

A reluctant reader

All it took for Bruce Hale to become a reader was the right book

By GARY DEMUTH
Salina Journal

It takes guts to stand in front of an audience of school librarians and tell them you hated books as a child. But that's the way Bruce Hale felt growing up. "I thought books were boring," he said.

So how did Hale turn out to be a bestselling children's book author with more than 25 published books to his credit? It's there in the title of his keynote speech: "Dream Big: How the Right Books (and Right Librarians) Turned a Reluctant Reader into an Author."

"When I started working on my dream of being an author, I knew it helped to have a home to support that," said Hale, who was raised just outside of Los Angeles. "And for me that was the public library."

Hale, who lives in Santa Barbara, Calif., was the guest speaker Thursday at the Kansas Association of School Librarians statewide conference at the Salina Bicentennial Center.

The conference, which continues today, brought together about 180 elementary, middle and high school librarians from throughout Kansas to attend seminars and workshops dealing with library-oriented subjects ranging from new technology to programming ideas.

"They're given professional development they won't get in their own schools," said Gwen Lehman, president of the Kansas Association of School Librarians. "It's a good opportunity for them to connect with other librarians from around the state, ask questions and see how things work in other districts."

The librarians are joined by members of the Kansas Association for Educational Communi-



TOM DORSEY / Salina Journal

Children's book author and actor Bruce Hale, of Santa Barbara, Calif., sits with attendees of the Kansas Association of School Librarians statewide annual conference Thursday afternoon at the Bicentennial Center in Salina. Hale was the keynote speaker at the conference.

cations and Technology and the Kansas State Department of Education for the joint conference.

'My best friend was the TV'

Hale writes and illustrates books for young readers that range from picture books to a book series featuring a lizard-like detective called Chet Gecko.

As a small child, Hale said his imagination initially was fed not by books but by television.

"My best friend was the TV," he said.

Hale said that after watching a pirate show, he wanted to be a pirate. That is, until he found he would have to set sail on the ocean and risk seasickness. Then, after watching a western with Clint Eastwood, he decided to be a cowboy.

"But my parents refused to buy me a horse," he said.

Then he saw Kirk Douglas

play a dashing gladiator in "Spartacus" and decided the gladiatorial ring was his destiny. When Hale's dad said he might have to fight wild tigers and lions, Hale reconsidered his career path once again.

'Tarzan of the Apes'

Then Hale discovered a book his dad was reading: "Tarzan of the Apes." The classic story of the English nobleman who was raised by apes and became king of the jungle instantly captured Hale's imagination.

"I've said that all it takes to make a reader is the right book at the right time," he said. "The book 'Tarzan' turned me into a reader. Then my dad told me the book was written by Edgar Rice Burroughs. I never knew a real man wrote that book, I thought it came out of a machine.

"After I found that Burroughs

had created 'Tarzan' from his imagination, I decided being an author would be a cool job."

Those great librarians

That led Hale to his nearby public library, which, he said, was an old 1920s building that inside smelled like old leather.

"Those great librarians guided me to other books that had a similar adventurous feel as 'Tarzan,'" he said.

From then on, Hale said, libraries and librarians always have had a significant place in his heart.

"Not only do I still use the library, I travel to a lot of libraries to speak," he said. "Authors and librarians are like best buds, because we support each other's work."

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