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## Authors of Youth Fiction Hire Their (Young) Critics

By Chris Lavin



Stanley Middle School students Nick Hutson and Coline Derange discuss Nanette Heffernan's young adult manuscripts with her at La Boulange in Lafayette. Photo Chris Lavin

conversation ensued as to what stick figures actually look like. References were made to car decals that depicted different stick figures - families with children, for instance.

"Oh, I get it," Hutson said, making a mark on the manuscript. He looked up. "I love realistic fiction and character development." He was not sounding at all like an eighth-grader. That might be because he's a Boy Scout, loves music, and is an avid reader. But it's probably something genetic, too.

Heffernan's other critic that day at La Boulange in Lafayette was Coline Depagne, also a Stanley student, who has read Heffernan's completed manuscript, "A Speck of Dust," and marked it up for her. Depagne is an exchange student from France who has gone from barely speaking English a year ago to correcting English grammar. "I can't believe she's my editor now," Heffernan said.

Depagne, who was not sounding at all like a seventh-grader, said she picked up the language quickly by playing games and asking her classmates about things that were said that she didn't understand. "I just asked questions," she said. Simple as that. Surmising that someone could just ask questions and learn French in return. Simple as that.

Heffernan pays 25 cents per page for her future readers' revisions. That netted Hutson \$40 for six months work last year. He doesn't remember how he spent it, but it was piecemeal. "I was always scared that I wouldn't have anything left," he said, finally sounding like an eighth-grader.

Depagne said she loves editing. She likes reading the stories, coming up with ideas for improvement, and she likes writing herself. She just might become a writer or editor, she said.

"If the kids really dig in, I get more detail," Heffernan said. "That's really cool feedback."

Depagne said her favorite part of reading a pre-published work was the fact that she was reading a good book before anyone else in the world had read it. When asked if he thought the same thing, Hutson got a bewildered look. "I never thought about that before," he said. "That's pretty cool."

Writers of books are always two of two things: Often frustrated, and constantly revising. But a writer's group has come up with a new twist to make the process, if not easier, more streamlined: Some writers are hiring their future readers to be their editors.

"It just occurred to me: I would love to have junior editors," said Nanette Heffernan, who runs the Young Adult Writers Group that meets at the Lafayette Library. She corralled some middle-schoolers and put them to work. The young editors get paid to make revisions and provide feedback.

At a recent editing session, Nick Hutson, who attends Stanley Middle School in Lafayette, turned to Heffernan to talk about her new manuscript, "Sticks and Stones," which features stick people as the main characters. She only has 40 pages written so far, but wants to get off on the right track.

"It's a great story. The idea is so great," Hutson told her, holding a pen and pages in hand. "But I got confused about what people looked like." Heffernan told him that was great feedback, and a

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