

Fantasy author takes students through the 'Looking Glass'

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BY JASON FREEMAN Correspondent

The classrooms were empty Tuesday morning at Orland Junior High School.

Despite the school bell's insistence that second period was beginning, the desks sat in lonesome rows, and the footfalls of children were absent from the hallways.

The school common room, however, was teeming with excited shouts and moving bodies as Frank Beddor, author of the bestselling fantasy book "The Looking Glass Wars," spoke to the students about "Seeing Red", the second book in his "Alyss of Wonderland" trilogy.

"Doing something like this with the kids is probably the most rewarding thing," said Beddor, who was on hand after the show to sign copies of the new book. "When you're interacting with the readers, you can tell them about the book, and suddenly it's a whole contagious, infectious environment."

"You really come to understand how great it is to motivate kids to read. If you can get reluctant readers interested, then that's really satisfying."

During his presentation, Beddor entertained the students by telling jokes, answering questions and selecting children to act out scenes from the book.

"It took me five years to write the first book because it's world-creation," he said. "I needed to create the logic, the rules and the back story before I could start writing the narrative. I like to act out the story with the children and show them all the aspects of that world-creation."

Seventh-grader Lana Barakat, 13, played Alyss during one segment.

"At first, it was a little nerve-racking," she said. "I was nervous, but it felt like I was really acting onstage."

Although the film version of "The Looking Glass Wars" is in production, Barakat said it won't be as good as the book.

"I read a lot," she said. "In the movies, they don't give you all the information that's in a book. Movies are only half of it, (whereas) books are the whole thing."

Seventh-grader Jake Pechukas, 12, was one of the first in line after the show to have his copy of "Seeing Red" signed.

"It was awesome," Pechukas said. "I've read all his books, and they're terrific. It's nice to finally meet him. I like fantasy, and I like adventure, and this book pretty much falls into all of those categories.

"This book isn't about all good things; there's villains and a lot of other dark things going on in it."

Beddor's series provides an alternate take on Lewis Carroll's classic story "Alice in Wonderland" and was a surprise hit with children, he said.

"I didn't write it that way; I just wrote it for me," he said. "But I think it works on two levels because a lot of adults have been reading my books."

Beddor said one of the most enjoyable aspects of writing is being able to channel his real-world emotions into the characters and plot.

"Writing the villain is the most fun," he said. "When you're in a bad mood or someone has done something to you, and you can't tell them exactly what you're thinking, you can put it in the mouth of the villain. You can let out all your aggression and put it all into the villain."

Beddor said the third and final book of the series, which is yet unnamed, should hit stores in the spring of 2009.