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Rainy day demands a script revise

What's a kid to do on a rainy afternoon in L.A.? Write a comedy script, of course.

By Mary McNamara, LA Times Staff Writer

It's hard to see the words "Junior Comedy Writing Workshop" and keep a straight face. It's bad enough we've lured the preteen set into coffeehouse culture with caramel-mocha Frappuccino and chocolate-dipped madeleines (does anyone else find the sight of a 10-year-old sucking on a Starbucks cup almost as alarming as if it were a bottle of beer?).

Having done this, do we really want to see table after table occupied by preteens hunched over laptops with their writing partners trying to think of words with "kuh" sounds while banging out a spec script for "Scrubs"?

No, we do not. We want them out on the streets, shoving each other, snickering helplessly as we walk by and otherwise acting out in an age-appropriate manner. Yet, here was this workshop, offered on a recent late Saturday afternoon by Storyopolis, a fairly responsible, if not traditional, kids' bookstore on Robertson Boulevard. Since it opened seven years ago, Storyopolis has tended toward the extreme in children's bookstore behavior -- half of it is an art gallery where one could meet genre notables like William Joyce or buy a framed print of Dick and Jane on the run for \$400.

There's an event within its exposed-pipe, faux-loft walls almost every weekend. (On the store's answering machine menu is a direction for "all press-related calls," which is a bit odd for a bookstore, even in L.A.) Two months ago, there was a mystery writers' workshop; last month, a classic radio hour performance with actor and "Gosford Park" producer Bob Balaban.

Storyopolis is situated almost directly across from the Ivy, making it perfect for such things. Conceivably, one could polish up a draft about one's hilariously traditional Portuguese family at the workshop, make a dinner-hour foray across the street and accidentally drop the script at the feet of the nearest director-producer-spouse of Tom Hanks on the way to the bathroom.

Stranger things have happened, even to people who still need parental permission to cross the street.

The workshop is part of a series of "super-sized" events; that is, they are geared for a more mature audience, one that has outgrown the typical hand-puppet reading of "Where the Wild Things Are" and "Eyeore Finds His Tail." Six and up, the fliers advise, and the special guest star is Hillary B. Homzie, a genuinely published author (the "Alien Clones From Outer Space" series), screenwriter and sketch comedian. It would not be surprising to find some folks taking the "and up" quite seriously, to see some waifish twenty- and thirtysomethings slouching through the door, trying to hide their tattoos behind the 200 pages they would just like a few notes on. A workshop is a workshop, after all.

And a few non-tattooed versions do show up, but they are mostly friends of Homzie, the men trying to look nonpredatory as they kill time surrounded by Madeline and Eloise. All the rest

are kids, from age 4 to maybe 12, a dozen or so, sitting on a big carpet toward the back of the store, flipping through the script-like material Homzie has prepared. Several of the kids belong to staff of the store but most of them are here not because their parents think they may be the next Nora Ephron but because it sounded like fun. And because it's raining outside.

Much has been written about the bizarre effect the rain has on L.A. drivers, but it is nothing compared to what happens to L.A. parents. No other group has such a strong sense of weather entitlement as L.A. parents, and when that is threatened, when the great outdoors is no longer an extension of our living rooms, we panic. The children, of course, would be quite happy to just play in the rain and the puddles and the mud, but we know, never mind what all those dang studies say, we know that wet hair causes pneumonia and pleurisy and rickets.

So we keep them inside as long as our sanity holds and by 10 a.m., bundle them up and hurry them out to the car as if the light haze of rain was nuclear fallout and take them somewhere. Anywhere. Kidspace or the Science Center, the mall, the local cinema or McDonald's. There is, of course, no children's museum in Los Angeles, and with plans for the new one on hold, it seems there never will be, which is why Chuck E. Cheese will never go out of business in this town. Because parents need to take their kids somewhere, the bowling alley, the nearest saloon, anywhere. Because they can't go outside because it's raining.

By 4 o'clock at Storyopolis, the rain has just about stopped, and it is very clear Homzie knows exactly what she is doing. She has degrees in children's literature and education as well as a lot of hours logged behind a microphone, and she has taught comedy to kids for years now. She finds that many kids have a gift for comedy, once they learn the rules, and the only hard part is teaching them how to revise. Little kids, she has found, can't grasp the concept of revision, and big kids, teenagers, that is, often get too bored or frustrated. "Middle school kids are the most receptive," she says. "I think because so much of their own body is changing. They are in a sort of physical revision, so it's easier for them to get it."

She sets about teaching some of the simple rules of comedy, especially the tried-and-true not-what-we-expect story line. Using Cinderella and Red Riding Hood as examples, she encourages the kids to think of the narrative possibilities if every assumption we had about these tales was wrong, if Cinderella were anything but pretty and nice, if the big bad wolf were something else entirely.

The kids love it and soon are putting their big ideas on paper, with the infectious glee of people who have never heard the words "derivative" or "similar project over at Fox." One young man is so excited by his creation, "Cinderfella," that his mother doesn't have the heart to mention that it's been done. Hey, if they can remake "Nutty Professor," they can remake "Cinderfella."

There are many versions of Cinderella in space, so it's safe to say the American blockbuster has nothing to fear from future screenwriting generations (although if anyone else has ever seen an amateur production of "Hamlet" done in space, they will know that some classics, particularly costume dramas, are better left earthbound). There is also a complicated, almost deconstructionist version titled "Cinderella in the Finger Nail" written by a girl with a strong and lovely chin and unwavering gaze who might have been 10 and who will undoubtedly win a Nobel Prize in something someday.

After about 15 minutes, everyone gets to share their stories with the group, and Homzie is very

attentive and appreciative and encouraging and nothing at all like any studio executive or newspaper editor who has ever lived. For one thing, she lets the kids read their stories all the way through, at their own pace, without interrupting them. She even lets a couple make multiple pitches (one young man makes three separate appearances, each with a new story to tell, but then he is 4, and the store owner's son, and connections do matter, no matter what the situation).

For almost two hours the kids are in bliss, the parents are in bliss and if they do not emerge quite prepared for a career in writing, Homzie can always do a follow-up. Call it a Junior "You Know, I Haven't Read It but I Think It Needs Work" Survival Workshop. The kids may not appreciate it, but the parents will. Especially on a day when the rain has revised all our fabulous plans.

The complete article can be viewed at:

<http://www.calendarlive.com/cl-et-mcnamara19nov19,0,1773676.story>
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