

I have just returned from the Spotlight on Books 20<sup>th</sup> annual conference, held at Sugar Lake Lodge near Grand Rapids Minnesota. Having been my first time attending this conference, I approached the date with much excitement and a little trepidation. Would I get lost trying to get there? Would I know anyone there? Stepping out of ones comfort zone is a hard thing to do, but I did want to attend, so I packed my bags and got ready to go.

The day before the conference was a beautiful, sunny day. The first day of the conference, however, the weather forecasters predicted blizzard conditions. The drive over was not horribly bad, but there were a few hazardous areas on the road. (I later found out that only about half of those who had planned on coming to the conference were able to actually get there. I was one of the lucky ones.) I arrived about a half hour early and found my room mate, Nancy Minkel, whom I had never met before. We were given a unit outside the lodge which was a very nice, two-bedroom kitchenette. Even with the bad weather that we had, we still enjoyed ourselves. The staff were great and did their best to make our stay, under such poor conditions, enjoyable.

Meeting the first and main speaker at Spotlight, Jim Trelease, was quite an experience. Jim is a very dynamic speaker, a wonderful story-teller, and a strong personality. The poor man had rented a car and driven to the conference in the bad weather. He was definitely dedicated to getting there. His presentation was so enjoyable and interesting. He spoke for several hours and held his audience captive. I came away with a satisfied feeling that I had learned some valuable insights into the importance of reading aloud and the effect it can have on our children's ability to learn. I also learned that helping children as well as adults become better at reading is not a hard accomplishment, just one that takes a dedication to reading every day. I am hoping that we can be a tool in encouraging ones from our locale to read aloud and to maintain SSR (sustained silent reading) on a personal level. I was amazed to find out that a large amount of schools do not implement these low cost, highly effective, simple techniques to improve all students, from all grade levels, in all subjects.

During the first part of Mr. Trelease's presentation, we were informed that the food truck had not been able to make it to the lodge because of the inclement weather. However, the staff stepped up to the challenge and provided us all with a delicious dinner buffet. After the dinner, Jim made his final presentation and we all had opportunity to speak with him and have him sign our books. Again, I have to say that meeting Mr. Trelease was a great experience.

The second day of the conference dawned bright and clear. There was still much snow to be removed but the sun was out and doing its part to help out. Nancy and I packed our stuff up and headed up to the main lodge for a wonderful breakfast buffet. We enjoyed meeting with and getting to know several of the other attendees over coffee and much more than doughnuts. After breakfast we were ushered into the conference room, where several showcases had been set up.

The first showcase, "What to Read after Harry", was very interesting for me, since we have quite a few junior and young adult readers at our library, and it would be good to have more ideas on what they might consider a good read. This speaker, Erin, gave a synopsis of several books and what age level she felt could or should read each one. This was a very useful "showcase" for me.

The second showcase was about books that were nominated for the 2008 Comstock Read Aloud awards. The ladies involved in the showcase did a fine job of presenting these books and made us all want to go out and buy them. ☺ I found out that the requirements for a Comstock award are that the books nominated must be: a good read aloud, have good text and good pictures or illustrations. Also, we were all informed that anyone can nominate a book, so if you know of one that fits the requirements, let them know.

After the second showcase, we were introduced to Minnesota author, Mary Casanova. Mary started her presentation with a little biography about herself and how she became interested in writing. She then went on to talk about doing research on books she had written and how these experiences affected her writing. Her books overall are written not only to entertain, but also to educate her reader. She is working on a series now that concentrates more on entertaining the reader as well as involving some relationship issues. Her discussion on the background for her new book: The Klipfish Code was very interesting. (I especially enjoyed Mary's sense of humor.)

The third showcase followed Mary Casanova's presentation and was about mostly nonfiction books. This presentation covered a wide variety of topics from books about animals, to books on space, history, science and even NASCAR racing. Steve gave a summary of many books, with a few interesting factoids thrown in about each, and also told what age/grade level he felt would be able to understand them. This was also a useful showcase for me, giving me ideas for books to encourage our library's nonfiction readers to read.

Following the third showcase was the presentation by Debra Frasier. I have to confess to being excited about meeting Debra, because she is the author for our summer reading program's book choice: A Birthday Cake is No Ordinary Cake. She made her presentation more from an illustrators point of view, though she is also an author. She described the making of her birthday cake book from start to finish and I was surprised at how hard it is to actually write and illustrate a book. All those revisions and the time involved! It is amazing that any picture books get published. I found her presentation to be the most educational for me, concerning what one goes through and has to do to get a book published.

The final showcase was a game - Pin the Tale on the Author, created by Vicki Palmquist. She is quite a character and made the game fun for all of us. She said that they are trying to format the game for the computer so patrons can play it online. This will make ones more knowledgeable about authors and what books they write.

The last presentation of the day was by DJ MacHale. He had had the

most trouble in getting to the conference, due to the bad weather, and -in fact- almost did not make it at all. But, thankfully he did get there and we were able to hear him speak on his novels in the Pendragon series. He is a good speaker too, with quite a sense of humor as well. So, he kept us entertained and awake (a hard thing to do with tired, well fed librarians and teachers.) ☺ He spoke about how he became an author - something he NEVER thought he would ever do, and how he comes up with ideas for his books. He also told us about some of his upcoming books that will be out in 2009 and 2010. Even some graphic novels on the Pendragon books will be published soon, to make the series more accessible to those who like comics and maybe get them on the road to reading more.....

In all, my first experience going to Spotlight was very enjoyable. I loved meeting the authors. I also enjoyed meeting the members who organized the conference and put on the showcase, as well as my contemporaries attending with me. All of the people who put this together deserve a big hand! They are helping to educate us; so, hopefully, we can educate others.

Paula Erickson