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Best Selling Children's Author Spends Day at Oak Grove

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Prolific children's book author and illustrator, Jan Brett, visited Oak Grove last week and read one of her favorite titles, sharing some insights with the elementary students, as part of her 10th annual contest.

Avid reader, Oak Grove assistant librarian Christi Todd entered the contest in 2020 and the campus community rallied behind the elementary school, beating out a total of 4,631 schools and libraries across the country, with 1,069 votes. The self-funded visit was postponed a year due to the public health emergency.

"This is my job," said Brett of her life's work, which includes 40 published books, some original and others retold classics. "I feed my chickens... I have breakfast, and I get to color all day."

Having practiced drawing for around 65 years, said the professional artist, it takes her about an hour to complete one inch of an illustration. She releases a book per year on average.

A shy girl growing up, Brett said she "needed a little more time to think of what to say," but when she got to express herself through the art medium, it "made me happy about the ideas in my head."

Explaining how creativity often happens for her in the middle of the night when “time stands still,” she said: “Something about just before sleep; your mind goes places. The hardest part is remembering.” A trick she shared was looking at a reflection of her artwork in the mirror so she can feel as though she is “seeing it for the first time.”

“I’m almost as surprised as anyone that this world can appear,” Brett said, earlier stating: “It’s almost like little elves were there drawing.” She said to the students: “I hope that will happen to you.”

Brett read her 2012 work, “Mossy,” inspired by a snapping turtle trailing aquatic plants on its shell that she observed in a lake at her summer cottage in the western mountains of Massachusetts. This scene became the manifestation of her vision about an eastern box turtle growing a garden on his back.

“It was one of my favorite books to write, mostly because I love to draw turtles,” Brett said of the reptile’s unique shell designs. She drew a quick tortoise for the students from her research, and explained how she had utilized other animals in the past like hedgehogs and horses, and she is considering a beluga whale next. Often her books contain so much art that she designs the borders of the pages as well, foreshadowing events to come, she revealed.

The first book she had published, when she was 27, was “Fritz and the Beautiful Horses,” she said during a Q&A. The book she is most proud of is always her most recent title: “The Nutcracker,” set to be released this fall. She also enjoyed writing “Berlioz the Bear” in her earlier career because she turned her husband Joseph into a bear, utilizing his expressions for the main character.

Brett and Joseph, a double-bassist of almost 59 years with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, started the contest a decade ago to connect with her readership, she commented. She often travels with him overseas, and he accompanies her in the states. “Maybe there’ll be a book somewhere here,” she said of her travels to Poplar Bluff.

Pictured: First grade students assemble for the first time all school year as famous author Jan Brett visits Oak Grove on Tuesday, May 18.

Photo and article by Tim Krakowiak, Communications/Marketing Director, Poplar Bluff R-I School District

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