

Students are excited to meet the live person behind the stories with which they've become familiar. This article includes a wealth of resources for arranging author visits at your school.

Author Classroom Visits Engage Avid and Reluctant Readers

Maryjo Faith Morgan

The students fidget at their desks, fingering their copies of *Reindeer Do Wear Striped Underwear* (2006) and *The Worst Name in Third Grade* (2005), hoping for autographs. Several have stacks of books, six or seven each. The bulletin board in the front of the classroom is bright with slime green “reading certificates” earned over the summer by students who finished six or more books in the series. In the back of the room there is a small diorama titled “Bailey School” with stick figures dressed as Liza, Howie, Melody, and Eddie, popular characters in the Bailey School Kids series. As children’s author Debbie Dadey approaches the classroom door, she is greeted by an orange poster themed from her newest book’s cover: “Welcome to Bridgett’s Classroom!”

“Look at that! What a great way to make me feel at home!” Debbie’s exclaim elicits giggles and clapping as she enters the room full of third-graders. After a short introduction, the teacher turns it over to Debbie, who gets right down to work. Or play. It’s hard to tell which.

Eager students ask why Eddie does the things he does, how she chose which monsters to be in her books, and how she gets story ideas. She answers their questions but deftly leads the discussion from her ideas to theirs. After a “Story Sparkers” exercise, the students

begin writing stories as Debbie and the teacher clarify individual questions or encourage the young writers. These children obviously feel as if they already know the author and want to try out “how she does it” for themselves. They dive into their own versions of stories and make up new characters. Eventually they’ll trade books, write book reports, and finish a whole series. By the time these students follow a set of characters through several stories, they no longer chart their reading progress by the page. It’s by the book, and they’re hooked.

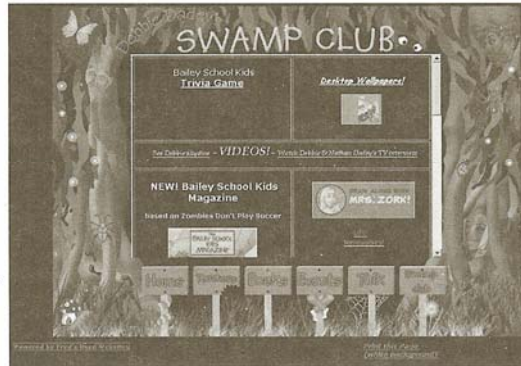
Teachers and Kids Create BUZZ for the Author Visit

Teachers can create enthusiasm talking about specific writers, the writing process, and an upcoming author visit. Reading aloud in the classroom can draw students into the story and familiarize them with setting, characters, and plots. Colorado children’s author Denise Vega suggests that reading aloud also helps break down labeling—“girl” book versus “boy” book. She says it’s evident when students have read the book prior to her visit.

“There is already a connection, so when they meet me they ask how I came up with characters’ names or if the shoes on the book cover are really *my* shoes.” She watches for ways to point out the fun in reading and

writing. When a student responded, “I thought I wanted to be a writer, but it is a lot of work and I’m not sure I can do it,” Vega had encouragement on the tip of her tongue. “If you really love something, you find that the work is *fun*.”

Likewise, a slide in one of young adult novelist Laura Resau’s presentations shows stacks of drafts across the floor, drafts that became a novel. “I ask the students how many revisions they think it took. They are always amazed. Once I ran into a student a few months later who told me they all groan when they have a writing assignment. Their teacher reminds them of my piles of revisions!” Resau is delighted to validate the teacher’s task because she remembers the keen student participation on the day of her visit.



Authors encourage kids to have fun discovering more about characters in their books through interactive Web sites.

Photo courtesy of Debbie Dadey

Help Students Step Into the Author’s World Literally

What makes an author visit run smoothly? Brainstorm with students. Ask them what *they* think will make the visiting author feel welcome in their school. Help students remember story elements by creating miniatures of figures or items described in the book. Diorama construction, map drawing, and wall posters depicting main characters are multimedia methods that get students into the world within the book. Facilitate decorating a door, classroom, hallway, or common area. Discuss with students the education, training, and experience required to become an author, illustrator, or poet. Suggest students visit the author’s Web site, read his or her biography, find interesting facts, and look for photos, craft projects, or worksheets. Then have them make a list of questions to ask the author.

Christy Goldberg, language arts teacher with the Thompson School District, looks at author visits as a way for students to learn more than just the writing process. “It’s more interesting [for students] to listen to someone who has had an epiphany and see where they drew their ideas.”

