

# Writing with Ralles

## Children's author goes to classrooms to help her readers think like a writer

Thirty fourth-graders at Daffron Elementary zoom in on H.J. Ralles, a children's book author from Plano.

"How many of you have read my books?" Ralles asks. Thirty hands reach for the ceiling.

"It's great to be back here. This is my fifth visit to Daffron. The very first time I came, I only had one book out. Now I've got five!"

Her articulate accent and 13 years of teaching experience captivate the children. "I was born in England. I've got two sons. One is at The University of Texas at Dallas and one is at the University of Oklahoma," says Ralles.

"When one of my sons was in fifth grade, he had to do a book report for school. I took him to Barnes and Noble one Saturday and every book I pulled off the shelf he moaned: 'That's boring! I don't like that one, Mum! Put that one back. That one doesn't interest me,'" imitates Ralles.

"After an hour of his complaining, I took him home and said, 'What is it with you that you couldn't find one book you wanted to read?'"

"Well," he said. "I was looking for something that would grab my attention like my computer games or video games."

Inspired, Ralles raced to the computer to write a chapter of a book that would engage her son, Richard. In 2001, Ralles published *Keeper of the Kingdom*.

"This is a story of a boy called Matt who gets sucked into his computer game, finds himself in the future, and has to play his game from inside to get out," Ralles says.

She explains how each book in the *Keeper* series is a level of Matt's game where he explores an underwater world, encounters villains such as 8-foot venom-spitting lizards, or meets heroes

with super-human strength. Book 4, *Keeper of the Colony*, level 4 of Matt's computer game, will be out at the end of February.

"And I have another series, which was never going to be a series at all." Ralles holds up *Darok 9* and *Darok 10*. "This is the story of two different children, Will and Maddie, who are 13 years old and live on the moon 100 years from now. Humans live in Daroks, which are big domed cities on the moon."

One boy asks, "Are you going to write another *Darok* book?"

"I'm not sure," Ralles shrugs. "There aren't 11 *Daroks* on the moon. I may have to build one. I might even take the *Darok* series to another planet! Maybe Mars!"

The children delightfully whisper.

Then, Ralles rolls out another surprise. She sweeps a hand-crafted blue book above the children's faces. "I wrote this when I was 10 years old in school – the same as you! My mum saved it all of those years. She mailed it to me from England with a little sticky note: 'Hilary this was your first book, not *Keeper of the Kingdom*.' Isn't the writing neat? But

I'll let you in on a very big secret." ... Ralles hunches down to the children's level, "My spelling is terrible!"

The boys and girls giggle.

"In fact, I'm still a lousy speller. And I wish somebody would have told me years ago when I was in school like you that even if you're a lousy speller, if you love writing, you can still be an author."

"I'm here today to help you improve your writing. ... This is my Creativity Box®."

Ralles holds a plastic box of note cards.

"You see, this is a filing system of ideas. The first section is Title. How can you come up with good titles for your stories? Every newspaper and every magazine has many ideas waiting for you."

Profile photos/Mike Newman



Plano author H.J. Ralles published her first book in the *Keeper* series, *Keeper of the Kingdom*.

"Dialogue or speech is a great way to start a story. How are you going to find dialogue? You go to the comics!"

Ralles displays a poster board with a newspaper's headline pasted to it and reads, "Officers Recognized as Shining Stars.' What could you write about 'Shining Stars'?"

One girl shoots her hand in the air. "Movie stars?"

"Well done!" Ralles says. "What about if you hit your head, what might you see?"

"Stars!" The children say in unison.

"Let's suppose your teacher says, 'Your homework assignment is to write about winter.' Do you know how many times I've marked stories called 'The Snow,' or 'One Winter's Day,' or 'Snow Day'? Ah!" Ralles sighs. "Boring!"

"What about 'Stuck'?"

Ralles flashes a bold headline in front of the children. "You could be stuck in the snow, stuck on a mountain, stuck in a frozen lake!"

"Ooooh!" the children agree.

