

Mercer Mayer draws kids into reading

By KATHY PARRISH

As a kid hunting frogs in Arkansas swamps, Mercer Mayer loved books — but not reading.

"I was tricked into learning how to read," admits Mayer, who preferred comic books and other "junk stuff" to more lofty literature.

"I learned to read to find out what the illustrations were about."

Now 35 and one of the nation's top author-illustrators of children's books, Mayer is playing the same trick on another generation of young readers.

In a short 10-year career, he has created more than 60 books. While varying widely in subject matter, almost all have one thing in common — more pic-

tures than words.

"I have a hard time with the words," Mayer told an audience while in the area last week to speak to the Birmingham Bloomfield Children's Book and Author Society and Detroit Children's Book Fair.

"But I love telling stories in pictures."

Mayer is best-known for whimsical creatures like his famous "Little Monster" whose Golden Book Adventures are much like a young child's.

He's also creator of the elusive Zipper-a-Zoo who leads Professor Wormdog on a merry chase into the bottomless pit.

BUT SEVERAL of his books — like the wordless "A Boy, a Dog and a

Frog" series, "There's a Nightmare in my Closet" which tackles fear of the dark, and his haunting retelling of "Beauty and the Beast" — are awardwinners which have made a real impact in the tight children's book field.

"Little Monster is not literature," said the pipe-smoking author, relaxing before his talk to a sold-out luncheon in the Birmingham Masonic Temple.

"Beauty and the Beast" is something I'd been trying to do for a long time. It took me 10 years to get to the point where I could do that," he explained.

"But I like all the books for what they are. They're all different; it's like having children." Mayer is the father of a seven-year-old and another youngster due in March.

The lanky, curly-haired author, dressed casually in slacks, a crew-neck sweater and sporting a tie "for fun" because he never wears one, let his Detroit area audiences in on how he puts together a book.

To their delight, he also showed families visiting the Detroit Children's Book Fair how his monsters are created.

"I just start writing anything that comes into my head," said Mayer. A poor speller who had trouble with punctuation, he struggles more with the words than the pictures.

"I usually get a hundred pages that go nowhere."

STORIES COME easier than sentences.

"I think the stories are just there. They're already told. They come running through and you catch them," insists Mayer, who has more stories than time to draw.

"It's like ticker tape. You just write it all down."

His monsters, who aren't drawn until the stories are complete, have similar origins.

"I don't really believe I make them up," smiles Mayer, looking implish. He recalls laughing hysterically until he fell off a restaurant chair at 12 when he imagined a waiter wearing a silly head.

"They exist somewhere, come flying through and you have to catch them as they fly by."

Much of Mayer's work is based on his childhood near Camden, Ark., where his father worked at a missile base.

He was a "big snake fancier" who played in the woods and swamps. But he loved to draw and savored illustrations in picture books.

While showing how his monsters evolve, he gave the audience a glimpse into his childhood.

"EVERYONE KNOWS monsters have straight hair and no monsters have curly hair," he said, fluffing the top of his hair with his fingers.

"My monsters all have straight hair; it's a bit of my revenge. Curly hair wasn't fashionable when I was a kid."

"Everyone had straight hair with lots of grease in it."

Until 13, Mayer was an 'A' student. (Continued on page 5B)



When the talk gets too serious, Mercer Mayer throws in a little bit of humor. (Staff photo by Dick Kelley)



Author-illustrator Mercer Mayer talks seriously about the more than 60 books he's written over the past 10 years.

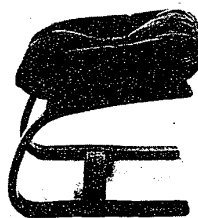


Alternative polling

Only hours before his older neighbors plunked down their votes for city council candidates and referendums, Robbie Johnson, 4, was absorbed in another sort of polling. Instead of choosing the best person suited for the job of running the city, Robbie's hard-thought-out decision dealt with the basics — vote for the favorite fruit. He and his class-

mates at Art-Start, the pre-school center at Mercy Center in Farmington Hills, penciled in their votes under the watchful eye of teacher Barb Burgess. Their choice? Apples, oranges or bananas. After an anxious round of voting, the results were announced: apples. And they lived 'apply ever after. (Staff photo by Randy Borst)

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