Bring together cultural or social studies, language arts, reading, anything you can think of to combine resources and engage more teachers in the project.

Team Up With the Author

Todd Mitchell, young adult author and director of the Creative Writing Teaching Program at Colorado State University, sees author visits as a collaborative effort

between the author and the teacher. Mitchell seeks to create a specific message that suits the teacher’s purpose and simultaneously meets the needs of his audience. “I am willing to be flexible and design something that is also academically beneficial.” He has teacher handouts that cover, in grade-specific groupings, workshops in poetry and story writing from third- to twelfth- grade levels. He mentions, as many teachers do, the benefits of having an outsider coming in who brings something special. “That’s something teachers won’t be able to do, even if I say the same thing the teacher has been saying.” Mitchell has a purpose in mind, “...to inspire a wide range of students to see the wonder of reading and writing...it’s my hope that I’ll be able to spread my love of reading and writing so that students may engage their academic study of these activities

with renewed energy and enthusiasm.” Mitchell is in good company among many local authors equally fervent about cultivating another generation of readers.

As an educator at Mesa State College, author Jim Van Pelt is well acquainted with what he calls the “honey-moon effect” and encourages teachers to take advantage of a fresh voice. “After you’ve been with them long enough...same old tune and they tune you out.” In his “A Story in an Hour Workshop,” Van Pelt defines his chosen genre—science fiction—and one way to write a story in three steps:

1. a clear goal,
2. a simple process, and
3. a definite deadline.

Students connect with this author of fantasy and horror stories. They defer to his suggestions about how to choose a main character at random and use his method to define gender, age, occupation, and name in two minutes. Then they’re off on their own adventure. Whether students start to have fun reading and become inspired to write or read to see how it’s done because they want to write, reading becomes a portal into another world. Award-winning young adult author Victoria Hanley affirms, “Students who write, read in an entirely altered way.” She coaches students to use small props that bring the reality of touch to their creative endeavors. Holding some thing may give them the focus needed. “They find a lot of joy in that ‘a-ha’ as they successfully express *exactly* what they want to express in a voice uniquely their own.”

Authors Listen to Kids

When Vicki Levy Krupp and Judy Gelman wrote *The Kids' Book Club Book* (2007), they chose a format that put the author's biographical information at the beginning of each chapter, based on their research with book clubs. Gelman is certain that kids want to know the hows and whys straight from the author, "It was clear that knowing about how the author conceived the story, how the story relates to the author's life, and any other details about the writer as it relates to their work was important to kids in these groups."



Meeting an author face to face can snag a student's curiosity, now that they know the "story behind the story."

Photo courtesy of Laura Resau

Invite Your Preferred Author

Our state is a great resource. We live in a destination state. Give authors an excuse to visit Colorful Colorado. With our year-round tourist draw, don't be shy about mentioning attractions in your area that might also interest the author. Tag onto an event or seminar that's already drawing authors here.

The Colorado Council International Reading Association Conference scheduled for Feb. 6–9, 2008, in Denver is a prime example. Already there are 17 attending authors who are slotting school visits around their conference participation.

Preparation Is Key for a Stellar Author Visit

As you prepare for an author visit, make a list of logistics. A simple contract will clarify expectations and prevent unfortunate surprises for all parties. Keep in mind that the author will likely appreciate a breather to recharge between presentations. Visit either the author's or the publisher's Web site and download advance materials, suggested previsit activities, and any specifications as to media, transportation, and creature comforts requested. Check for any dietary restrictions due to allergies, diabetes, etc.

To make their travels cost-effective, authors may schedule other schools on the same day. Be sure to communicate as per your contract if word about the visit spreads and you'd like to change the venue from a single classroom to a full auditorium. If you want to accomplish something specific through an author's visit, discuss this beforehand. Some authors focus on reading aloud and answering questions, whereas others focus on enabling students to write their own stories, add chapters to what they've read, etc. If your focus is motivating students to

write in addition to cultivating a love of reading, discuss your intent with the author and see what you can come up with as a teacher–author team.

However, don't let talk of preparation stop you if an opportunity for an author visit pops up. Some things are worth the scramble.

Put Books in Students' Hands

Check your district's book-buying program and ask authors what additional materials they offer. Many publishers offer substantial discounts if purchases are connected to author visits. Major publishing houses have marketing managers who set up book

fairs and facilitate author visits. Take advantage of their expertise.

Consider holding a drawing for a book and allowing only students who have read a certain number of books to be in the drawing. As a special treat, these students could have a special pizza lunch with the author. Try whatever you can think of to motivate students prior to the visit.

