

Bridget and the White Rose: An author among school children

Ed Kavanagh

When I was a child, the only people you could ever expect to see in school, other than students and school employees, were the priest, the public health nurse, and, occasionally, the schools inspector. That seemed right and proper; who would want to come to a school if they didn't absolutely have to? Certainly we never saw a writer in school. If, on some bright May morning in 1963, Miss Hynes had announced to our grade four class that an author was coming to visit, I'm sure we wouldn't have known how to react. Is this person going to give us a needle? Tell us why good Catholics go to heaven? Ask us to spell a difficult word? One of our first questions would probably have been, "What's an author?" When told that authors were people who wrote books, we would have stared at each other incredulously. People? People wrote books? We knew, of course, that a person's name was usually affixed to a book's cover, but equating that name with an actual human being required a mental stretch of which few of us were capable. And if they were human, weren't they all dead? Surely a dead person wasn't coming to visit.

My personal knowledge of authors was, to say the least, limited. I knew that someone named Franklin W. Dixon wrote the Hardy Boys books, but was he a real person? (As I have since learned, he wasn't; the books were written by a number of different people. Franklin W. Dixon is a collective pen name.) Conjuring up an image of Mr. Dixon hunched over a typewriter, hammering out Frank and Joe's latest adventure, was, for me at least, a difficult feat.

So where exactly did books come from? Many of us, I'm sure, if we thought about it at all, considered that books originated in some mystical void, shadowy places like Limbo and Purgatory. From there they somehow made their way to bookstores, angels perhaps? ...and then, eventually, on to us. Or perhaps they came from those green, hot countries we sometimes studied in geography class, countries that exported bananas and other exotic fruit; places far away that had no real connection to Newfoundland. Perhaps books grew on trees like mangoes.

None of these notions had anything to do with liking books. I liked books even more than Fireball XL5 (my favourite TV show of the era), and so did many of my friends. After all, you couldn't take a TV show to bed with you. But the idea of one person, an author, coming up with all the words and characters of a novel, and then sealing them between covers was, for us, more magical than a magician pulling a rabbit from a hat.

Times have changed, at least in the larger centres. Today students are becoming more and more aware of authors. School libraries are often adorned with posters of famous contemporary writers, many exhibiting a flamboyant rock star quality. And it's not just authors who are finally making their presence felt. On any given day, school children may be marched down to the library or resource room to meet a policeman, scientist, pet

owner, fiddle player, theatre group or, of course, a real, live author. (To be distinguished, I suppose, from the many fake, dead ones.) It's a wonderful experience for everyone. For teachers and students, author visits add an exciting, extra dimension to a book; authors get an opportunity to meet their audience. I find it a great way to get my batteries recharged, to learn what children really feel about writing; it reminds me of why I spend all those lonely hours in front of a computer.

But what exactly do authors do in schools? There is certainly no uniform approach. For me, developing the most effective school visit was a long, drawn out process. When I first started visiting schools, I found the experience more than a little intimidating. But it was also exhilarating. Imagine, here were 30, 40, 100 people who had read my book and seemed to genuinely like it. Question and answer time was a forest of raised, waving hands. In those early days I kept things simple: I would read from *Amanda Greenleaf Visits a Distant Star* and then take questions. That was it. Gradually my visits changed. Because of my musical and theatrical background, I began to storytell my books, essentially turning them into self-contained plays. That way I could, nominally at least, cover the whole story. (Young children dislike getting half of something.) Eventually, I began to bring the guitar and sing my original children's songs. Still later, it occurred to me that students would benefit from seeing how a book was composed. I began to bring the early handwritten drafts of my stories, as well as the illustrator's mock-up illustrations. The children could see that the composition of a book requires many attempts. They learned a lot, but so did I. Having to explain how I go about a piece of writing made me measure and re-evaluate my own compositional techniques. Something else happened that was useful: I gradually began to develop a feel for what appealed to children, to subtly sense what they found moving or amusing. I learned that this is not necessarily the same for a Kindergarten student as it is for someone in grade three. Writing for children became even more intriguing.

