

Star Tribune

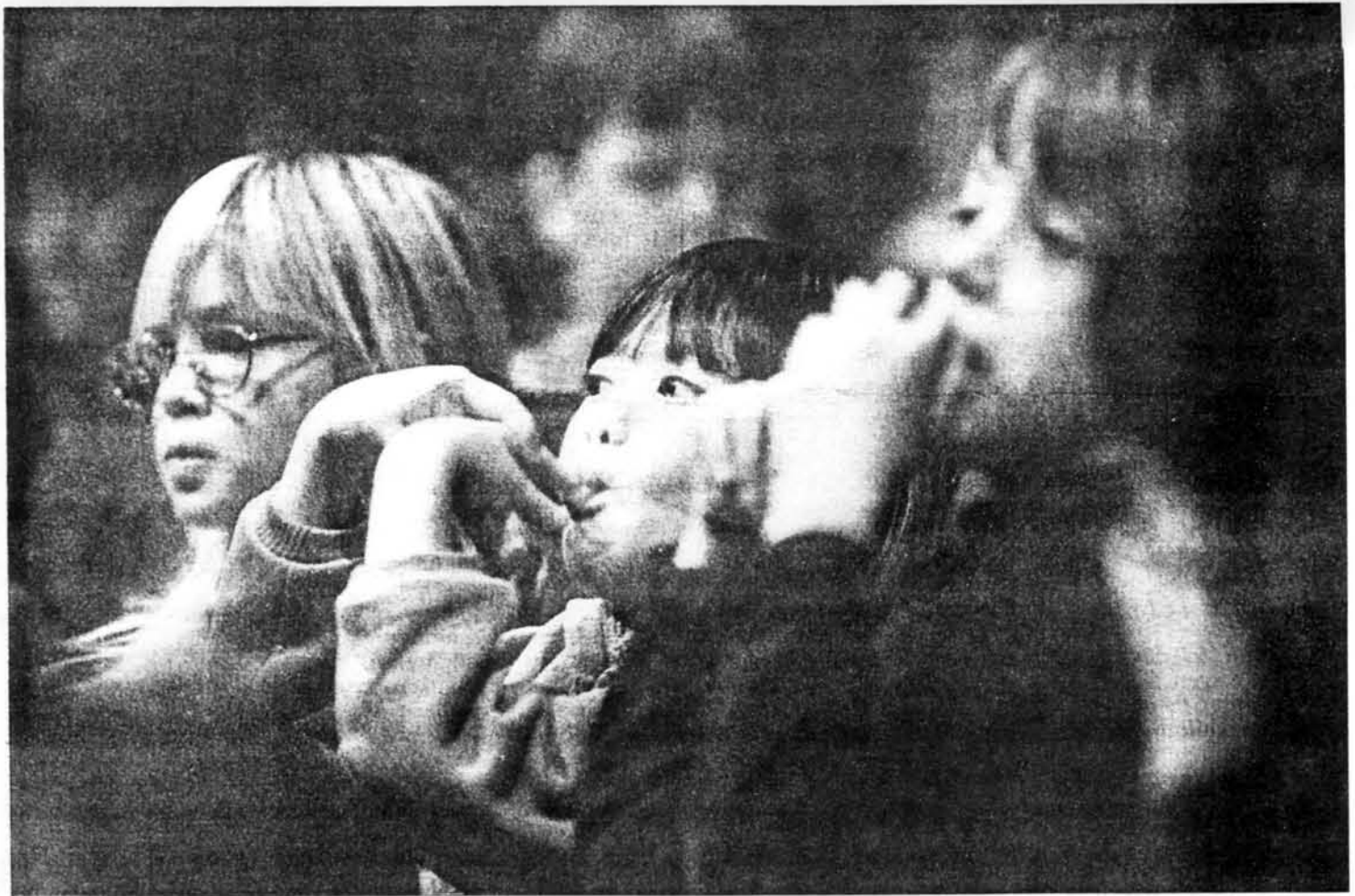
Minneapolis Edition

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One girl made a drawing to go with a poem about the Mississippi River.

Author John Coy, who spent two weeks working with students at Sheridan School in Minneapolis, thinks it's important to preserve children's natural spontaneity: "I wanted to get them writing the way they tell stories when they run in from recess."



Star Tribune Photos by Stormi Greener

Emily Lange, left, Mai Va Lee and Whitney Hazelmyer — all second-graders at Sheridan School in northeast Minneapolis — listen Tuesday as John Coy tells them how he writes. For two weeks, Coy worked as a writer in residence at the school.

Writer in residence teaches possibility

By Chuck Haga
Star Tribune Staff Writer

John Coy is a writer. It's easy for him to say that because his book for children, "Night Driving," was just published.

