

## HOW TO HOST A SUCCESSFUL AUTHOR VISIT

I arrived at Roywood Elementary School in the City of North York, Ontario to do a one-hour presentation on my newly published book *Love Affair with a Cougar* to a grade three class. Believing that education comes through entertainment, and using displays, dramatic readings and audiovisual methods which lend themselves to large audiences, I normally do my presentations in the gym to several hundred students at a time from grade four to seven, or to several classes of high school age when their more restricted schedule allows. To maximize student participation, I follow this main presentation with small group discussions or workshop activities either in individual classrooms or in the library to representatives from all classes who then return to their rooms to report on their experience (an appropriate language arts activity).

So I didn't think my visit to Roywood would be of maximum value to either the grade three class – or me. Thanks to an outstanding teacher-librarian, I was wrong.

A huge WELCOME LYN HANCOCK sign greeted me at the door of the school and selected students were waiting to direct me to the principal's office and to help carry my equipment to the library (instead of knocking me down in the foyer on their way to classes as happened at one memorable high school). I suppressed my grimace at the messy entrance. A sleeping bag and other camping equipment lay on the floor at the door, probably left there, I thought, by an outdoor education class. I didn't see the stuffed seal in the bag, or pay much attention to the life-size figures, a man and a woman, erected on either side of the door, although the woman was wearing a cap and jacket similar to ones I wore on my wilderness expeditions. No, I was trying to concentrate on how to adapt a young adult/adult book to a grade three audience. *Love Affair with a Cougar* was not the usual children's book, despite its whimsical title, animals as a universally interesting theme, a true-life location in a grade four classroom, and the inclusion of much of my students' writing.

I entered the library and was bowled over by a scene that stays with me still despite at least 500 subsequent presentations in the intervening 25 years.

A quiet well-behaved group of grade three children sat on the carpet in front of a movie and slide projector (fully equipped and working), two long tables awaiting my quickly assembled displays, another table containing copies of my books gathered from the school library, district libraries and local homes, a blackboard for note-making and a pin board for magazine articles and handouts. An audiovisual assistant hovered nearby to offer help in adjusting screen and lighting. Teachers sat by their charges with notebooks in hand to jot down questions and ideas for follow-up activities (instead of using this time to mark papers or drink coffee).

The librarian (Doris Pilkey is the name that comes to mind) came forward with a bright enthusiastic smile to greet me and - surprise – introduce me to the principal, invited parents, some members of the school board *and* the superintendent! A few minutes later, Doris introduced me. She remembered my name, had read biographical details and a few of my titles, and had discussed my writings with the

students prior to my visit. It was refreshing to be called Lyn Hancock instead of what I was usually called to date - a female Farley Mowat, Mrs. Doolittle or Gerald Durrell, although they are famous company. Then it dawned. The two models at the library door were myself and my husband dressed for the outdoor expeditions described in my books and the sleeping bag, the kids clamoured to tell me, contained a stuffed representation of Sam, the seal in my first book *There's a Seal in my Sleeping Bag*.

Being a professional teacher as well as a former actress, I easily geared my presentation to the grade level of my audience, showing how fascination with cougars coming through my bedroom window began my writing process, and how fascination with cougars coming into their classroom motivated children through observation, personal experience, note-taking, journal-keeping and creative writing to learn a variety of subjects, prescribed learning outcomes and in a couple of cases, to even solve their social problems. The session ended with a climactic film clip which I like to think shows that I write non-fiction, even if often one of the first questions I fend is "Are your stories and characters really true?" Usually, questions lead to informative discussion on writing and the writing life, and inspire students (as well as parents and teachers) to write themselves on whatever fascinates them.

One of the students then thanked me, a real-life rehearsal for conducting meetings. My Roywood thanker (is there a better word than that?) showed that she had really absorbed my presentation. She created an original response, rather than merely voicing what the teacher may have told her to say, or just a mindless "Thanks for coming."

And then I waited for the questions. This is when I try to fit in specifically with the prescribed learning outcomes of the curriculum or the wishes of the teachers expressed before my visit, and foster audience participation.

I expected questions about the biology of cougars and people's attitudes to them. I anticipated questions about how long it takes to write a book, how much money do writers make, and even (sigh) how old are you? I did not expect a grade three kid in the front row to ask, "Did a cougar break up your marriage?"

It stumped me for a few embarrassing moments. This teacher-librarian and her students had responded to the "adult" themes of my story, read between the lines and delved beyond the cute and obvious. It was me who learned from them. Freed by the welcoming sincerity and prior preparation in this school, I was able to lead a meaningful discussion on loss, not just of a cougar and its effect on me, or loss of wilderness habitat for a species, but loss of a pet, a friend, a parent, a job. We also discussed the politics of story endings, happy versus sad, real world versus Disney. We talked of fiction, non-fiction and fiction based on fact. One book later, I would use the thoughts generated in that library that day to write the ending of *An Ape Came out of my Hatbox*. The unsolicited reference written by the Librarian of the school board's Materials Examination Centre is one that I still cherish.

And this school is one that believed in capturing the motivation of the moment to bend budgets and buy some of my books (they probably still have *There's a Raccoon*

*in my Parka* complete with Tabasco Raccoon's footprint autograph). Believe me, I visited one school in another province where reluctant readers were all clamouring to read a book I had presented and the teacher-librarian, citing budget cuts, refused, even when local and national media were bringing the same book daily into their homes. Other schools approach this kind of problem with creative fund-raising because they realize the advantage of seizing the educational moment.

The point? When teachers prepare thoroughly for an author's visit, it is a win-win situation for everyone, though some authors may not relish such an unexpected audience as I had that day at Roywood.

One particularly memorable school for me was in Richmond, British Columbia. Before my visit, the intermediate grades had read or had listened to stories from *There's a Seal in my Sleeping Bag*, *There's a Raccoon in my Parka*, *An Ape Came out of my Hatbox/Gypsy in the Classroom*, and *Love Affair with a Cougar*. Obviously.

I arrived to find the rooms and corridors crammed with poems, stories, art work, social studies and science reports connected to the animal theme of my visit. Teachers had derived spelling and vocabulary lists from my books that were far beyond what was expected at the particular grade level they were teaching e.g. "brachiating" which Gypsy my gibbon did constantly was a word on the grade three spelling list. Another useful project was the laminated postcards addressed to me that included a colourful illustration, an "I miss you" letter written during my absence from home by one of my animal characters, and a short researched paragraph on the species (one card represented several different learning outcomes). I came away from that school with dozens of ideas I could suggest to other schools.

Inviting a writer to the classroom provides many opportunities to integrate the author's books with language arts and other subject areas in the curriculum. Like most things, the more you put into something, the more you get out of it, the more the teacher and students prepare for the author's visit and follow-up afterwards, the more educational benefit is derived. Amazing things can happen. I am thrilled when student interviews after my visit are published in the local newspaper, when my "books begin in your backyard" approach results in the publication of a student's family history and in one case *Tell Me, Grandmother*, leads to the re-uniting of adopted family members, when students tell me decades later that they chose careers or developed hobbies after reading my books or participating in a classroom visit.