Stephanie Nooney, marketing manager of Scholastic's Author Visit Department, emphasizes the benefits of solid preparation. "When the students read the books in advance and discuss the author's work in the classroom, when the walls are lined with posters or murals based on the author's works.... When the entire school has come together in anticipation of the author appearance, the day of the appearance can be absolutely magical. The students are excited to meet the live person behind the stories with which they've become familiar and the author is excited to see how their stories have influenced these young readers. There is an energy that develops and builds between the author and students...there is potential for students to take away so many things from the experience: a better understanding of literature and an increased enthusiasm for reading and writing. On the other hand, if the students have no idea who the author is, the program may just be another place for them to pass notes to their friends."

As a moderator for mother–daughter book clubs and a seminar and classroom workshop presenter, Victoria Hanley acknowledges that teachers sometimes simply do not have the luxury to spend time on a particular author's work. "In that case, most publishers can make arrangements for schools to order books at a discount that can be passed on to students or used as a fundraiser." She has also seen schools put a lot of time and energy into book

fairs, making it a fun enterprise that involves the family and the entire school community. Consider that authors may be able to bring pre-ordered books with them the day of the visit.

Feedback Tells the Tale

The feedback these authors share is remarkably similar. They hear from teachers who tell them how much the students enjoyed the visit, that they are reading more, and that after the workshop or visit, many students were more engaged in writing activities. Creatively augmenting classroom literacy may require some Googling, team effort, budget juggling, and carrot dangling. But when you see your students carrying around the fifth or sixth in a series, you know you've accomplished your objective. Good job, Teach!

Note: The authors quoted are all Colorado residents with the exception of Debbie Dadey, who moved from Colorado to Pennsylvania just as this issue went to press.

Children's Books Cited

Dadey, D. (2005). *The worst name in third grade*. New York: Scholastic.

Dadey, D. (2006). *Reindeer do wear striped underwear*. New York: Scholastic.

Krupp, V.L., & Gelman, J. (2007). *The kids' book club book*. New York: Penguin Group.

Maryjo Faith Morgan is an active member of Colorado Authors' League (www.coloradoauthors.org) and hosts a local Weekly Writers' Workshop to further writers' careers. Freelancing full time, Maryjo produces a wide variety of work, including business text, magazine features, and inspirational stories. Her husband Fred (www.FredsUsedWebsites.com) is the Web master behind: www.maryjofaithmorgan.com; they also enjoy tandem biking together.

Additional Resources for Finding Authors

Although this is not an exhaustive list, hopefully it serves as a springboard. Inclusion does not imply endorsement.

Informational Web Sites

- American Library Association—Children's Notable Lists: <http://www.ala.org>
- American Society of Journalists and Authors: <http://asja.org>
<http://www.freelancewritersresearch.com>
- Americas Book Award for Children's and Young Adult Literature
<http://www.uwm.edu/Dept/CLACS/outreach/americas.html>
- Book Organizations of Colorado: http://coloradobook.org/booc_resources.htm
- Children's Literature: http://www.childrenslit.com/award_link.html
- Colorado Authors League (browse by group, i.e. fiction): <http://www.coloradoauthors.org>
- CCIRA Conference. To set up an author visitation for your school, contact Patsy Thompson: pthompso@jeffco.k12.co.us.
- Find an author by region: <http://teacher.scholastic.com/authorsandbooks/visitkit/authorregion.htm>
- How to Pay for Author/Illustrator Visits: <http://coloradobook.org/documents/PayForAuthorVisits.pdf>
- National Council for the Social Studies. Notable Trade Books for Young People
<http://www.socialstudies.org/resources/notable>
- Random House—Author & Illustrator Appearance Kit
<http://www.randomhouse.com/teachers/authors/appear.html>
<http://www.randomhouse.com/teachers/authors/list.html>
- The Rocky Mountain Chapter—Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators
<http://www.rmcsbwi.org/ourmembers>
- Scholastic—Planning, Fundraising, & Tips for a Successful Author Visit
<http://teacher.scholastic.com/authorsandbooks/visitkit/index.htm>
- School Library Journal, reviews: <http://www.schoollibraryjournal.com>
- Teens Read Too: <http://www.teensreadtoo.com>

Writer-Related URLs

- Debbie Dadey: www.debbiedadey.com
- Victoria Hanley: www.victoriahanley.com
- Todd Mitchell: www.toddmitchellbooks.com
- James Van Pelt: www.sff.net/people/james.van.pelt/O-Forms.htm
- Denise Vega: www.denisevega.com