

local

Children's authors inspire students

Frank Peebles
Citizen staff

Two of Canada's most recognizable children's authors were in Prince George last week to inspire students to read, write and imagine.

Bonita Forsyth and Tim Wynne-Jones were at Malaspina elementary during that school's Writing Celebration.

"This year Malaspina elementary made it a school focus to enhance the writing skills and strategies of all its students," said principal Nevio Rossi. All around the gym, like some schools display visual arts, Malaspina displayed samples of writing. Students illustrated some of the stories and poems, other students took on more persuasive writing that relied on prose instead of drawn images.

At the centre of the event were a pair of well known authors who came to share the celebration. Forsyth and Wynne-Jones were the prizes for the students winning the writing game all year long.

Forsyth is known for her Huckleberry Hollow children's book series, and the popular snowboarding bunny character. She also just completed her first juvenile novel with the starting book in the Ice Dragon Series.

Wynne-Jones started out as a songwriter (he was half of a folk duo with Raffi and also wrote songs for the TV show "Fraggle Rock") before sliding into children's books and novels. He now has 30 books to his credit including "Rex Zero and the End of the World" which was nominated for the 2009 Red Cedar Book Awards.

"Writers have a disease; I call it the 'what if?' disease," Wynne-Jones told an audience of Grade 6s and 7s assembled in the gym. "All that is part of developing your imagination. That word imagination contains a smaller word. Who can tell me what that word is?"

"Image," replied a student.

"Yes, 'image,' a picture in your head. You are seeing something that is not really there in the world, it is in your head. That is what makes up your imagination, and that is what gives you the 'what if?' disease."

He told about Isaac Newton's realization of the force of gravity, something no one can see, so he had to explain it using images. The image that persists today is that of an apple falling from a branch and landing on Newton's head, giving him his moment of epiphany.

He also talked about Louis Pasteur and how difficult it was for him to explain his discovery, germs, to a world that could not see the microscopic organisms.

Over in the school library, Forsyth was talking to the younger grades about much the same topic, just presented in a different way.

She read her vivid fantasy story and allowed the students to bask in the mental images her words conjured up.

"I want to read that book so bad," said one youngster when she closed the reading of her Ice Dragon novel at a cliffhanger moment.

She explained that a writer cannot rely on imagination alone, however. The images and colourful language must be properly presented and for that, she needs a plan.

She showed the boys and girls a map of her fictional land of Minera where the Ice Dragon series is based, the drawing of which gets her ideas flowing in the first phases of writing.

She held up a reflective garden globe because that played a central role at the start of the story.

She showed them also a couple of large sheets of paper: a brainstorm sheet where her initial ideas got jotted down in three divisions: the beginning, the middle series of events, and the end.

With that came the storyboard, which is a frame by frame blueprint for the story, so she knows what markers to hit as she goes into the writing phase.

"There is a lot of planning before I write a story," she said.

From her efforts, and those of Wynne-Jones and the organizers of the event, might come some motivated, lifelong learners and even future authors from the student population of Malaspina elementary school.

fpeebles@pgcitizen.ca