He stood, the published writer, in front of 200 children Tuesday at Sheridan School in northeast Minneapolis and asked, "How many of *you* are writers?"

Virtually every hand shot up. Coy, 38, is a teacher, too. He teaches possibility.

For two weeks, Coy had been writer in residence at Sheridan, an arts magnet school, talking about ideas, first drafts, editors and rewriting. Stretch your words, he told the children. Be more specific.

Twin Cities Journal

Close your eyes and tell me what you hear.

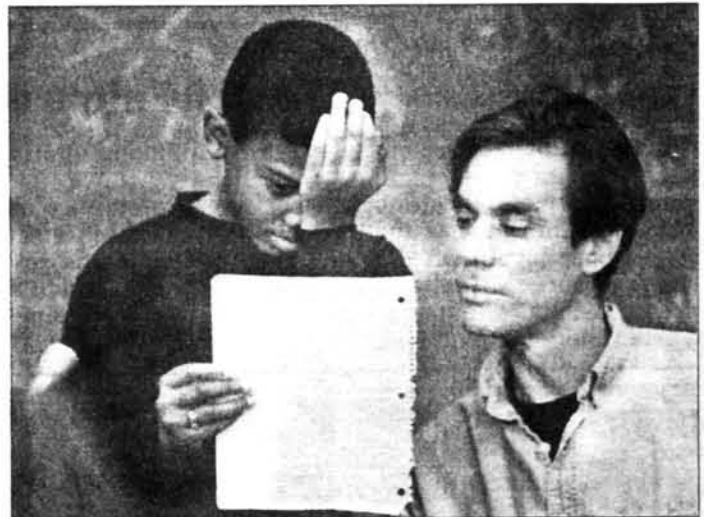
For a theme, he chose the nearby Mississippi River. He encouraged the children to consider the river, to walk along it and *feel* it — see it, smell it, hear it — and then to write about it.

And they did.

Turn to JOURNAL on B8

Also on B8:

— Listen to some of the children read their poems by calling the Star Tribune.



James Griffen, a third-grader at Sheridan School, reads his poem in front of his class as Coy lends moral support. The author, who helped students learn how to use words to get across their ideas, had them write about the Mississippi River.

Writer in residence emphasizes possibility

*I see a nice clean river
and a little blue bird drinking,
and he's coming back from the south.
He's taking big drinks.
I see the same bird in fall,
taking one last drink of the cold.
Is he going back?*

With three groups of third-graders and one class of fifth-graders, Coy pushed for strong, tactile words — magical but true words that made the river a noise, an animal, a memory.

“Kids are spontaneous storytellers, but already at this age they’re becoming tentative, cautious about spelling,” he said. “I wanted to get them writing the way they tell stories when they run in from recess.”

About a fifth of the students are learning English as a second language.

“Some of the Hmong kids, their memories are of the Mekong River,” Coy said. “When they close their eyes to imagine animals and the river, they see monkeys and tigers.

“It’s been wonderful to work poetry with some of those kids. Partly because the language is new, they’re able to take more chances with metaphors and similes. Kids who grew up with the language say, ‘Oh, you can’t say *that* about a river.’ But they can.”

The river is like a tiger eating.

Also in St. Paul

Coy’s residence at Sheridan was supported primarily by a grant from the Minnesota State Arts Board.

He did a similar residency last year at Phalen Lake School in St. Paul and got this from a fifth-grader:

*The river sounds like carp splashing,
deer drinking,
water running to the sea.*

And this from a third-grader:



John Coy’s budding young poets

To hear third-graders read their work, call 673-9067. When told, press 5391 for Marisha Stone’s “Campfire,” 5392 for James Griffen’s “The River” and 5393 for Cindy Vue’s “Blue.”

You can also hear the children on Star Tribune Online at:

<http://www.startribune.com/stonline/html/audio/tcj13.ram>

*I am as deep as five grownups,
I travel many places every day.
I was made a thousand years ago.
I was made to give water.
The water sounds like a lion growling
when the water is strong.
When the water is weak,
it sounds like a cat.*

Ashley Bell, a Sheridan third-grader, read her piece on the Mississippi in class Tuesday. She raised her hand when Coy called for volunteers, and she carried her typed manuscript to the front of the class and read in a voice as clear as her name.

*The waterfall sounds like birds are chirping
and the birds are in the trees.
I hear the cold breeze and the trees in the breeze.
I hear people walking by the river.
I made a new friend, the Mississippi.*

One Sheridan boy seemed to be having trouble thinking of himself as a writer, Coy said. He came to school too distracted to think about the river, to remember what he had seen and sensed, and to put that into words.

“And then one day he did.”

*The river is like a dove
with some food for her babies
so they can grow big and beautiful.
Great birds protect their babies.
Babies are important to me,*