

Grow | Kid stuff

Rochester Children's Book Festival

Helping to instill a love of reading early on

by Kate Antoniadis



Clockwise from left: Authors Mark Shulman, Cynthia DeFelice, and Scott Gibala Broxholm sign books for kids.

The Rochester Children's Book Festival was once deemed "the gold standard of children's book festivals" by Publishers Weekly. Popular children's author Jane Yolen has said it's the most organized festival she's attended. And it's definitely a big hit among its youngest participants. "The room is filled with energy and excitement and laughter," says children's author Elizabeth Falk, who oversees the annual event with codirector and fellow author Kathleen Blasi. Falk points to *Bunnicula* author, James Howe, as an example. "If you go up to his table with your book, he talks to the child the whole time," she says. "They're standing there with their wide-open eyes and they're just thrilled to pieces."

The festival, which is in its nineteenth year, takes place at Monroe Community College on Saturday, November 7, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., and is free of charge. Presented by Rochester Area Children's Writers and Illustrators (RACWI) and Lift Bridge Book Shop in Brockport, the event features Busy Bookworm Place, which offers several book-related craft activities; many author presentations; the Read-to-Me Corner, where authors read their books aloud; and a "mall" of a few dozen children's book authors who are available to meet and sign books. Each of them will have books available for purchase on-site (via cash, check, or charge).

Falk, who also teaches at the Ella Cline Shear School of Education at SUNY Geneseo, says the six hours of the event pass quickly. "It feels like we're there for

twenty minutes," she says. "And that's what most of our authors tell us, whether they're a returning author or it's their first time... there's this love of reading that's perpetuated throughout the festival."

This year's authors and illustrators, who appear by invitation only, include a "core group" from RACWI who are festival regulars, such as Vivian Vande Velde, MJ Auch, and Linda Sue Park (just to name a few), as well as others from outside the area, like James Howe, Nikki Grimes, Sarah Albee, Alyssa Capucilli, London Ladd, and many more. The organizers have been working on increasing the diversity of the featured slate of writers, says Falk. "We want kids who walk into the mall to relate to the authors and to find somebody just like them."

Linda Sue Park, Rochester resident and author of *A Single Shard* and *A Long Walk to Water*, has been a featured author at the festival for more than a decade. She says she values the face-to-face interactions with her readers. "When a kid says, 'I loved your book and you're my favorite author,' that's such a thrill for us," she says. "I think I speak for all the authors when I say, when a kid says 'I didn't like to read, and then I read your book and now I like to read'—that's huge, that's like, 'I can die now.'"

Park says that authors of children's books are lucky in that they get more opportunities to meet their fans than authors who write for adults—and she notes that Rochester's festival is unique in that each author is available and accessible throughout the event, not just during a scheduled time

slot. Speaking from a practical perspective, she says the invited authors appreciate the books they sell during the event as well as the future sales that result from conversations with teachers and librarians. "Most of us have other authors getting in touch with us, saying, 'How can I get invited?'"

Each year, some of the authors give presentations in which they speak to audiences about the creative process and other topics—a couple of examples are "From First Idea to Finished Book" and "Want to Be a Writer When You Grow Up?" "They are so highly entertaining," says Falk, who recalls Syracuse-area author Bruce Coville jumping onto a table and acting like a dragon one year. These talks, which are popular among kids and adults alike, are always well attended by local librarians and teachers.

One librarian you're sure to see at the book festival is Tonia Burton, youth services consultant for the Monroe County Library System (MCLS). Burton, who staffs the busy MCLS table, highly recommends a visit. "It's a great way to get kids excited about not just reading but maybe publishing their own books. They get to meet all the authors," she says. "It's definitely a must-do for families who have kids or even adults interested in becoming authors or illustrators." rochesterchildrensbookfestival.org 

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