



THIS STORY HAS BEEN FORMATTED FOR EASY PRINTING

## Young novelists rush to meet deadline

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By Stephanie V. Siek, Globe Staff | November 19, 2006

WALTHAM -- It doesn't have to be perfect. It just has to be 50,000 words long, and finished before midnight on Nov. 30.

That's the challenge issued by National Novel Writing Month, known as NaNoWriMo to tens of thousands of professional and amateur writers around the world. And every Tuesday this month, some of its younger adherents have gathered for a write-in at More Than Words Bookstore on Moody Street in Waltham.

This year, 1,325 people have taken on the challenge in the Boston area, according to Travis L. Kelley, NaNoWriMo municipal liaison. Most are adults trying to meet the 50,000-word goal.

Schoolchildren as young as kindergartners participate through an offshoot, the Young Writers Program. They work alone or as part of a class with word goals adjusted to their age and ability. The program even offers teachers curriculum tips and lesson plans. Carrie Birgbauer, a program staffer, said that this year's participants include students in Shrewsbury, Bolton, Framingham, and Watertown.

Last Tuesday's write-in at More Than Words was entirely patronized by third- through fifth-graders from Boston Jewish Community Day School in Watertown. Led by teacher Susan Midlarsky, about 20 scribbled away in notebooks and pecked at laptops, trying to reach their varying goals by the end of the month. Creativity was boosted by occasional "word wars," in which the kids competed to see how much they could write in a specified time.

"The goal is for them to get past their inner critic, to enjoy writing," said Midlarsky.

Jake Bernstein, 10, whose story focuses on five World War II soldiers stranded on an island, had exactly 4,600 words so far. His friend Amiya Seligman, also 10, was about halfway through her 8,000-word story about a land of magical creatures, a baby who's reincarnated every 5,000 years, and an epic battle between good and evil. Both were amazed by how many words they'd pounded out.

"In first grade, we had to write four pages, and we thought that was a lot," said Amiya.

Lev Brown, a third-grader who turns 9 on Friday, was deep into his first novel, about a mysterious map and the two friends who try to figure it out. He woke up early to begin his work, at 6:30 a.m. on Nov. 1. A quick count Tuesday revealed that he had 4,271 words toward his 7,000-word goal.

"I have a little trick: instead of saying 'isn't,' I write 'is not,,'; instead of 'don't,' I write 'do not,' " said Lev.

He's not sure if the experience will lead to a career as an author, though. "I change my mind, like, every month," Lev says of his long-term career goals. "But this month it's to be a writer for NaNoWriMo."

Such enthusiasm among younger writers has taken NaNoWriMo founder Chris Baty somewhat by surprise.

Baty said that the Young Writers Program's popularity has been rising even faster than that of the adult version. Last year, about 4,000 kids from kindergarten to 12th grade took part. This year, the program's website has 11,000 registered participants, but Baty says that could grow to 12,000 or 13,000 by the registration deadline of Nov. 25. The adult version has tallied about 78,000 participants this year.

"It's been somewhat unexpected for me," he said. "I didn't know how this idea of a month-long fiction frenzy would work with kids. But it's worked amazingly."

Baty told of a friend who taught ninth-grade English. The students were "high-energy, rambunctious. . . some of them had difficulty staying in their seats," Baty said. "He did the NaNoWriMo, and for a month, you could hear a pin drop in there."

The write-in at More Than Words was a little louder than that, especially when some of the budding novelists shared their favorite passages. But there was no doubting their dedication.

Shira Lehmann's dad is a high school principal, and so is the father of her main character. The 10-year-old thinks she's about a quarter of the way to her 4,000-word goal. The hardest part of writing, she said, is the problem of time management. "When you have a lot of homework and you get stressed out, and you have a lot to do, and you don't have much time to write," Shira said. ■

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