

## I miss them already

For two weeks I had the pleasure of speaking with classes in Indiana almost every day. There were always two classes at an hour a piece and the grades ranged from first to third. I could not have been more impressed by the children, their questions, their drawings, and their enthusiasm for the work.

School visits are actually kind of a rare thing for me and for many other children's book authors. The big names charge too much to appear and the little ones, like myself, are often overlooked. There's also the time issue as well as the subject matter, being that teachers both want a relevant topic for the kids and also a short enough time frame to keep them from getting bored. That's why a lot of author visits turn into presentations and pep rallies.

Which is all another reason this set of visits was so special. I didn't have anything prepared and instead focused exclusively on the questions the kids asked. Sure, I was asked a few times about my former pets and my family, but I was also asked things like "why does this character do bad things?" or "why does Dupa Doo hate himself?" (both are related) and "did you ever want to stop writing?" I found myself struggling to communicate more adult, complex, concepts in terms that they could grasp, but then it hit me: the books were already discussing these issues in ways they could understand. The children were, in fact, expanding upon what was already there! I was floored.

These kids were engaged, entertained, and energized not because I delivered them information but because they were heard and their opinions, questions, and interpretations were respected. I feel that all too often children's book authors speak down to children, they assume the role of the teacher, but that's not our job. Our job is to inhabit their headspace right beside them; to be one of them. That's why when the moral of the story is blatant or made plain, they don't like it because

that's what teachers and parents do. The author has betrayed their duty to entertain them and set up puzzles for them to solve on their own.

These visits were a watershed moment for me. They highlighted that not only did children actually enjoy my work (a fear I have based on having to market the books to parents) but that the stories did actually have an impact on their lives. In turn, the children discovered that everyone was unique, different, special, odd, and okay just the way they were. There was even one girl with scoliosis that learned I have a touch of it myself.

One amazing thing that happened was that my new book "The Giggle Game" transformed in front of them. Each class did a read-along of the book and, without knowing it, had a hand in shaping the final version. They suggested animals, showed me where it got awkward, and helped to shape the wording of the intro and outro. This demonstrated to each class that talent is less about doing it right the first time, and more about working on it until it sings.

If I had to do a school presentation, it would be on persistence. Each class ended with these parting words "no matter what it is you want to do in life there are just two things you need to do to make it happen. One, watch what others have done that is similar and two, do the thing that it is you want to do. Writers get better by reading and by writing. Artists get better by going to museums and drawing. Soccer players get better by playing soccer." It sounds so simple, but in a world of American Idol and The Voice most people come away thinking that you either have it or you don't, that it's either given or stolen. That couldn't be further from the truth.

These children will grow up and define who they want to be and, without realizing it, they have helped me define who I am and who I want to be. With any luck and lots of help, I'll continue to visit classes across the country and the world. It would be a great honor and, honestly, a dream come true.

As for "The Giggle Game", I'm pleased to announce that the book will be available next week! I'm still finalizing the digital versions but you will be the first to know when it's ready. What is the book about you ask? Well, here's a video that does a way better job of explaining than I could.

I can't wait to share "The Giggle Game" with you and the rest of the world. Stay tuned next week for the big release!

Much love,

AJ