids to fill in their own blanks," Principal Stephanie Crownover said. Students in every grade are doing writing projects. The younger grades are given ideas, then required finish the concept.

"We don't want them to worry about spelling and punctuation, we just want them to use their imagination and write what comes naturally," Crownover said.

Older students have written letters to the troops in Iraq, given a personality and voice to Thanksgiving turkeys, and must go through the entire writing process - rough draft, edit and publish. Looking farther down the road, this more creative fill-in-the-blank philosophy coincides with the Constructive Response part of the state MAP test, Crownover said.

Jackson discovered the writing bug at age 10 when her mother bought her a Kodak Brownie box camera, and told her to write a story about her favorite photo on the roll.

"I wrote a story about a toad in the dog's water bowl," Jackson said. "My mother and I then packed a lunch, went up into the hills, talked about descriptive writing, and practiced over and over. I loved it! My mother gave me a another roll of film every summer."

Toward the end of her visit at Sparta Elementary, she addressed the future writers in the bunch.

"If you want to be a good writer, read and write a lot. Practice your writing in any fashion; non-fiction or fiction, poetry, descriptive writing, anything. If you have a subject or hobby that fascinates you, read and write about it. Keep a notebook or journal; write in it every day, even if it is simply to say, 'I've got nothing to say today.'

"Above all, keep reading and writing."

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