"The second section of my Creativity Box<sup>®</sup> is the Starting Line. You see, your teacher Mr. Yerger sits down with his cup of coffee and groans when he looks at the pile of stories he's got to mark because he knows what he's going to get: 'One day I went to ...' or 'Once upon a time there was a ...' or 'I'm going to tell you about the time that ...' Ha!"

"Horrible. Horrible," mumbles Mr. Yerger in the back of the classroom.

"The person who will get the A is the person who will make Mr. Yerger drop his cup of coffee and say, 'Whose is this?' Do you know I wrote the first line of *Keeper of the Kingdom* 40 times? Not four. Forty."

Ralles reveals the first line she wrote for *Keeper of the Kingdom*: "The blue ball of light flashed passed Matt's head."

"That wouldn't have gotten pub-

lished," said Ralles. "It's boring! ... But now let me read the first page of *Keeper of the Kingdom*:

*"Halt, intruder! In the name of Zaul, the Protectors command you to surrender!"*

*Matt ignored the warning and continued to run. A vibrant blue ball of light flashed past his head. He fell to the ground and covered his ears as the shimmering sphere of Xeleron struck the wall and exploded with an almighty boom. The stench of burning chemicals filled the air. Tiny fragments of plaster rained down as if he were in the middle of a sandstorm. Matt could taste the dust on his tongue and feel bits of debris tangled in his hair.*

*Two Cybergon Protectors were visible in the distance; the fine silver barrels of their Xelerays were aimed straight at him. A direct hit meant instant death.*

*Matt struggled to his feet and carried on, his life depended upon it. The walls of the corridor flashed by as he frantically searched for a way out.*

*"Halt, we command! You will not escape the Protectors. Surrender or be eliminated!"*

Ralles puts the book down.

"A blue ball of light flashed past Matt's head," she recalls. The children laugh.

"Dialogue or speech is a great way to start a story. How are you going to find dialogue? You go to the comics!"

"All rise!" Ralles reads a *Wizard of Id* comic. "We usually think of a courtroom, but you could write a ghost story, 'All riiiiise,' Ralles says in a shaky voice. You could write a school story. Instead of 'One day I was late for school and Mr. Yerger was already saying the pledge with everybody in the class' – Boring! 'All rise for the pledge!' Mr. Yerger scowled at me as I snuck in the back of the class



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*Ralles uses newspapers, magazines, advertisements, and other forms of printed material to help students at Plano's Daffron Elementary understand the impact of the written word.*



Profile photos/Mike Newman



*Ralles helps students clip a favorite headline and then discusses the impact of the words.*

late for the start of the day."

"Ooooh." The children giggle.

"The next section in my box is Characters. Everybody in this world is different. Freeze!"

The children freeze, stiff still.

"You may not move your hands. You may not move your arms or your bodies. Now, everyone move their heads. Some of you are kneeling. Some of you have your legs crossed with your hands folded in your lap. Some of you have your legs stretched out. And now you can move."

"Ahhhh," the children sigh.

"That is being a human," said Ralles. "You see, we can all be doing the same thing at the same time, but we don't do it

in the same way. You've got to put details in your story. You've got to make your reader picture your character.

"Let's move on. Character Names. In the newspaper there are thousands of names. If you don't like them, switch them around. Let's suppose Mr. Yerger says, 'Write me a story about a billionaire.' If you've got a lot of names, start from there. Calvin Walkins," said Ralles holding up a poster board. "Shana McKay – not bad," she continued. "What about Calvin McKay?" Ralles switches the names. "Sounds like a billionaire to me."

The children nod in agreement.

"The last section in my box is the Setting. This is where a story takes place.

I use pictures. This is the kingdom of Zaul 500 years in the future. It's actually a place in India!

"There are wonderful magazines with beautiful pictures. Maybe you'll find a deserted island with a palm tree." Ralles holds a picture of a beach. "This will be for my book *Keeper of the Isle*."

As the lesson comes to a close, the children divide into small groups and rummage through newspapers and magazines to make Creativity Boxes<sup>®</sup>.

Students aren't the only ones at Daffron Elementary who are encouraged to make Creativity Boxes<sup>®</sup>. Lead teacher for fourth grade Terri Stout shows off her own.

