

The Write Stuff
with
Brenda Bennett

Bruce Coville and Tony Sansevero

When I met Bruce Coville and Tony Sansevero at Tony's studio in Syracuse they were preparing to discuss their new joint venture: a twelve book series called "I Was a Sixth Grade Alien." This is the first collaboration for the two Syracuse talents and an appropriate one as the arrival of the first "known" alien visitors to Earth will take place in none other than our own Salt City and of course, across the galaxy.

Bruce Coville is the award winning author who has in the past set his children's and young adult's stories in Syracuse locations such as the Everson Museum, Syracuse Library and Landmark Theater. Tony Sansevero is a local artist, transplanted from Boston, who is illustrating the new series.



BRUCE COVILLE

Bruce grew up outside Phoenix and continues to make Central New York his home. He said, "what I like about CNY is it's physical beauty. It's a much more beautiful place than most people realize. I've driven over most of the country speaking and its one of the most beautiful places." Bruce appreciates our rich arts and wonderful theater communities but adds the fact that his family is here is to him the most important feature of CNY.

Bruce Coville considers himself "a very lucky person" as he makes his living doing what he loves. And I learned quickly that he does it well. A trip on the information super highway brought me to reviews and correspondence from his young fans all over the world. The local and school libraries revealed long lists of Coville titles including the popular "Jeremy Thatcher, Dragon Hatcher" and "My Teacher is an Alien". Coville has even written picture book versions of Shakespeare's works including "MacBeth" and "A Midsummer Night's Dream".



TONY SANSEVERO

Most impressive to me was the response from kids and adults when I asked if they were familiar with his work. Each was quick to respond with a favorite title, how they met him when he spoke at their school or even how he had been their teacher. What makes an author so endearing? Bruce knows what kids like. "I never had a problem with being a kid" he admits. "I didn't want to grow up particularly. I thought, I'm having more fun than any grown up I see."

To create his stories, Bruce draws on his own childhood memories, and observations made while fathering three children and teaching elementary school in Liverpool for 7 1/2 years. Bruce laughed, "The truth is that 10 year old boys are not tasteful. That's why we have a hard time getting them to read. If we go to where they are, we get them to read." While reading his stories, including the first few pages of "I Was a Sixth Grade Alien", it was clear to me that Bruce goes to where the kids are and he does get them to read. I had a hard time putting the books down as they pull you into the story with their realistic characters and humor. When I asked Bruce if he writes with a moral to the story in mind he responded, "People who set out to write a story with a moral get what they deserve. The first goal is to tell a story...If you are any kind of human being, it will have underlying values."

Bruce humbly admits he doesn't consider himself a star but his accomplishments and notoriety are undeniably stellar. I spoke with his office manager Marie, who proudly cited several of Bruce's accomplishments and projects. She reported that Bruce receives about 3,000 letters each year from his young fans. Many coming from foreign countries where his books have been translated into other languages. "Bruce wants to be accessible to kids" Marie said. Each letter gets a response and autographed copies of his books are available by mail

In addition to his writing, Marie said, "Bruce is a totally patient, wonderful director." His "Words Take Wing" group records three to four children's books on tape each year for Listening Library. Marie explained how these stories are brought vividly to life with full casts of characters as opposed to a sole reader as we're accustomed. As Sixth Grade Alien has been opted for television, Bruce may have a TV series to add to his achievements in the near future. You can also add Board of Directors Member of "Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators" to Bruce's list of titles along with Playwright and Actor. His works include "Dragon Slayer" produced by Syracuse Stage. He admits, "When I grow up, I want to write musical theater, but I don't have time to now." With a 12 book series to be completed in 18 months, it's easy to understand why.

Bruce is married to the illustrator Katherine Coville. In addition to books by other authors, Katherine has also illustrated for Bruce. While it's uncommon for authors and illustrators to communicate with each other on a project as publishers are afraid of conflict, Bruce disagrees. "There is something juicy that happens in the conflict...causing a story and illustrations to be more connected and grow as an organic unit." Bruce and Tony seem to agree wholeheartedly on this point, and we can expect their working together to bring us an enjoyable series. The lunch meeting this day was to further discuss the illustrations to be used for particular stories and the choice of models Tony will use to achieve the right look for the characters.

