



antonylishak
writer-in-residence

Read his online blog at:

literacytimeauthor.blogspot.com



So, I am your Writer-in-residence for the next year. That doesn't mean I'm going to be setting up a tent in your playground or making myself at home in your stock cupboard; it's more of a virtual role. I'll be living where authors are most comfortable – in words on a page. That's not to say that I wouldn't feel at home in your school, because I'm sure I would. Having spent the vast majority of the last 30 years in primary schools, first as a teacher and now as a visiting author, I have developed a fascination for such places. I was once introduced at a Headteachers' conference as a 'school junkie' – which is pretty close to the truth, as I genuinely start to get withdrawal symptoms during the summer holidays.

a fly on the staffroom wall

I visit almost 150 schools each year to lead writers' workshops with children, teachers and parents – and I love it. I am intrigued by what makes a school tick. From the moment I walk into a school my antennae start picking up the vibes... that initial welcome, the way work is displayed, the look of pride reflected in the eyes of the children you meet and, of course, whether there's a frantic search for the visitor's mug and

tea bags when you're offered a drink in the staffroom. For there is only so much you can learn about a school from statistics and league tables. Trust me, we should ditch Ofsted and start talking to the flies on the staffroom walls.

Liars and thieves

Authors are liars and thieves: we steal our ideas from the world around us and make things up about them in stories. And there is no richer vein of ideas than overheard staffroom conversation. Intermingled with opinions on *The X Factor* and *Strictly Come Dancing*, I have heard everything from musings on the existence of God to partners' night-time habits.

Staffrooms are decompression chambers – places where you can sound off about particular children, parents and, dare I say it, Heads. I particularly like it when a child knocks on the door, and I see their eyes widen at that stolen glimpse of their role models, caught with their guards down.

Precious moments

Schools often build their Book Weeks around my visits, so I find myself surrounded by Snow White, Pooh Bear and Alice in Wonderland. (I usually explain that I have come dressed as an author.) I once visited an infant school where

every child came dressed as a dalmatian and all the staff as Cruella de Vil. I still have nightmares about that staffroom!

But I often recall one particularly precious moment, which took place after a pre-school briefing in a large inner city Catholic school. Not unusually, proceedings were concluded with a prayer. The Headteacher movingly spoke about how she hoped the Lord would help the whole school gain from my visit, that His words of wisdom would rub off on us all, that He would help us all to see the good in the children and find the patience and understanding to give their enquiring minds the space to explore the world around them, and that we might find the strength to make the school a happy place where minds could enquire and souls could soar. I was touched. For a moment the staffroom had become a place for genuine reflection. Then the Head stood up, opened the door, eyed a child who was gently tapping a fish tank outside and, hardly pausing for breath, bellowed ferociously, "What do you think you're doing, child? Do you want to startle that poor creature to death? Get to class, now... and stop running in the corridor!" 'You're going to have to work harder than that, Lord!' I thought, as I sipped my visitor's tea from my visitor's mug.



Antony Lishak taught in primary schools for more than 15 years before becoming a full-time children's author. He lives in Hertfordshire with his wife and three children, Emily, Sam and Jessica. To find out more, visit his website at www.antonylishak.com.

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