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BOOKS

Marc Brown, creator of Arthur, said his stories and characters are drawn from real life



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CANTON – All the characters and stories from the popular children's series Arthur come from real life.

"I think the best things happen in real life," author and illustrator Marc Brown, creator of the Arthur books, said Tuesday night.

Hundreds of families attended the free event at the Canton Palace Theatre, sponsored by the Stark Library.

Brown has been writing about Arthur, D.W. and their friends since the late 1970s. The aardvark has starred in at least 30 books.

Brown said several students in his third-grade class in Erie, Pennsylvania, in 1955, a seventh-grade teacher and his sisters inspired characters in his books.

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For example, Arthur's sister D.W. is a mixture of all his sisters. His eldest sister became Francine Frensky, the monkey.

And Arthur is Brown.

Brown also said his best friend Terry Johnson, a former Canton resident, from third grade was the inspiration for Arthur's friend Buster.

Johnson now lives in Australia.

Real life influences Arthur stories

Brown graduated from the Cleveland Art Institute in 1969. Before Arthur, Brown was a failed truck driver and television art director.

His creation, Arthur, came out of a bedtime story he told his son Tolon involving an aardvark who didn't like his long nose.

He turned this tale into "Arthur's Nose" — the first book in his popular Arthur Adventure series — in 1976. But he said he never expected the success.

The nose has shrunk over the years.

Brown said all his ideas come from real-life situations, many involving his own family. "Arthur Goes to Camp" was inspired by his son's camp fears. "D.W. Rides Again" came from his daughter's attempts to ride a bike.

"The best stuff happens in real life," Brown reiterated after the event.

Feeling like a star

When Brown took the stage Tuesday, he was not alone.

Damon Babel, 8, a third-grade student at AIM Academy in Canton, was a guest reader who helped him with the humorous and enlightening presentation.

"I felt like a star," Damon said after the event.

During the presentation, Brown also took questions from children in the audience.

Asked why all of his characters are animals he said: "Any skin color can identify with any character. Like when I go to a school in Harlem everyone thinks Arthur is Black. I love that."

The PBS Show is 'not canceled.'

Kids also asked about the animated series on PBS, which first aired in 1996. Brown said the show has not been canceled despite reports.

He said the popular cartoon series is entering its 25th season. Reports have said the 25th season would be its last season.

Brown said he expects more seasons in the future.

He also said a featured film is in the works and a new collaboration with friend and Goosebumps author R.L. Stine has started.

He also was friends with the late Fred Rogers. Brown called Rogers the "real deal" and said Rogers' TV persona was his real life persona, too.

"Fred Rogers told me every child needs one person in their life to believe in them to make it," Brown said, noting those words have stuck with him all these years.

So his books are written to help children with truths through real-life situations.

"We all want the truth from the media but we don't always get it," Brown told the audience.

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Q&A with Marc Brown

Following the presentation, Brown signed books and took pictures with audience members. He spoke with a reporter afterward:

Who is your favorite Arthur character and why?

D.W. will be my favorite character because she's so much fun to write words for. She always has the best lines. And I like the relationship of her and Arthur. It's a lot like me and my sisters growing up. For me, everything comes from real life.

Arthur was back in third grade, in my third-grade class. All these characters turned into the Arthur stories were there. I didn't realize at the time.

Tell me about Terry Johnson.

He lived here in Canton. He lived here from junior high through high school. Then he went off to college and now he lives in Sydney, Australia. He was a teacher and an artist. I lost touch with him. I'd love to hear from him again.

Is it easier to draw or write?

Definitely draw. The writing is hard work.

How often do you collaborate with Columbus native R.L. Stine on projects?

We're good friends so we are emailing back and forth all the time. This will be the third book I work on with him. We may have a TV series together from 'Little Shop of Monsters,' a book we did together. We're talking to Netflix. It's looking promising.