

Storied Lives

Writers' Inspiration, Readers' Dedication Are on Display at Book Festival

By BOB THOMPSON
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There are hard ways and easy ways to get ideas for books, and both were on display Saturday at the National Book Festival on the Mall. The hard ones involved such things as surviving car bombings in Baghdad and hiding in a tiny bathroom for three months during the Rwandan genocide.

As for the easy ones . . . well, all Neil Gaiman had to do was carry his son's tricycle down some stairs.

Gaiman — tall, dark and handsomely attired in a black leather jacket despite the intense humidity of the day — has done just about every kind of writing: adult fiction, graphic novels, children's books. He'd come to talk about his latest, "The Graveyard Book," which he considers an all-ages novel. The idea for it arrived 23 years ago, he said, when he was living in England in "a very tall, thin house, which meant that every single room was on a different floor . . . and I had an 18-19-month-old son who had a little tricycle."

Down the stairs they would go, every day. They had no yard, so "I would walk him across the lane to a churchyard filled with big old gravestones," some going back 900 years. The boy looked so at home pedaling around there that Gaiman had an inspiration: "You could take the basic idea of Kipling's 'The Jungle Book,' of an orphan boy raised in the jungle and taught by the animals, and 'slide it over into a graveyard.'"

You know, orphan boy adopted by dead people and "taught all the things that dead people know."

Excited, he wrote a page and a half, then thought: "This is a better idea than I am a writer." So he put the book off until deciding, a few years ago, that "for good or for ill, I am probably now as good a writer as I am going to be. I may as well write that thing."

First-time author Laura Bush came by her idea easily, too — though she, like Gaiman, waited decades before turning inspiration into prose. She and her daughter Jenna were at

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the children's pavilion to talk about their joint effort.

"Read All About It" is one of those Hey, Kids, Reading Is Really Fun efforts aimed at reluctant readers. The teacher-librarian turned first lady said it was written with a particular first-grade boy in mind. Untrained in the ways of school, he would infiltrate her fourth-grade Texas classroom, "yell as loud as he could and scare the whole class."

This was Bush's final year hosting the book festival, which she persuaded the Library of Congress to launch in 2001. (It has numerous corporate sponsors, including The Washington Post.) Librarian of Congress James Billington is hopeful it will continue under a new administration. The library, Billington said last week, "will be looking to all possible ways" to perpetuate this "unique and popular" event.

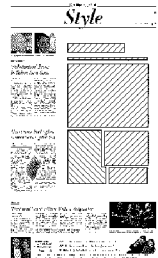
Popular it certainly was on Saturday, despite continually threatening weather. Dark clouds loomed over the festival's gleaming white pavilions. A night of rain had left the Mall soaked and muddy. But none of that stopped people from overflowing the available chairs for many readings, including the one by novelist Geraldine Brooks.

"Thank you all for loving books," Brooks said, "and I particularly want to thank the wet tush brigade here. Greater love hath no reader than to sit in the mud."

Dionne Warwick also drew a throng. "Will you sing for us today?" asked one fan — never mind the children's book Warwick just published — and she obliged with the opening bars of "I Say a Little Prayer." Memoirist-turned-novelist James McBride confessed to *his* overflow crowd that "if I had known so many people were going to read 'The Color of Water,' I would have written a better book."

Then there was Richard Price, who read from his novel "Lush Life" and talked about the trouble with autobiographical fiction. "I feel like cannibalizing your own life is good for one or two books and then it gets deadly dull," Price said. "The world is so large and there are so many voiceless people out there." Then he offered his take on a somewhat tired question from the audience:

"What's the process of writing? All right, well, the thing is, you get



up at the crack of noon. You have a good hearty breakfast, take a little nap to digest that good hearty breakfast. You get up, take a good cup of coffee, real strong. You wait for your hands to stop shaking. You pick out a pencil, you put it in that electric pencil sharpener and break the point. Then you realize it's probably not the pencil, it's the pencil sharpener, so you go down to Staples"

As the laughter died down, Price said, "I wish I was lying."

Where does he get his ideas? "I gotta mix it up with life," he said. "I'd so much rather go off and interact with something and see what it does to me" than sit in a chair all day writing about "a guy who, nananadada, and then he goes

and gets divorced, nanana, and then he finds out he's gay, and then he finds out he's not gay, he's lesbian.

