

Racing to Read...



A regular visitor to schools to encourage children to enjoy reading, Jeremy Strong was visiting Birmingham to do just that in six local schools. Arriving early on Monday evening – in good time to enjoy three whole days in schools – he checked into a quiet, family hotel, had a brief rest then joined the Book Group committee in a nearby ‘Italian’ for a welcome supper. Happy memories of his last visit, ten years ago, were revived, after which members who were not actually hosting a visit personally were allowed to monopolise our guest for the rest of the convivial evening.

Day One of his tour was across the city to a new school member; although around fifteen miles the worst of the morning rush was over and we chatted about the many changes he had noted over the last decade or so. Maybe less relaxed teachers? More ‘clock-watching’? Much more security awareness? Perhaps noisier audiences – but as a retired Head teacher crowd control was not a problem for him. I asked about courtesy – was it customary for the Heads to welcome him personally? “Rarely,” he replied. “They seldom put in an appearance, and often other staff – those not directly involved in the visit – don’t acknowledge my presence as a visitor to the school.”

Arriving at the school gate we were met by the look-outs, two children who greeted Jeremy like a long lost friend. A selection of his latest books, including specially nominated favourites, had been delivered a week previously so they were well acquainted with them. They were soon jabbering away about the ones they liked best. We eventually caught up with the librarian who led us into the hall where Jeremy set up his power point presentation. Children filed in and sat down full of expectation. On the screen was his first picture so they had something to chat about and the atmosphere was happy and buzzy.

After a brief introduction by the organising librarian, Jeremy involved his audience immediately by asking if they could guess the different names his letters from readers were often addressed to. Lots of answers were forthcoming, creating peals of laughter, but no-one worked out that many children wrote to him *Dear Jeremy!* Cue for such a letter on the power point.

His next question was more serious. “Have any of you written a story, other than the ones that you have been asked to compose in school?” A number of hands shot up as he went on “... because I wrote my first story when I was five.” The audience were then treated to a visual of that story and the author pointed out fifteen spelling mistakes – he was writing in text speech long before mobile phones were invented! He invited children to come out and see if they could translate all that he had written. When they failed, two teachers had a go to make sense of it. Needless to say, no-one was a hundred per cent successful.

He moved on to talk about where ideas came from. All the children were keen to share their own but listened attentively to those invited to contribute – from television, an incident on the bus or at the shop – and Jeremy gave some of his, explaining that really they all came from his head, from his brain, from his memory and they were *all* triggered by the many different experiences that had

sown the seed there.

The next visual was his workplace, a shed in the garden. “It’s a dangerous place, sometimes the lawnmower falls on me!” As the camera roved inside he pointed out the fridge,

“... in case I get hungry, I keep milk, chocolate and fruit there.” He asked the children why they thought his typing chair had wheels but nobody came up with the full answer, “... so I can move to the fridge without getting up!” On his desk there was a laptop, a pen and a pencil. Keeping watch is a photograph of his mother when she was twenty-five – she’s now ninety-two. She’s sitting astride a Harley Davidson on a farm in Africa. “She always carried a gun,” he added, “to shoot snakes.” Also on the desk, perched on the printer’s paper supply as if on guard, is Jeremy’s cat, Jeeves.

Before starting a new story he plans and plots it out in his head. No paragraph headings, no beginnings or middles or endings – just a collection of phrases. “I like peace and quiet and I try not to look out of the window too often in case I get distracted by what’s happening outside,” he told his audience. Everyone laughed when he described how Jeeves sometimes helps out by placing her paw on the keys ppp...s & qqq...s!

The children had been totally involved during the presentation and when invited to ask their own questions almost everyone’s hands shot into the air. Taking care to choose boys and girls of different ages, sitting in different parts of the hall, he answered promptly and, very often, humorously. How old are you? Are you very rich? Do you think that funny stories are better than sad stories? What do you write when you’re not feeling funny? If you weren’t a writer what would you be doing?

Finally, after a delightful thank-you, children who had not previously bought a book were invited to browse around the display and those already clutching their copies joined an orderly queue to have it signed. Everyone was rewarded with a smile and a message with his signature. As we left the children were drifting into lunch, casting wistful glances as Jeremy packed up his laptop and books and prepared to depart for school number 2. Reading – stimulating, entertaining and such fun... that’s the message, loud and clear from Jeremy Strong.

David Blanch

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