



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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*“They was two great
Black Things a-standin’
by her side,*

*An’ they snatched her
through the ceilin’ fore
she knowed what she’s
about!*

*An’ the Gobble-uns ‘ll
git you Ef you Don’t
Watch Out!”*

-From James Whitcomb
Riley’s “Little Orphant
Annie”

This past week I attended the 2007 Association of Children’s Librarians of Northern California (ACL) institute. This day-long program was held at the San Francisco Public Library (SFPL) main branch, in the wonderful Koret Auditorium, with comfortable seats and a spacious light feeling. It is rooms like this that remind me how important it is to have some sort of community room in which to hold library programs.

This year’s theme was mythology and our first speaker was graphic novel author Gene Luen Yang, whose talk was entitled “Asian-Americans, Monkey Kings & Comics.” He included a brief history of the Monkey King, as well as his own connections to this traditional literary character. He told us some of his favorite childhood stories were about the Monkey King, who had a whole range of magical powers, including the ability to fly on a cloud, grow or shrink at will,

beat his enemies off with a magical stick and – my favorite – create clones of himself with his own hair.

His talk was charming and when he read aloud from his book, *American Born Chinese*, which was displayed on a large screen behind him, he invited the audience to provide the appropriate sound effects, which we did amazingly well.

Susan Fox and Beverly Vaughn Hock were next, and they acted out a brief history of the Greek gods and goddesses, from the viewpoint of Athena and Hera. They did a good job of presenting the complexities of these deities’ relationships.

The award-winning author and storyteller Judy Sierra was our first after-lunch speaker. This can be a challenge for anyone, but her forthright, personable and humorous style made it easy to pay attention. Her topic, too, was a great one: “Monsters of Myth.” She began by telling us that one of her major interests is “monsters and

scary things for children.” Using PowerPoint, she talked about the various monsters in her book *The Gruesome Guide to World Monsters*. One of the most gruesome is Monster Rolling Skull, who tasted his own blood one day and liked it so much he ended up eating his whole body except for his head – a hungry head, Sierra added.

She talked about the role of monsters in children’s lives and how they are used to protect children by scaring them into safe behavior. One particular point she made is that monsters and scary stories can help children deal with their feelings; as she put it: “Children enjoy being frightened in a safe environment.” Yet these days parents and children’s librarians are reluctant to use frightening stories – the monsters have been toned down or “defanged” as Sierra says. I think this is a great point and yet I know I consciously choose

not to read these kinds of books aloud to children. I have never forgotten “Little Orphant Annie,” which was probably read to me before I was ready for it. Or is anyone ever ready for it?

Our final speaker was Rick Riordan, author of the best-selling *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* series for children. Riordan talked about how he came to write these books, which are about a twelve-year-old dyslexic boy who discovers he is the modern-day son of a Greek god. His talk was fast-paced and funny and it was easy to see the appeal of his work.

As usual, the best part for me was listening to authors whose books I see daily. Each time I have this experience, it makes me a better librarian and I am glad for the opportunity.