"I mean, you know that story. So show me something new."

That, as it happens, is what CBS News correspondent Kimberly Dozier's bosses were saying to her about her coverage of Iraq. They wanted footage that wouldn't add to "image fatigue." Two years ago, she was nearly killed trying to provide it.

"From 2003 to 2006," Dozier told her rapt listeners, "I covered a war that became increasingly unpopular." No matter what she reported, someone didn't like it: Viewers called her both "a corpo-

rate pimp for George Bush's illegal war" and "a terrorist cheerleader." Then she walked into a car-bomb ambush. Five people were killed, including two of her colleagues, and Dozier's chances looked slim.

"I had shrapnel in my brain; I had both femurs shattered; my femoral artery was nicked and I was studded with burning shrapnel from my hips to my ankles," she said. "I coded on the operating table five times."

If she'd been hit like that in 2003, she'd be dead. But medical treatment of wounds like hers, she said — applied by the heroic doctors and other medical personnel her book, "Breathing the Fire," is intended to celebrate — has im-

proved so radically that she's now "training for the 10K portion of the U.S. Marine Corps marathon."

Immaculée Ilibagiza's books cost her at least as dearly.

Born in Rwanda, Ilibagiza was home on vacation from the national university in 1994, when the country's Hutu majority began the mass murder of her Tutsi minority. Her father ordered her to run three miles to a Hutu pastor he felt he could trust. For three months, she and seven other women sheltered in a tiny bathroom in the pastor's home. Killers with machetes repeatedly searched the house. One put a hand on the bathroom door-knob, then changed his mind and told the pastor he trusted him.

"I couldn't put into words the fear," Ilibagiza said.

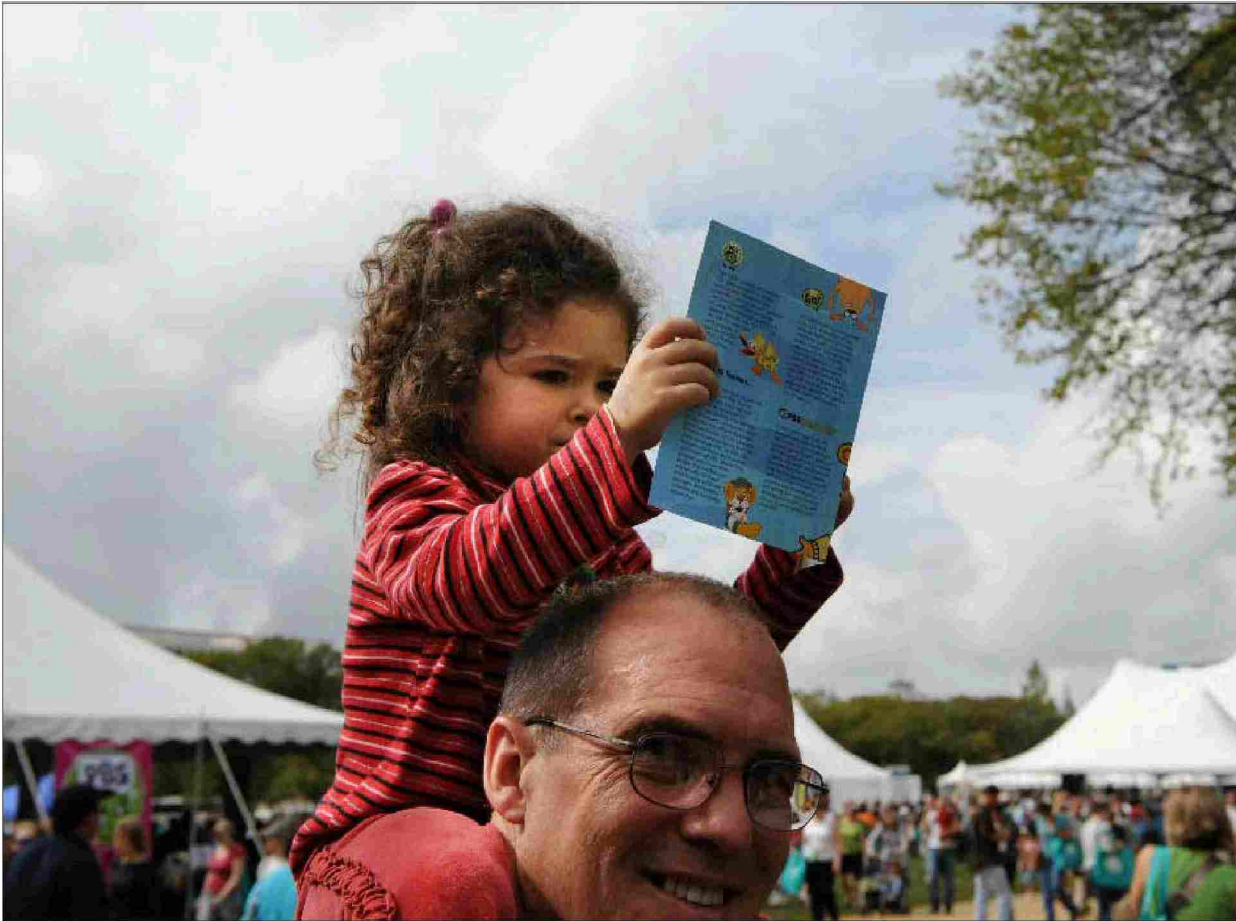
She emerged to discover that "everyone in my family" was dead. "I wish I was Rambo," she thought, so she could shoot all the killers. She did not want to forgive them, but God, she said, taught her how.

