

Out of This World

Writer and illustrator blast off with a 12-book series

By Laura T. Ryan
Staff writer

Any world that pairs Bruce Coville with Tony Sansevero is a world that makes sense.

Even one inhabited by evil hamsters, disembodied brains and purple sixth-graders.

Just about every day, the men head into their laboratories — Coville into a darkened second-floor office, and Sansevero into a bright, airy studio splattered with color. Coville sits at a keyboard and mines his imagination for stories that blend classic classroom tales with outlandish alien creatures and landscapes. Then Sansevero inches the fantasies closer to reality with vivid illustrations.

The collaboration has produced two books. "I Was a Sixth-Grade Alien" (Minstrel Books, \$3.99) in August and, new to bookstores this month, "I Was a Sixth-Grade Alien: The Attack of the Two-Inch Teacher" (Minstrel Books, \$3.99). The third installment, "I Lost My Grandfather's Brain," comes in November. Nine more volumes follow, in an ambitious 12-book series that features a new book every other month from here on out.

The two will celebrate the second book's release — and help raise money for Success By Six — with a combination book-signing/alien party at 7 p.m. Friday at Barnes & Noble in DeWitt. The party is a product, Coville says, of Sansevero's "fertile brain and excess energy," and will include aliens and alien abductions, prizes and videos of the book series' companion TV show, which airs on Fox Family Channel at 5 p.m. Tuesdays.

Coville and Sansevero live and work in the same city, share a singularly sick sense of humor and offbeat passion for 1950s science fiction and get the same gleeful twinkle in their eyes when talk turns to extraterrestrials. Their partner-



Local: Wallace - Contributing photographer

THAT'S ILLUSTRATOR Tony Sansevero behind those glasses and author Bruce Coville with the book and mascot named Meep. The pair collaborate on an ongoing, 12-volume series called "I Was a Sixth-Grade Alien."



TONY SANSEVERO transformed a photo of author Bruce Coville (left) into a villain, with tentacles as a beard.

ship seemed inevitable, but in fact was a stroke of luck.

Authors rarely choose their illustrators. Usually, the publisher picks the artist for a project and acts as a liaison between the writer and artist. But when Coville heard Sansevero, a Boston native, talk about illustration during a local book-



signing, he knew he found a natural and told his publisher so. The publisher asked to see Sansevero's work and hired him.

"I was very impressed because he really knew his stuff," says Coville, who grew up in Phoenix. "He has in his blood this passion for science fiction and horror stuff."

The details

What: Book-signing and "alien party" with Bruce Coville and Tony Sansevero, to benefit Success By Six.

When: 7 p.m. Friday.

Where: Barnes & Noble, 3454 Erie Blvd. E., DeWitt.

Admission: Free.

Sponsored by: Barnes & Noble and Success By Six.

Info: 449-2948

Rather than communicate slowly through a distant intermediary, Sansevero and Coville trade ideas in person, usually over lunch at the Dinosaur Bar-B-Q.

Sansevero bases his drawings on photographs of real-life local models, including Central New York schoolchildren, whom he coaxes into wearing some bizarre costumes and facial expressions. The photographs serve as a baseline, and then Sansevero embellishes. For instance: Jonathan LaSalla, a perfectly normal-looking 10-year-old from Jamesville, transforms into Pleski, a bald, purple alien kid with an antenna; Amy Bartell, a local artist, morphs into a giant evil hamster named Mikta-makta-mookta; and a tennis ball in a coffemaker carafe becomes a bodiless brain in a glass case.

Other locals include: Syracuse photographer Brantley Carroll as Pleski's father, Meenom; actress Laurie Bridges as Ms. Buttsman; construction worker Willie Johnson as a Men-in-Black-type agent, McNally; Fayetteville-Manlius High School teacher Kelly Sajnog as teacher Ms. Weintraub; Shane Murray, 10, of Oswego as Tim Tompkins; Kim Chabro as Lanny Vanderhof; and Weston Czerkies of Gillette Road Middle School as the school bully.

Even Coville gets a piece of the action. Later in the series, look for him as a villain with a beard full of octopus-like tentacles.