"Five years ago, teachers here started

making Creativity Boxes®," said Stout, who reads *Keeper of the Kingdom* to her students every year before Ralles visits.

"Her books are creative and very action-packed. My kids hate it when I say, 'OK, we're going to stop for the day.' They'll say, 'Nooooo,'" Stout laughs.

Ralles speaks at more than 100 schools a year. This year she's visited 114 schools. Her lessons are for fourth- through seventh-graders to prepare them for the TAKS test.

"We always see a marked improvement in kids' writing after she comes," Stout said. "She does a lot for Plano schools."

All of Ralles' books are on the Accelerated Reader program, a national point-based system schools use to encourage reading. And the Educational Media Association of New Jersey has chosen *Keeper of the Kingdom* for its fifth- and sixth-graders' Battle of the Books program.

Said Ralles, "I hope that my books will increase vocabulary and reading ability, as well as increase a child's desire to pick up a book and read. I set out to write stories that are in line with children's technological interests today and so promote reading."

Ralles was the first children's book author for Top Publications in Dallas. Her books reach ages 9 to 14 and promote values like respect, as adults and children work together to solve problems. Proceeds from the sale of her books benefit the PISD Education Foundation, which has received about \$12,000.

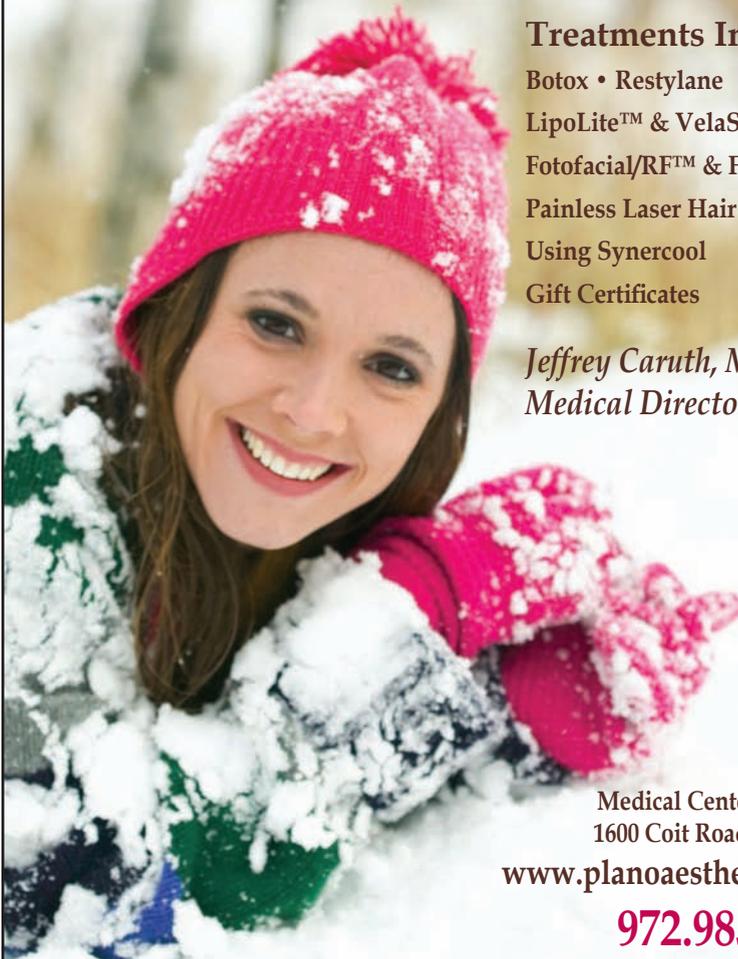
Ralles and her husband Malcolm have lived in Plano for eight years, and their sons Richard, 19, and Edward, 18, attended PISD schools.

Who inspires Ralles? "My fans who tell me they have read my books seven or eight times or that they can't wait for my next book to come out," she said. "When children write to me telling me how much they have enjoyed one of my novels ... I am eager to get on with the next book."

Visit HJRalles.com where Ralles is hosting a competition until the end of December for the name of a pirate in *Keeper of the Isle*.

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