When children are truly interested in something, they give back a wonderful, honest energy. It wasn't long before I was addicted to my school sessions. If too many weeks went by without one, I found myself wondering if I should call a school myself and volunteer to come in. Or would that be pushy? Luckily, in the early days at least, there was never too much of a dry spell.

As the years went by my school visits became even more animated. Now they are a mixture of theatre, the writing process, songs, question and answer, and, recently, the Celtic Harp. It makes for a full and rewarding hour.

Memories. I've performed for thousands of school children in just about every nook and cranny throughout Newfoundland and Labrador and also on the mainland and in Ireland, so I have a great many, but here a few that have stayed with me in an especially vivid fashion.

I've long since forgotten her name, but the little girl was in grade two and the school was in Portugal Cove. As the children trooped, single file, into the stuffy library, giggling and glancing at me sideways, she stood out like a white rose in a cluster of rhododendrons. It was her dress. On that bitter February morning, with the north wind whipping freezing spray off the grey ocean and rattling the ill-fitting fire doors, the little girl wore a white, fluffy party dress: the same style I remember my sister and her friends wearing at 1960s birthday parties.

Throughout my presentation the White Rose seemed off in her own world, distracted, continually looking around the library, taking us all in with a wondering eye, as if she questioned our purpose there. Why were we having such a good time? What was all this singing and face-pulling about? During the presentation she offered not a single response, remained tight-lipped during the sing-a-long, refused in any way to be drawn in. And even though everyone else was having a wonderful time, it was this little girl of whom I was most aware. Her distraction was distracting me; I began to question my performance. What could I possibly be doing wrong? Usually, I'm confident about my school presentations. Ninety-nine per cent of the time my audiences pay me complete, riveted attention. After all, where else do children get to see a grown man do the kinds of silly things I do? Where else would they see a Celtic Harp and actually get to play it? But this little girl was not buying in.

I was surprised, then, that when the time came for questions, the White Rose was the first to raise her hand. I braced myself and awaited what I was sure would be some stinging criticism--the kind of which only children are capable: unselfconsciously cruel, brutally direct and honest. I smiled weakly. "Yes?" And then, as if she were a miniature priestess conducting some ancient ritual, the little girl slowly stood, drew herself up to her full height, smoothed down the folds of her shimmering party dress, clasped her hands in the "Mercy Clutch" (although, I seem to remember, it was a Protestant school), and in a solemn, plaintive voice announced, "My cat Tiger got runned over!" Immediately she raised a fist to her mouth in a futile attempt to stifle a series of smothering sobs. It was one of the few times in a school session when I was completely lost for words. The other children nodded and stared at her sorrowfully. Sadness hung heavily on the humid, library air for an eternal five or ten seconds. For a horrific moment I wondered if she was accusing me of this crime. Eventually I found my tongue. "Oh, I'm so sorry," I blurted out. Surprisingly, this simple statement seemed to satisfy her. She wiped away her tears, gathered the folds of her dress and sat down, her large brown eyes, now puffy and wet, continually fixed upon me. But her expression had changed; her countenance had definitely lightened. Afterwards, one of the teachers said it was telling that she wanted to share her grief with me, with all of us. Getting it off her chest in such a public fashion had helped her. It helped the rest of us, too. Somewhere along the line we'd all had a Tiger in our lives.

During recess I asked the little girl about her dress. "It's really my Mom's," she said. "But she lets me wear it whenever I'm sad. Pretty, isn't it?"

"Very," I said.

She smiled. "You know, sometimes I think I'd like to live in a waterfall like Amanda Greenleaf."

I nodded. "I know just what you mean."

Later I saw her sprawled against a library wall, a half eaten apple in one hand, an Amanda Greenleaf book precariously balanced on her white dress, a faraway look on her smudged face.

On another occasion I gave a reading in a Halifax public library to a large and varied audience: adults, teenagers, babies--the lot. It was in a poor, rundown part of town. I remember a line of leather-jacketed boys hanging around at the back. In front of me, practically on top of me, were 10 pre-schoolers tied to a rope. There were also two or three elementary classes from a nearby school. One of the librarians told me that many of the children's parents were unemployed or on social assistance. Despite the age differences and the big crowd, the show went well.