Ilibagiza's books are "Left to Tell: Discovering God Amidst the Rwandan Holocaust" and "Led By Faith: Rising from the Ashes of the Rwandan Genocide." When she finished her talk, her audience swiftly rose to applaud.

An hour or so before, the clouds had finally let loose. Over in the poetry pavilion, Stanley Plumly arrived a bit damp. Staffers from the National Endowment for the Humanities were filling in for another poet who couldn't make it, reciting favorite works by Shakespeare, Emily Dickinson, Gerard Manley Hopkins and others. Then it was Plumly's turn.

"Pretty rough out there," he said. But later he amended this judgment.

"It's been a long day, a very sweet day, a magical day," the poet said.



PHOTOS BY JAHN CHIKWENDU — THE WASHINGTON POST

Aliya Adams, 3, of Clifton, Md., checks out a book while dad Gary does the navigating Saturday at the National Book Festival.

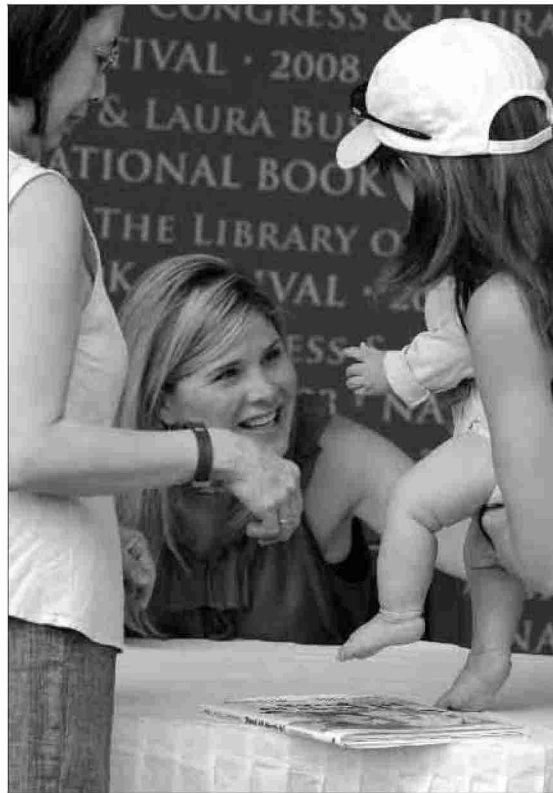


Author Neil Gaiman reads from "The Graveyard Book" at the Mall event.



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Above, Rhonda and Buzz Ball, visiting from Columbus, Ohio, take a break with a book during Saturday's festivities.



At right, Jenna Bush Hager greets a future reader while promoting "Read All About It," written with her mother.