

Authors in Schools

Words: **Sandy Fussell**

I call it the 'Loud Noises and Pointy Sticks' tour. I bang my gong and wave my wooden bokken (practice sword). That's the sight and sound of what the Department of Education calls 'Authors in schools'.

Prior to the publication of my first book, *Samurai Kids: White Crane*, in June 2008, the Department of Education ran courses designed to encourage new authors to visit schools. I went because I felt as a children's author I had a responsibility to promote literacy to kids. However, I had one big problem - I was terrified of speaking to a classroom full of them.

The only people I had taught were adults who had to listen because their employer paid for them to attend my course. Kids are a much harder audience. They might want to learn, but much more than that, they want to be entertained. But I was determined, and it got a whole lot easier when I discovered my sense of humour was exactly the same age as the kids I was talking to. Being an author in the classroom is now one of my most rewarding experiences.

Behind the fun and games of the 'Loud

Noises and Pointy Sticks' are some important lessons about writing. When the kids bang the gong we discuss onomatopoeia and use our ears and imagination to make up words for the sound. We talk about how words in text can be given volume and emphasis. Students wave their arms to show 'how loud' and 'how long', and how words can be made to snake across the page.

With my wooden sword I talk about hands-on research and how I went to sword fighting classes. I also sneak in a little life lesson. As the kids giggle at how useless I was, I tell them 'you

don't have to be good at something to have fun doing it' and 'you don't have to be good at something to write about it.'

The real value of an author in the classroom is that it makes reading and writing 'real'. I hear the children whisper about me, 'I asked her a question', 'She said I could email her my story' and 'Do you know she's famous?'

I'm not, of course, but I sign my name on so many pieces of paper that I sometimes feel like I am. Children enjoy meeting authors and are interested in the writing process.



Authors Katy Watson-Kell and Sandy Fussell at Storylines

Natalie O'Sullivan (Unishop), Rachel Cooney (winner, St Pius X), Sandy Fussell



They ask the most insightful questions and some really funny ones.

'Do you get headaches?' A year 4 boy asked. I was surprised because I suffer from migraines.

'Yes,' I said. 'Why did you ask that?'

'Your brain is so stuffed full of ideas it would get really stretched and hurt a lot.' Then his friend sitting beside him piped up, 'That's why she writes stories - to empty her brain out.'

While we all had a giggle, and I still do when I think of it, the question showed that they had thought about what I had to say about story ideas.

As well as the classroom, authors are involved in a range of workshops and festivals where school groups attend. In March, I was a presenter at the annual All Saints College Storylines Literature Festival in Perth. Last month, I presented a writing Masterclass for primary school students at the State Library as part of the Sydney Writers Festival. Recently, I was author in residence for the Just Imagine project at Wollongong Art Gallery where primary and high school students explore the relationship between picture and story. I gave two weekend writing workshops for students and one for teachers.

I am the first to admit that what

I teach in my workshops is no different to the writing exercises of classroom teachers. Recently, a local teacher came up to me and said, 'That's what I say and do.' And then she grinned, 'But they believe it when you say it, and now I can tell them 'I told you so.'

I'm sure I don't deliver the lesson half as well, but because I'm an author, with books in their library and five titles on the NSW Premier's Reading Challenge list, it gives me a level of street credibility.

I love workshops. I hope to inspire the children, but without fail, they always inspire me. Their imaginations are way ahead of mine. They come up with some of the most beautiful lines and clever openings I have ever read. Two images from a recent session on the use of similes and metaphors stick

in my mind: 'a rainbow of parrots' and 'a city of stars'.

In the past two and a half years I have presented to almost 6,000 students. I know how many there were because with the help of my friends, I have made an origami kabuto helmet for every one of them. I don't claim to have waved a magic wand and created classrooms full of enthusiastic readers and writers, but I do feel I have made a difference. Kids email me their work, proud of what they have written. They send me drawings and they write to me with ideas for the next Samurai Kids book 'in case you ever run out'. My stories are as real to them as they are to me.

But my favourite experience comes from a visit to a local primary school. At lunch time I stayed in the library. I find it often encourages kids to come and talk to me and we do a little origami while we chat. In came a year 5 boy. He told me how his teacher was reading *White Crane* to the class. It was a very animated re-telling with arrows flying and swords swishing.

'So what other books do you like to read?' I asked. He looked stunned as if it was the most stupid question he had ever heard.

'I don't like to read,' he said and disappeared out the door. I sat there with a smile on my face. Maybe he didn't like to read - yet. But anyone who enjoyed a story that much would eventually read for pleasure someday.



About Sandy Fussell

Sandy Fussell is an award winning local author. To book Sandy for an author session or workshop contact Lateral Learning 02 95694844 www.laterallearning.com.au Or email her direct at samuraidkids@people.net.au Sandy is always happy to hear from students and provide feedback on their work.