

Author passes on expertise to Waterman students

by Jen Cowart

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Author and storyteller Mark Binder spent last Thursday and Friday at Daniel D. Waterman Elementary School. Binder, who has spent the last dozen or so years storytelling, and the past several decades writing, had the students' complete attention during the assemblies.

Binder explained to the students that there is a difference between reading aloud from a book and storytelling, and he did a little bit of both, so that the students could see the difference between the two.

Reading from "The Brothers Schemiel," and telling stories from his book "It Ate My Sister," he explained that he mainly writes three types of books: traditional folk tales, tall tales and the Helm Series, from which "The Brothers Schemiel" came.

Binder wrote that series of books one per week, hooking the reader at the beginning by creating a good tagline, and hooking them at the end, by making them wonder what would happen in the next part of the series.

The students at Waterman are currently involved in writing and publishing their own books, through Nationwide Learning (www.nationwide-learning.com), a company that publishes children's books in hard cover, for free.

Each child in the intermediate grades will be writing, illustrating and publishing their own book, while each class in the primary grades will be writing and illustrating a whole-class book where each child will contribute a page and an illustration.

Following the assemblies last week, Binder was running 90-minute writers' workshops for individual grades.

"My stories change over time as they're told," Binder said. "By the time this book came out, it had changed from when I'd first written it. Changes come

depending on the mood, the audience, even the weather on the day it's told."

The students listened and laughed as Binder told the story of "It Ate My Sister" during Friday's assembly. It was a story of sibling rivalry and science, and it seemed to strike a chord of familiarity with those in the audience. He originally wrote that story for a presentation he had to do for the Providence Public Schools, which involved the scientific method, and pointed out the various references to science throughout the story.

Binder allowed ample time for a question and answer session after the read-aloud and storytelling session. When asked how he comes up with his stories, Binder answered that he doesn't usually know the entire story when he first starts out.

"I might come up with the title, the ending, the characters or the problem, but I don't usually know the entire story. I like to surprise myself," he said.

He also told the students that he tends not to write from personal experience and that he tends to be a private person.

"I tend to write more light-hearted stuff, happy things," he said.

One student asked if any of Binder's stories had morals, and he answered that his story "The Gold Coins," did in fact have a moral, but that he often likes to leave a lot up to the listeners' imaginations, including a moral they might draw from his stories.

Principal Joanne Valk said that the students were very excited about the presentations Binder was doing last week, and that the faculty involved had a very specific goal in mind when planning this event.

"Our goal in this is that the students have a responsibility in the presentation, that they're not just passive recipients of the information," she said.

Third grade teacher Lynn Holt explained that during Reading Week in the spring, the students would be reading aloud from their soon-to-be-published books.

"They're very enthusiastic about getting their books published," said Valk.

As Binder ran his writers' workshop after the assemblies, he explained to the students that he does most of his writing in a coffee shop, on his laptop.

"I can't write creatively in my home office," he said.

He spoke to the students briefly about the elements of a story, before starting them on writing their own stories during the 90-minute session. He encouraged

them to use all of their senses when writing in the story details, incorporating colors, smells, sounds and how they feel.

“I really love to write,” said Sophie Grosswendt, as she worked on her story.

Sophie and her twin sister Lydia attended a writing camp at Rhode Island College this past summer.

“That has helped us with our writing this year,” Lydia said.

The students worked diligently on their writing, the topics and titles varying from student to student.

“My story is called ‘The Best Christmas Ever,’ and it’s about Duncan, a boy in the woods who is lost. He finds a shining baby rabbit and saves it from danger. He finds his way to go home but his parents don’t want him to keep the rabbit because it may cause sneezing, so he tries to find another place to keep it,” said Daniel Cornelio.

For more information about Mark Binder and his variety of available presentations, visit his website at www.markbinder.com.