Kids creating their own books

By Margaret Fosmoe South Bend Tribune | Posted: Saturday, December 26, 2015 5:30 pm

SOUTH BEND — The conference room is a sea of white paper, colored markers, magazine clippings and chattering children.

But there's a method to this madness.

The result is literature.

A group of 10 budding young authors is hard at work in a conference room at the St. Joseph County Public Library on this day in early December.

They're participants in "Write YOUR Story," a free children's writing course taught each fall and spring by volunteer Julia Douthwaite. During weekly sessions over the course of a semester, the participants read several books, discuss the plots, jointly write a book as a group, then each write and illustrate their own storybook.

"It's pretty great," says Amelia Zwart, 10, a LaSalle Intermediate Academy student, who has participated in two full semesters of the book course. Her latest book is about a modern-day girl who happens to love the old West. Amelia's favorite part is drawing the illustrations.

Sometimes it's hard to come up with a story idea. "But eventually, I'll just start writing, and then it happens," she says of the plot.

"My favorite thing about it is the creativity of creating your own book," says Jehlin Houston, 11, a home-schooled sixth-grader. He's written a zany story about a young wizard who works at a pizza parlor.

Seannessy Snider, age 13, is finishing her book, titled "Twelve Minutes to See the Stars." She enjoys books with fantasy and supernatural themes, and already knows she wants to be a professional writer.

"I like to write," says Micaela Honaker, 10, a student at St. Adalbert School. The book she's written and illustrated is about a pair of orphaned twins, a boy and a girl, who are separated in childhood.

"I like making up people," says Rhylie Cress, 9, a fourth-grader at Beiger Elementary School in Mishawaka. The 25-page book she wrote and illustrated is about her family's trip to Disney World.
This fall's group jointly wrote and produced a picture book titled "Nabiki and Ruby: An Outer Space Fairy Tale." It's an altered version of the classic fairy tale "Puss in Boots." The children created the characters, rewrote the story and produced a 32-page illustrated book.

Spelling and grammar must be perfect in the final volumes. The kids are having such a good time, they hardly notice they're learning important skills for their future.

The weekly sessions for youthful writers are the brainchild of Douthwaite, a professor of French at the University of Notre Dame. She and two other volunteers guide the youngsters, teach them about writing and help them place the artwork in their books.

"I just love to do this. You never regret the time you spend here," Douthwaite says.

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