

Seventh-graders write young adult novel

Glen Ellyn, IL

Sean McHale said he's written lots of stories and papers in school, but it's not often that he's able to write the type of fiction he really loves.

But this school year, Sean and 13 other seventh-grade students at Hadley Junior High stayed after school every Friday to brainstorm, write and revise a young adult fantasy novel they hope to have published this summer.

"I've written a lot of things in class before, but this is fun because I finally got to write the genre I like," said Sean, 13, who lives in Glen Ellyn.

Inspired by the young adult science fiction novel "The Hunger Games," the students, led by literacy teacher Brett Cooper, took on the task of writing their own post-apocalyptic novel, "Siege of Never Eden."

This is the first year Cooper organized the group, known as the Synthesis Project, and he said there was a much bigger turnout than expected.

"The overall goal of the project was to nurture the passion for writing ... (and a) secondary goal was to see our young adult novel published," Cooper said. "I believe the first goal has been achieved. The second is still in the offing, but we are hopeful that it ... will be achieved."

Cooper's worked at Hadley for three years and said he's always enjoyed writing in the summer, so he wanted to find a way to incorporate his love for writing while working with the students.

In addition to their other schoolwork, the students spent several hours a week writing the 14-chapter, 250-page book. Cooper said he spent more than 100 hours outside the after-school club working on the book's rewrites.

Many students said they joined the club and took on the extra work because of their love of writing — with the hope of improving.

Megan Fickert, 13, of Glen Ellyn, loves writing, but said she never had the courage to pen a book until now.

"In the beginning it was tough because a lot of us had not written before, but it's gotten easier," Megan said. "When I'm writing now, I always have the beginning and the end of the story in mind."

Cooper said the group's skills improved in many ways, such as organization, word choice, sentence fluency and writing metaphorically and lyrically.

“I think all fanned the flames of their writing and storytelling passions, which typically translates to general writing improvement across the board,” he said.

The book, “Siege of Never Eden” follows a 15-year-old boy named Ecco who lives in Bar Harbor, Maine. After missiles hit the earth, Ecco has two goals: to protect his sister, Gemma, and to work with a group of rebels who’re trying to save the world from the antagonist, Moriarti.

Through the process, Cooper said the students surprised him with their creativity.

“They’re so imaginative and they come up with so many good ideas, which is one of the hardest thing for writers,” he said.

Cooper said the group will submit the novel to publishers, such as Scholastic, Hyperion and Little, Brown and Company this summer.

But incorporating 14 students’ ideas into one novel required Cooper to use a unique writing process.

The writing process

The group voted on most major decisions about the novel, from genre to plot to characters.

“It became this democratic thing with the students deciding everything,” Cooper said, which was the plan since the beginning of the year.

Once the book’s plot was outlined by the students, they worked each week from a chapter map, which Cooper helped create based on his years of studying story structure. Students drafted their own versions of each chapter and posted it on the club’s blog every Tuesday night following their Friday meeting.

“Since the blogs were successful with my classes, I figured the format would be successful with the Synthesis Project,” Cooper said.

Club members then cast blind votes on their favorite three chapters. The draft with the most votes was chosen as the template, but Cooper revised each chapter to include some elements of each student’s draft.

Voting on their favorite chapter made the process more competitive, and the students worked to improve so their chapter was selected as the template.

“Students have been exceptionally motivated and diligent, and the story is captivating, if I do say so myself,” Cooper said. “I think the strength of the writing and the story, as well as the unique nature of its creation, will be attractive to both publishers and readers.”

Jack Knapke, 13, of Glen Ellyn, said the process of working on the novel with friends made writing more fun.

“Writing can kind of be a boring process, but seeing other people’s writing growing and connecting them together ... has been fun,” he said.

But this will not be the only year the students will get to develop their writing skills with the hope of publishing a novel.

Next year Cooper will have two clubs — a new group of seventh-graders will begin work on a novel, while those who worked on “Siege of Never Eden,” will be writing a second book — perhaps a sequel.

Who is Jordan Colt?

Jordan Colt is the pseudonym the group chose to write the book under. The name was chosen so that, if published, “Siege of Never Eden” will be shelved alphabetically near Suzanne Collins’ novel, “The Hunger Games,” which is where the group found inspiration for the book.

Excerpt from beginning of ‘Siege of Never Eden’

“Feels like all I do is search. For anything useful: drinking water, packaged foods, medicines, hand tools, candles, matches, lanterns, propane, butane, blankets, winter gear, weapons, and metals and woods that can be salvaged for weapons. And I search for survivors. Most of all, for Gemma.

As I pick through the debris of the demolished buildings, I think of the people I knew who lived here — and how it all used to look. My ex-girlfriend Sarah lived in the apartments on Front Street. The place looks like a blown over house of cards now. The pet store in the strip mall on Main is also flattened. They don’t sell pets there anymore. No pets to sell and no ‘they’ to sell them. My best friend Roy lived in a red brick ranch on Collins Lane. He survived, but an infection got him two weeks after. His new name, the one he gave himself after the world burned, was Phoenix. He was brave; he tried to rise from the ashes, but in the end his new name couldn’t save him.

In the afternoon — I think today’s a Monday — I sit in the forest, against the trunk of what used to be a tall, proud tree. I remember how beautiful these woods were: full of life and color. I used to play here with my pals. Back when life was aglow with the promise of hope and wonder. Now I wonder why I’ve survived.”

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