

Blindness doesn't hinder her vision as an author

By Sue Buck
STAFF WRITER

Jean Little says that she never has to go looking for new characters in her books.

"They come up and tap me on the shoulder and say, 'Write about me. Write about me,'" Little said following a speech at the Farmington Hills Community Library recently.

Little, who is blind, was accompanied by Ritz, a black Labrador retriever, her seeing eye dog.

Little is an internationally renowned children's author. In 1962, she received the Canadian Children's Book Award, a joint award of the American and Canadian branches of Little, Brown & Co for her first book, "Mine for Keeps." In 1985, she earned the Canadian Library Association's Children's Book Award for "Mama's Going to Buy You a Mockingbird."

A resident of Guelph, Ontario, Little received her undergraduate degree from Victoria College at the University of Toronto in 1956. She taught children with motor handicaps for several years before she started to write full time. She also was a summer camp director and leader of church youth groups.

"I could see the big E on the chart, but was still legally blind," Little said of her early days. "I could still cross streets (without assistance)."

Little held printed material close to her face — so close that she got ink on her nose.

"Fifteen years ago, my vision got much worse. Thirty years ago my left eye was removed," Little said.

She's already retired another lead dog, Zephyr, who also lost his vision, has arthritis and is now living on a farm.

Little's right eye can't see to read or anything, she said. "If I see the cars coming, it's too late," Little said.

Little uses a talking computer to write.

A novel takes her 18 months to two years to write. It took her seven years to write "Mama's Going to Buy You a Mockingbird."

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Jean Little

"I wrote it just as I was losing my vision and I couldn't quite figure out how to do it, (write it)," Little said.

There's money to help buy computers for the blind, Little said. "In Canada I had a lot of help from the Lions Club and the Canadian government. I'm on my fourth computer in eight years," she said.

Little will continue to travel. In August, she will teach a class in England.

"Children ask me what they can do to become writers," Little said. "I tell them there are three things: First, you have to have talent. You can't do anything about that. What you can do is read a lot and start writing and keep on writing. Don't expect to be published right away."

Little urges parents not to push to have their children's work published. "It's very seldom good enough to be published," she said.

Likewise, Little advises children: "The best place for your nose is inside a book."

Little's written two autobiographical novels. She's written 20 books in 30 years.

She likes the autobiographical books best because "they take my life and keep it for me. The books are "Little by Little" and "Stars Come Out Within," which deals with her loss of vision.

When the school was new, Little was asked to provide her philosophy of life in 15 words for a bronze plaque that now hangs in the school.

After much thought and effort, Little settled on a simple sentence: "A good book reaches deep inside and shakes your heart awake."



SHARON LAMPERT/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

A welcomed sight: The Farmington Community Library invited children's author Jean Little to talk about her experiences as a blind writer. The Hills Branch Library on 12 Mile Road is the home to materials that are reader-friendly to the blind.

Library offers services to the visually impaired

By Sue Buck
STAFF WRITER

Joy Schmidt, owner of Joy Schmidt and Associates in Southfield, was 35 years old when she learned she was partially blind with a retinal problem.

She knew her business was failing, but she wondered why.

After consulting several doctors, Schmidt learned she had "holes" in her eyes through which she could see. Schmidt had successfully adapted to her low vision without knowing it.

"I could see four or five characters at one time, which was enough to get me through tests in school," Schmidt said. "I was a whiz at easy questions."

She learned how to get through tests by keying into specific words. Doctors told her that her IQ is high. She wouldn't have been able to adapt otherwise.

"They forgot to tell me I'm blind, so I forgot to learn how (to be blind)," Schmidt said with a laugh.

Schmidt uses a voice synthesizer on her computer. She types into the computer and the computer then reads back what she's typed.

For reading material and other research needs, Schmidt regularly visits the Oakland County Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped, which is housed in the Farmington Community Library on 12 Mile Road in Farmington Hills.

"I use the library all of the time," Schmidt said. "I probably read seven to 10 books a month. I'm in and out of here constantly."

Free services

The Talking Book Library is just one available service. It's a free national program for visually and physically handicapped readers, available to residents in their home countries. A certificate of eligibility must be signed by a competent authority other than the applicant's immediate family.

Books in large print, Braille, cassette, record and flexible disc are provided.

The national book collection con-

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tains more than 55,000 titles and subscriptions to more than 75 magazines. About 2,600 new titles are added annually to a readership of more than 700,000 readers.

Cassette and record playback machines, and some accessories are also available free. Service and circulation of materials is provided to readers free by mail. No postage is required.

"We have fiction and non-fiction and carry everything from the earliest readers to the raunchiest best-sellers," said Liz Hahn, a library assistant.

Patrons may indicate if they don't want books sent with strong language, violence or explicit descriptions of sex.

The library has several machines which aid readers, including a number of magnifiers which have been donated. These magnifiers are loaned out for a month at a time. They cost anywhere from \$60 to \$250 to purchase in a store.

A visual "tek" machine enlarges print and puts it up on a TV-type screen which can be used with different colored screens.

"This would let them do their checkbox and read their own mail, for example," Hahn said.

There's even a voice-synthesized word processor tutorial program which walks patrons through a word processing program. For someone who can't see and has never typed, there's a program which teaches patrons how to type, Hahn said.

"We do a lot of referrals here," said Karen White, another library assistant. "We keep an information file and a ready reference box and we work closely with other agencies like the Greater Detroit Society for the Blind and Recordings for the Blind, which is used by students."

New machines

The library service is designed so that everything can be handled by mail or by telephone. Patrons can call collect, White said.

The newest machine in the library is the Xerox/Kurweil Personal Reader, an optical scanner that reads typeset and typewritten material and turns it into synthetic speech. The machine reads single sheets and bound documents, like books.

The reader interfaces with other computer devices for storage, word processing or Braille conversion applications. It can also be used in conjunction with a cassette recorder and as a talking calculator.

The reader operates at several different intonations and voices — including a male, a female and a child's voice. These voices include names like Perfect Paul, Huge Harry, Dr. Dennis, Uppity Ursula, Beautiful Betty, Rough Rita, Kit the Kid.

Different voice tones and speeds work well with different individuals.

For information on any of the library's services, call 553-0300.

The National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped is a national network. From a beginning of 19 libraries, the network has expanded to 56 regional and 90 sub-regional libraries throughout the United States.

Last year, more than 2 million recorded and Braille books and magazines were circulated to a readership of 767,000. The International Union Catalog currently contains 152,457 titles (15 million copies).

Statistics show that the average reader borrows 37 recorded books and magazines a year.

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