Towards the end of the session I call up a child from the audience to play Amanda Greenleaf. On this particular morning a little girl sitting about three rows back caught my eye. I think I called her because she looked a little bit like Amanda; I do remember that she had long yellow hair. The girl hesitated momentarily, but then made her way to the front. She was not a healthy child; she was far too skinny and her cheeks were sunken and sallow. But she was a pretty little girl with intelligent, flecked blue eyes. She said her name was Bridget. Bridget performed her duties with quiet, efficient dignity and returned to her place to a round of applause. She flushed with pleasure; a small grin crossed her thin face.

At the conclusion of the show, as the audience was leaving, she smiled at me and waved shyly; impulsively, I gestured for her to come over. "Here," I said. "This is for you." I passed her my copy of Amanda Greenleaf Visits a Distant Star. She took the book gingerly and then looked up at me. "You mean I can keep it?"

"Sure," I said. "It's ... it's for helping me. Here, I'll autograph it for you." As I wrote in the book some of her classmates gathered around. For a moment I regretted the gift. Would her friends feel envious or put out because they didn't get a book. I could imagine comments like, "Why should Bridget get a book? She only said a few old lines." But nothing like that happened. Her friends gathered closely around her looking at the book. A little boy whispered softly, "Wow, Bridget got a book." Bridget stared at the book and hugged it to her chest.

"You'll share it with your friends, won't you?" I said.

Bridget nodded. "Yes."

As they left the library their teacher, a tired young man in a threadbare cardigan, approached me. He glanced at Bridget and her friends and smiled. "You realize she's going to sleep with that tonight, don't you?"

"I hope so," I said.

Oh, Bridget, where are you after all these years? There aren't many things I'm sure about in this world, but even though you're grown up now and probably have children of your own, I'm sure you still have that book. I remember what I wrote in it: To Bridget, for helping me. I wonder if you ever knew what I really meant.

Of course when visiting schools there is always the silly and the unexpected. I remember a session where a stereotypically nerdy child in black frame glasses hung on my every word. Not for a moment did he take his eyes off me. When I asked for questions he waved his hand frantically. I expected some profound question, perhaps with Freudian overtones, something like, "Why, Mr. Kavanagh, does your protagonist, Amanda Greenleaf, live in a cave behind a waterfall? What exactly is she hiding from?" What he actually said was, "Sir, where did you get that watch?"

"Woolworth's," I said. "\$19.99."

"Cool," he said.

You never know what the children will say or what might happen. I once visited a school when, just at the most dramatic moment of my storytelling session, a fire drill sent us all out to the parking lot, even though the school authorities knew I was going to be there on that day.

And, of course, you have to learn how to think on your feet. Once, during a sing-a-long, a child inexplicably asked me if I knew any songs about the Post Office. I pride myself on rarely missing a beat. "Oh," I said, "you want a slow song." So I improvised a slow song about a letter carrier who was so rich he could never get his route completed; he was continually stopping off in every store he passed to buy things.

Then there was the little girl in Corner Brook who came to my session dressed as Amanda Greenleaf; attention had been paid to every detail: dress, wig, necklace--everything. She had made the costume with her mother for Halloween.

I remember a little Inuit boy in Nain, Labrador. At the completion of my visit, just as I was about to board the tiny four-seater that was to take me to Davis Inlet, he came tearing up to the plane on his bicycle. I thought I must have left something at the school and he had been detailed to bring it to me. But no. He merely wanted me to sign his Toronto

Blue Jays baseball cap. (Incidentally, when I got to Davis Inlet, my first two sessions were with young Innu children, none of whom could speak English.)

I've done hundreds of school visits and I hope to do hundreds more. I love books and I love to see children excited by them. These days, however, there are fewer and fewer calls for writers to visit schools. Apparently there is no money, no time, no co-ordinators left to arrange the visits. Catch phrases like "Time on Task" are bandied about. It's a shame. If you ask children what they remember most about a particular school year they will often say, "The time the author came." To this day, I am often stopped on the street by young men and women, long since graduated from high school, who tell me that I visited their class when they were in primary or elementary school. I'll admit that it sometimes makes me feel old, but it also makes me smile. After all, it's nice to be remembered.