

Today on The Lerner Podcast we're talking with author John Coy, who lives in Minnesota. John is an award-winning author of picture books, nonfiction, and novels on topics from basketball, to immigration, to potatoes.

His most recent book with Lerner is *Their Great Gift: Courage, Sacrifice, and Hope in a New Land*, which features photos by Minneapolis-based photographer Wing Young Huie. John was kind enough to talk to us about author school visits while recovering from a ping pong ball indoor baseball eye injury, so that's what the reference is in the middle of the podcast. Here's John.

I let international schools know that there are certain months that are very good for me to come visit, those would include November, December, January, February, March, and April.

Sometimes May, too.

So. Yeah. So that works very well. I was very fortunate. I started doing international school visits a number of years ago, and 15 years now.

The first time I did it, I just absolutely loved it. I could not believe that I could combine my love of travel and somebody inviting me someplace new with getting to work with kids in a different country. And one of the things that's remarkable about these international schools is kids are from many, many different countries. So I mean, I've been in schools where they have students from, you know, over 50 different countries. And so you really see, you really see some interesting dynamics and some interesting mixes. So I try and do a couple of international school visits each year. And, yeah, very nice way to get a little break from the Minnesota weather and also go see some new places.

So where all have you been?

Oh, it's a nice, nice list. I've been to a number of schools in India, Nepal, Thailand, Myanmar, Nigeria, Tanzania, South Africa, Kenya, Ethiopia, Uganda, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Egypt. Yeah, that list goes on. And there's another one coming up. I'm going to Bangladesh next winter.

And one of the things that's fun is a lot of these, a lot of these American international schools, they have librarians and teachers from Minnesota. They love having Minnesota teachers, so I've been lucky enough to work with some of these, some of these librarians and then these librarians move. So one of the librarians I worked with in India, he's starting at a school in China. And I look forward to visiting him at the new school once he's established there.

Wow, you have quite a network. Anything still on your bucket list?

Yeah, there are some places. I was in China a long time ago. And it would have been unimaginable at that time to think about how much--because China has changed, and I have not been back. So I am excited. I am excited about that possibility. And then, you know, there's other places sometimes, you know, some place that I don't even--you know, I don't even realize how interesting it's going to be before I go, and then, you know, end up going and learning more about the history and about the culture of the place. You know, I was in Bulgaria last year, and I didn't know much at all about Bulgaria and just found it a fascinating place. And so you know, it's parts of the world that I might not even necessarily say, this is on my list of places I'd love to go. And then the invitation comes in. I mean, I feel that way about Bangladesh. I mean, Bangladesh, you know, I think is going to be absolutely fascinating after having spent time in India to see Bangladesh. And Bangladesh is one of the places in the world most impacted by climate change right now. So I'm eager to go there and see what's happening there.

Do you have any specific stories to share?

Oh, I you know, I think the one, you know, the one thing about, you know, about school visits, for anybody who does school visits is, I think you learn very early on about being flexible. I can remember being at a school where as I was reading a story, somebody threw up. The kids kind of made an area around that person, and it was clear that I was just supposed to continue reading the story. I thought, okay, you know, here's what we do.

And but you know, I think one of the things is so surprising to me about it is you know, for years, I've been driving around visiting schools and, you know, in the Midwest. And, you know, Minnesota is a big state, you know. We can go up to Roseau. Roseau is farther from my house than Chicago is. You can drive seven hours and still be in the state. And sometimes I'm just surprised how much going to you know, a school in Nigeria feels like going to a school in Minnesota. You know, I think this one of the biggest surprises for me is how similar it is. How similar walking into a school is, wherever I go.

What makes for a really excellent school visit? Probably not a kid throwing up.

No, that's not so good. I think that the librarian, and teachers are just key to it, particularly the librarian. I think, so often, the librarian establishes a tone, introduces books to kids. I find that the more kids know about books I've written, before I've come, the more interesting the visit is. It's not like we're trying to save something for them. But instead, they have questions, they want to learn more. And so I think the librarian sets the tone of, "This is an exciting opportunity."

And then when I go in, I always want to try and connect with the teachers to find out what kids are working on in their writing, what kids are struggling with. And then I want to emphasize in what I present, that I go through the same process with writing that kids do. I think some kids think that like, you know, certain adults, they write something, and it's just perfect the first time. And so I show rough drafts, and I show mistakes and cross outs, and just really give them a sense of how similar the process is for me, compared with what they do. And that, you know, it's something we're all in it together. We're all trying to become better writers, and nobody is perfect at this job.

Yeah, and that adults screw up too.

Yeah, and that that's one thing writers are good at. Writers are good at recognizing that the first draft isn't going to be that good. It's just something to get you started. And then we work on making it be better and better and better. So many kids now, they expect things so quickly, that working on the same thing over and over is . . . that's a new experience for some of them. They're not used to that. And so in that way, I think it's really valuable to go through that process and talk about, you know, how long we spend making a book. A lot of kids think it's much, much faster than it is.

Well, a lot of adults think that it's much, much faster.

That's true. Exactly.

So then, do you have any recommendations for teachers and librarians who are looking into scheduling author visits for the upcoming school year?

