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Tuesday, February 26, 2008

Local children's book author keeps kids engaged, amused

By Kate Miller

In between car pool lines, the laundry, grocery shopping and everything else that moms do each day, Amy E. Sklansky is typing away at her computer, piecing together sentences that will materialize into a story preschool and elementary children want to read.



Amy Sklansky, a Webster Groves resident, is the author of "The Duck Who Played the Kazoo," a children's book.

"I squeeze it in whenever I can," said Sklansky, a Webster Groves resident who just published her fifth children's book, "The Duck Who Played the Kazoo."

The story is about a duck that has to leave his lake and sets out, flying in the rain with his suitcase and shiny kazoo until he lands at a new lake, with new a flock of ducks to befriend.

"This duck is not so very different from a person in that he feels loneliness," Sklansky said. "He's left alone after a hurricane and has to start over. He goes on a quest to make new friends."

The illustrated story rhymes like Dr. Seuss, which makes it easy for readers to sing along as much as read along. It's unlikely, however, that the kazoo-playing duck will become a household name like Barney or any other kid-notable character because "I did not name my duck," Sklansky said.

Her writing ideas spring from her imagination, but the premise behind "The Duck Who Played the Kazoo" had an added appeal.

"I thought the idea of a duck playing a kazoo was just funny," the author said.

Sklansky grew up in Chattanooga, Tenn., and worked in the publishing industry in New York and Boston as an editor of children's books. She always wrote, but writing seemed secondary to the job, at least for a few years.

After awhile, “I started getting a lot of my own ideas,” Sklansky said. “I decided it would be more fun to be on the other side of the editing desk.”

She sold her first manuscript in 1998. Since then she has published two books of poetry for children, “From the Doghouse: Poems to Chew On” and “Skeleton Bones and Goblin Groans: Poems for Halloween.” She also has published the educational “Where Do Chicks Come From?” and “My Daddy and Me,” a fictionalized story about the love between father and child.

Sklansky likes the children’s market because it renews itself every few years, but, she said, “The best part of writing for children is that if a child likes a book, she’ll read it many, many times and may even remember it into adulthood or parenthood.”

Her theory as a writer is that books should entertain and engage readers, and children’s books don’t always have to teach a lesson.

Sklansky said an author doesn’t work on just one book at a time. Part of her author duties include presentations, book signings, writers workshops and readings. While that is going on, Sklansky is working on her next book, doing publicity and setting up other appearances.

She enjoys visiting with her readers.

“It’s great to see how a real kid thinks about your book,” Sklansky said. “They ask things like ‘How old are you?’ ‘How much do you weigh?’ ‘How much money do you make?’”

When she makes appearances for “The Duck Who Played the Kazoo,” Sklansky will be carrying bagsful of kazoos to hand out to children.

She has made several appearances at the Webster Groves Public Library, where Michelle Haffer is the children’s librarian. Haffer said Sklansky turns her visits into an event, such as when she arrived in costume when she came to read her Halloween-themed book.

Haffer said Sklansky includes things in her stories that children love: most notably humor, animals and rhythm or music.

“Her books are beautifully illustrated and her stories are always engaging,” Haffer said. “They’re not really wordy, but the short sentences say a lot.

“Parents are thrilled when they find out the books were written by someone right here in Webster.”

Sklansky moved to Webster Groves in 2003. Her husband, Joe, whom she met when they were students at the University of Virginia, is an attorney for Washington University. They have two children, Phoebe, 7, a second-grader at Clark Elementary School who has memorized many of her mother’s poems; and Owen, 4, who attends preschool classes at Washington University.

At home, Sklansky said, “The books are just another part of our family. They’re around, and they get talked about a lot.” Webster Groves resident Lucy Schramm met Sklansky through their children about three years ago. Schramm found out her new friend was an author when she spotted one of the books on store shelves.

“I thought it was really cool, and my kids are thoroughly convinced that she’s famous,” Schramm said.

Schramm has a heightened sense of literature because she, too, worked in the publishing world and even lived in New York at the same time Sklansky lived there.

“The books are great; (Sklansky’s) sense of humor is reflected in her writing,” Schramm said. “I think of her when I’m reading them.”

Schramm teaches music at Emmanuel Nursery School in Webster Groves, where she just might include a kazoo lesson based on Sklansky’s new book.

Sklansky will make an appearance at 4 p.m. Sunday, April 13, at Left Bank Books in St. Louis’ Central West End. On Wednesday, April 9, she will do a “virtual” author visit, or video teleconference, with Cooperating School Districts.

As a mother and book author, Sklansky has to stop and think about what she does in her spare time. After a moment, she said she reads. After another pause, she said she also knits, and then she added, “It doesn’t seem like there is a lot of spare time.”