



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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*"I'm an only child –
with the exception of my
sister."*

-Denys Cazet, at the
Association of Children's
Librarians of Northern
California (ACL) annual
institute. April 13, 2006

Every year ACL presents a thorough and thoughtful institute on a topic of interest to children's librarians. This year's topic was transitional books – a subject with little research but a lot of interest from parents, children, teachers and, of course, librarians.

A psychologist and three children's authors gave their opinions and observations on this topic. The charming and talented Active Arts Theatre, who acted out a transitional reader from the Junie B. Jones series, also entertained us. It was a full and rewarding day, and I am glad I went.

The first speaker was psychologist Andrea Zevenbergen. She spoke for about an hour, and it is a challenge to summarize what she said – it all seems relevant and informative. She started with the main characteristics of a typical transitional book, as described by Graves and Liang in 2004. These include: the main character is between 8 and 10 years

old; the vocabulary is accessible; the topics, issues and emotions are appropriate for this age range; there are 60-100 pages; the book has short chapters (6 to 8 pages); the font size is reader friendly; there are a few illustrations per chapter; and the characters have unique but not developing personalities – that is, a funny person stays a funny person.

She commented that transitional books are a bridge between easy readers and chapter books, and then went on to discuss illustrations, context and something called the five-finger test. One page of text is read aloud and if the child needs help with more than five words, it is considered too difficult – and consequently the child may become discouraged while trying to decipher it. This seems like a good tip for librarians to pass on to parents.

Megan McDonald was the next speaker. She is the author of the *Judy Moody* children's series, as well as picture

books and books for older readers. She described her childhood with four older sisters, and said, “I became a writer because of all these stories and wanting to write them down.” Her talk was funny and gave us all insight into the life and thoughts of a writer. I was particularly appreciative of the page she showed us of a first draft with the red editor’s notes – a good reminder for all would-be authors that few people start with a finished product.

H.B. Homzie – the author of the *Aliens from Outer Space* series – began her talk by saying she spent years studying comedy because as a child she didn’t understand humor and she is “obsessed with understanding what I don’t get.” She described three aspects of humor: fish out of water, reverse order, and surprise; and she applied these to her work. I was struck by her comment that

children “are constantly fish out of water” – because growing up means everything is changing all the time.

Denys Cazet – creator of the *Minnie and Moo* series and the *Elvis the Rooster* series – was the final speaker. He described the rumpus room/bedroom he slept in starting at age 8, when his sister was born. The vivid image of a young boy opening his eyes every morning to his father’s collections of shrunken heads, hand grenades, swords and various firearms will probably stay with me forever. Cazet commented that he likes to call the vocabulary in early reader and transitional books a “preferred vocabulary” as opposed to a “controlled vocabulary” – an excellent point.

I think it is worth mentioning that all three of these authors had worked in libraries. What that means, I don’t know – but there it is.