I asked Bruce if there were advantages to living in a larger city for a person choosing a career in writing. Although he sees no advantage to it now or when one is trying to get their first book sold, he admitted he spent a couple years in Manhattan when he first became established. "The fact that I could walk right into the office, be there in 20 minutes if something came up really did help. It helped in establishing connections and it helped in keeping you in their faces for promotional opportunities that came up. But one of the great things about doing what we do is its a very portable thing."

Bruce met Tony Sansevero when Tony contacted him upon moving to Syracuse. They consider themselves kindred spirits and have been friends for about a year and a half. Bruce admires Tony's combination of skill and speed. The speed comes into play as they are working on tight deadlines.

Tony has displayed his diversity of style in the illustration of several books including "The Secret Admirer" by Donna W. Guthrie with its soft pastels, and the brightly colored cartoons of "Sing Henrietta, Sing" by Lynn Downey. Of the Sixth Grade Alien project Tony stated, "Its a rare opportunity to work with two people I respect and one that was a strong influence on my artistic career." The influential artist of whom Tony speaks is Chris Achilleos who will be illustrating the covers for the book series. In young adult literature one artists typically illustrates the cover while another does the inside illustrations.

Tony credits writers more than illustrators with inspiring him early on. He enjoyed Jules Verne, and J.R.R. Tolkien is a favorite of both Tony's and Bruce's. Tony explained, "I spent the start of my serious art career trying to illustrate the characters I saw so clearly in my mind." When he speaks to a class of students he stresses the importance of art's impact and that inspiration can come from everything around us. "An artist needs to see everything." On why he chose children's illustration, Tony said, "Its one of the very few illustration careers

where you are actually not just allowed but expected to be creative."

Tony has worked as a general illustrator in advertise design and product illustration. He considered this work too strict and monotonous and enjoys the diversity of a career illustrating children's books. Admittedly, at the heart of him is a fine artist and the illustration career allows him to do his own purer type of art. A look around his studio gives one a feel for his boundless use of style and technique. The presence of his black labs Frodo (named for a Tolkien Hobbit) and Tasha lend to the sense that the studio is a second home for Tony as he described marathon sessions with little sleep in order to meet deadlines. I heard him tell a class of illustration students, "Never miss a deadline, or you're done!"

Both Bruce and Tony agree that theirs are highly competitive fields and that the "best" authors and illustrators are not necessarily the ones who will make it. "Persistence in the face of constant and continuous rejection" is what Bruce says is required. He professes his first key to success is bone headed obstinance. Tony stated, "Perseverance is the key. You are not going to make it in this extremely competitive field unless you really want it. If you do, eventually you will make it. You just have to want it bad enough." Those fortunate enough to meet Bruce or Tony when they speak to a class or group clearly see that both are passionate about their work and wanted it bad enough.

Bruce suggests joining "Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators" to those interested in children's literature. They can be contacted at 345 North Maple Drive, Suite 296, Beverly Hills, CA 90210, phone (310) 859-9887 or on the web at: www.scbwi.org.

In addition to illustrating children's books, Tony is a general illustrator whose work includes CD covers, architectural renderings of houses and portraits. You can see an example of Tony's work the next time you see a Beak & Skiff delivery truck. Be sure to notice their new mural. Tony's studio is located at 501 W. Fayette St., #270, Syracuse, NY 13204. You can write to Bruce Coville at Oddly Enough, P.O. Box 6110, Syracuse, NY 13217.

"I Was a Sixth Grade Alien" is scheduled to be on bookshelves this August or September with one book coming out every other month. I know I can't wait to discover what happens when Syracuse hosts the new Alien Embassy and Pleskitt joins Timmy's class!



Tony Sansevero and Bruce Coville with a couple of their fans, Kala and Gemma Branson.