

Word wizards create their own worlds

Children relish the chance to invent fantastical characters and the tallest of tales.

WRITING
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IT'S THURSDAY AFTERNOON and I'm sitting next to a pint-sized pirate who wants his name and picture in the paper. "So?" he asks, swinging his sword around like a swashbuckling conductor. "My mum reads the *Herald*," he adds, to seal the deal.

Well, that introduction is as good as he's getting for now. For further coverage, Jack Sparrow jr may have to put pen to paper and write some kind of autobiography. After all, the pen is mightier than the sword, and he is a student of the Writing Workshop, so he shouldn't have any problems.

The Writing Workshop is a creative writing school for children run by multi-award-winning novelist and picture book author Bernard Cohen at various locations.

I'm at Annandale North Public School. There are three classes throughout the afternoon, grouped by age, with students from first to fourth grades. We start with some of Cohen's youngest students, who are in fancy dress, but that's not a workshop requirement. The pirate pants and red riding hoods are in the name of the children's Book Week parade earlier that day. There are no genuine workshop prerequisites but there are a few rules: no deteriorating, no wasting time and the answer to questions about writing is always a yes!

All this reminds me of my early writing endeavours. In year 4 I wrote my first chapter book about a group of cool teenagers in a bad, who seemed to spend all of their time chasing for fleeing from) monsters and bad guys. Sound familiar?

I wasn't even a fan of *Josie and the Pussycats* or *Scooby Doo* but Cohen says children - even those who have yet to learn to read and write - have an exceptional ability to invent new takes on narrative structures from television and other sources, and to put their inventions into words.

Cohen, having taught creative writing to children since the late 1980s, knows not to underestimate youthful imagination. "They all have an answer to 'how would you begin a scary story or a funny story?'" Cohen says. And the answers the kids come up with form the basis of their writing projects.

"The idea is that [The Writing Workshop] is something they'll enjoy, but there's no holding back. It's about presenting kids with a challenge rather than limiting them to an expectation of what they're capable of."

The kids flood into the classroom, bubbling with excitement and comments about previous workshops and stories they've written, and Cohen gets straight down to business. "The word for today is 'Parody'," he says, writing it neatly on the board. It seems a tough word to expect kids



Yes man ... Bernard Cohen.

Photo: Stephen Bacon

'So we could write about Cinderella, but make her a fat elephant?'

Budding author

to understand; yet there are no signs of concern among them.

They are asked to rewrite a fairytale in a way that makes fun of the original story. Dozens of possibilities are nominated - the more absurd the idea, the more uncontrollable giggles bounce around the room.

"So we could write about Cinderella, but make her a fat elephant?" one asks. "Yes!" Cohen says, in keeping with the rule to answer all questions about writing in the affirmative. The kids are thrilled by the freedom and focus on coming up with outrageous and original scenarios.

Towards the end of the hour-long session, the students read their work aloud. Cohen says that reading aloud helps to build the kids' confidence and, as their diction improves, the students are more eager than ever to share their work with their classmates.

The workshops for year 3 and 4 pupils also focus on fairytale parodies. One student gets straight into writing *Awake Ugly* (as

opposed to *Sleeping Beauty*), which is about an insomniac princess who only manages to sleep after a hearty slap from a prince, while an eager year 3 writer asks Cohen, "Is *Hamlet* a fairytale?" It's no wonder Cohen has learnt not to underestimate the students.

The stories the kids come up with aren't all short. One girl is 23 chapters into a meerkat love story. It gets a mixed response: most kids adore it and demand more, while cowering in the corner a romance-averse boy shouts "No-ooo! No more Meerkat love! It's too scary!"

Cohen encourages all points of view. "It's interesting to watch participants developing their own styles," he says. "I try not to set exercises which are simply about emulating."

Cohen concedes that in some cases, the influence of popular authors such as J.K. Rowling and Andy Griffiths is clear.

Most would agree that anything that helps improve literacy is a good thing. The Writing Workshop manages to do this while giving kids a fun pastime and a liberating creative outlet.

The highest praise for the Writing Workshop comes from Cohen's students, one of whom says: "Things that you thought were impossible are possible, and I learnt that from Bernard."

The Writing Workshop runs from October 3-5 at the Bicentennial Park Field Studies Tower, Homebush Bay. Bookings are essential and are open to students in years 5-8 and 9-12. www.writingworkshop.com.au.