
Authors in Schools

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Last December we were visited by Robert Burch, author of *Queenie Peavy*, *Skinny*, and the *Ida Early* books. We had mulled over the prospect of an author visit for several years, and we might have gone on doing so had it not been for the helpful intervention of one school family who was acquainted with Mr. Burch. Their enthusiasm for the project of bringing him to the school was equal to our own. We invited Mr. Burch to visit us for a two day period in the fall of 1983. During his stay with us, we planned for all of our K-6 grade students to have the opportunity to meet with Mr. Burch.

As this was our first Author Day, we were assailed by questions like What have we forgotten? and doubts about the gap between reality as it would unroll versus our on-paper plans. Thankfully, there were no major upsets to report.

It seems that, ultimately, the format of author sessions will depend upon what the authors are comfortable with or what experiments, like an author party, they might be willing to try. Mr. Burch had not worked extensively with primary grade children, and we felt our main audience for his books lay in grades 3-6. Therefore, on Thursday, we scheduled shorter visits for grades K-2 and more substantial half-hour sessions for the upper grades. (Confident that we could outcook our local caterers, the media staff served lunch in the library for the author, his host family, a local reviewer, and our school administration.) In an attempt to provide students with some more intimate time with their author, we planned an autographing party for the second day of his visit. Each 3rd-6th grade classroom came separately, for a scant fifteen minutes, to see Mr. Burch in a smaller group, have refreshments, and pick up their autographed books. Almost all sessions were held in the library or media center. It might be more efficient to whisk one author in and out of classrooms than to move whole classes of children in and out of the library, but we felt strongly about using the library. We wanted children to associate what we hoped

would be a very special, very happy experience with their media center.

Mr. Burch's presentations were simple, without gimmicks or dramatics. Their success was due to the fact that he is a "real live author" and that children found their author to be a remarkably warm and likeable person. He sometimes started by asking students a few questions to break the ice. Then he talked about his books and his writing, touching on his entry into the field and what he did before he started writing. He read a humorous selection from one of his stories and ended by answering questions. These ranged from insightful to self-answering. After a number of questions dealing with very basic issues—like Do you write with a pen or a typewriter?—I realized that students were hard at work creating a mental image of what authors actually do, what they look like while doing it, how long they do it every day, and so on. They were doing their best to bridge a gap between a misty, somewhat meaningless term and an undeniably solid reality—in this case, a white-haired gentleman with glasses whom we might just as believably have passed off as an agricultural extension agent or someone's grandfather but had instead introduced as an author.

Autographing Party

On Friday morning, Mr. Burch returned for an autographing party. I was decidedly apprehensive about this venture. A party for 160 students in the library, even spread over several hours, seemed potentially disastrous. Was ten to fifteen minutes an impossibly short time? Would an author seen on Thursday be "old hat" on Friday? The schedule *was* tight, but it worked, and the party served its intended purpose: children had a chance to meet the author individually, to shake hands, to crowd around and watch him as he signed his books. Their responses on Friday repaid all our efforts.

The autographing party sprang from brainstorming sessions prior to Mr. Burch's visit, as did the ideas of an "autographed" program, of averaging the price of hardbacked books, and of using

his books as classroom read-alouds. While I encouraged students to read his books independently, I also urged teachers to use them in their ongoing storyhours, because the latter method seemed the most efficient way to expose students to his books. Averaging the price of the hardbacks we had for sale allowed us to fill orders with the substitutions listed and forestalled endless notes home on what was still available as of a certain hour, how much money was due, and the like.

We knew that Robert Burch would spend a day and a half signing autograph books, scraps of notebook paper, and used napkins if we didn't provide any guidelines. Begging for student sympathy, we outlawed all of the above. Mr. Burch would only sign his own books (some of which were as inexpensive as seventy-five cents). However, each student would leave the party with a memento of the occasion, a program with his pic-

ture and signature printed on it. As it was, Mr. Burch signed about two hundred books and was most generous with his messages. I don't know how he held up, even without autograph books and napkins.

Our author had a strong interest in Winston-Salem's arts community and a personal contact with the school family that sponsored his visit. As a result, his visit did not require any major expenditures on the part of the school. The happy chance that sparked this particular visit is not one that is likely to recur. We will budget for another Author Day and feel that the great success of the first one has brought us support for our future plans. For those still dreaming of their first, I would suggest beginning on a small scale and seeking out local and regional authors—really, starting any way you can in order to demonstrate success and rouse interest in your school community.



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