I think it's one of the most valuable things teachers and librarians can do. And I think one of the ways to look at it is how does an author visit, how does that complement the work that we are doing already? And I think that that's part of what makes for a very good author visit is to reinforce with students, the things that teachers are saying about the writing process, about the importance of reading. And one of the great things about an author visit is when I walk in, I don't have any expectation of who's going to do well, and who's going to not do well. I expect everybody to be engaged and I expect everybody to do well. And that

new start for kids can be incredibly important for particular individuals. There's some kids who just really, really connect in a different way, and then become different writers and readers than they had before. And I hear that from . . . I hear that from teachers over and over again. And it's one of the things I value most about doing school visits.

Do you have any tips for authors who are also looking into setting up school visits?

Yeah, take it really seriously. I--the first time I ever do to school visit was Long Prairie, Minnesota. And I was working with a class of seniors in high school, they were 12th graders. And I asked them if they had worked with an author before. And they all raise their hand, they all wanted to start talking about what they wrote. Some of them did not remember the name of the author, but they all remembered what their story was about. And they had done that when they were third graders, nine years before, and they were still excited about what they wrote. And at that moment, I realized, wow, this is really . . . this can be a really powerful experience.

So I always, always encourage authors who are thinking of doing school visits, to think what would have been valuable to hear, what would I have really enjoyed hearing at the age of the students you're going in to present, and to also recognize it's not for everybody. I mean, some authors really love school visits and do amazing jobs. Some other authors are much more introverted, and really don't like doing it. And I think that's fine, I don't think there's any reason to do it if it's not something you really love because we want it to be . . . we want it to be a really memorable experience for the students so that teachers and librarians will keep having authors and illustrators come in. Because for many of us, that's a really important part of allowing us to do the work we do.

So now we're going to change gears and talk about your basketball picture books. How did you come to write picture books about sports?

I, you know, as you can probably tell from a ping pong baseball story, when I was a kid, I spent a ton of time with balls playing games. You know, when you're writing, it helps so much to write about something you know a lot about. And that's something that, you know, I've spent, you know, hundreds and hundreds of hours doing. I remember, I remember, I was eight years old the first time, you know, I played basketball in a gym. And I remember somebody passed me the ball, and I jumped into the air and turned and shot it. The ball banged off the rim. It did not go in, but what I remember was that feeling of being in the air, of being off the ground, and just thinking, "This is amazing." And I've loved that game since.

And there were stories when I was a boy, one of the stories that we were familiar with was the story of the invention of basketball. But most kids now, they don't know that story. They haven't heard that story from their parents. And so that was the impetus to write, you know, *Hoop Genius* and the story of James Naismith and to do the research for that.

Game Changer came about through the research on *Hoop Genius*. I was at Basketball Hall of Fame, and came across the exhibit for John McLendon and realized I didn't know anything about John McLendon, and he's just an extraordinary guy, James Naismith's student. And I was, I was shocked that I hadn't heard more about John McLendon, and as I did research on his life and came across the secret game, I realized, many, many more people should know about John McLendon and what an extraordinary person he was.

So, again, I feel like it's this unbelievable job where I get to combine two of the things I love. I love basketball, and I love writing. And I get to put them together. And then people say, "You want to come to our school and talk about it?" and then I get to travel. So I consider myself very lucky.

Have you ever played basketball with a class?

Oh, yeah, as a matter of fact, with *Hoop Genius*, one of the great things about that game is we printed the original rules on the end paper, the original rules that James Naismith tacked to the bulletin board. And those rules are very different than how we play now. The biggest difference is no dribbling.

Yeah, particularly at the international schools, I've been able to work with gym teachers. And I get to go into the gym class. And we read the book in the gym class, which is a nice, nice place to read a book where we're not as inclined to read books. And then we play the game using the original rules. And it's really fun because one person can't dominate the ball. You have to pass it, and you have to cooperate. And at the end of the game, we talk about how the experience was, and oftentimes there are many, many kids who prefer the original rules than the rules we use now. So yeah, I've had a lot of fun. I get to be referee in those games. And that's fun too.

Finally, what's up next for you? What are you working on?

Well, I've got two books I'm really excited about. We've got it a picture book coming out for the 50th anniversary of Earth Day, called *If We Were Gone*. It's just beautiful art. We've got a new illustrator, first-time illustrator, Natalie Capannelli, who's done beautiful pictures for it. And the premise of the book is what will happen to the earth if the people weren't here? I started working on that a couple of years ago, and have just really, really enjoyed the process of working on that book with editor Carol Hinz.

Then, for the first time ever, I'm going to get to do a book, I'm going to get to work with an artist I've worked with previously. And that's the brilliant photographer Wing Young Huie. And we are working on a book called *Dads*, and I've wanted to do a book about dads for many, many years. And I'm just thrilled that Wing is the person I'm going to get to collaborate with on that. We hope to have that book for Father's Day 2020.

Rumor has it you met Wing through basketball. Is that true?

I did. A lot of things in my life have happened through basketball. Yeah, Wing and I, we met playing years and years ago on a court in St. Paul. And then later Wing and I got to know each other much better playing together every Monday night at a gym in Minneapolis. You know, he's a dear friend now. And I I've always admired his photography now that the idea of being able to work with him is, you know, that's just a real thrill. I'm really excited to be able to do another book with Wing.

Yeah, yeah, I will have to talk to you and Wing about *Dads* next spring.

Yeah, *Dads* and *If We Were Gone*.

Thanks, John.

Thanks, Libby. Thanks a lot. Bye bye.

Thank you for joining us here on The Lerner Podcast. Tune in again next time for more author interviews and the stories behind the books.