

SAMPLE CHAPTER

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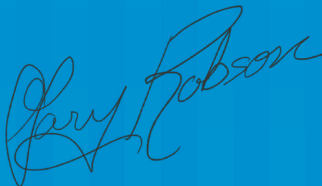
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Gary's Guide to

Successful Book Signings

Including tips, tricks, and
anecdotes from experienced
authors and booksellers



Gary Robson

Author of 29 books, including

- *Myths & Legends of Tea*
- *The Closed Captioning Handbook*
- *The Who Pooped in the Park series*



Proseyr Publishing
Red Lodge, Montana

The Book Signing



CHAPTER 8

You've made it. You've arrived at the event venue, given your talk (if you're doing one), and settled at your signing table. The first interested reader walks up to the table, looks you in the eye, and says, "I'll take one of those books!" Now what do you do?

Hopefully, you've already turned off or silenced your phone and eliminated any other distractions that might prevent you from giving 100% of your attention to the people in front of you. They've gone to the trouble of attending your event; you need to put in the effort to make them feel like it was worth it.

Why you're really there

If you do the math, the royalties you make on copies sold at the book signing are rarely enough to cover your expenses in getting to the event. You aren't there to make a pile of cash in royalties at the signing; you are there for public relations.

Treating the customers well is such an obvious rule that I almost hesitate to include it. People will tell their friends about the fascinating, polite, pleasant author that talked with them and signed their book. They will tell a lot more friends if you were rude or indifferent.

I once invited a well-known New York City author to do a signing at my store. He laughed in my face and said, “Me? Go to a store in Montana?” It wasn’t a chuckle, a chortle, or a guffaw; it was a full-fledged belly laugh that went on long enough to make me very uncomfortable.

He did this in front of a dozen other booksellers at a conference luncheon (they were pretty uncomfortable with the situation, too). If he had politely accepted my business card and said he’d see what he could do, I wouldn’t have thought any less of him. A lot of authors don’t want to make the trip to a small town far from home. As it is, I’ve told that story to dozens of people, and the booksellers that were seated at the table with us – most of them also residents of “fly-over states” – probably have as well. It wouldn’t have taken him any effort to be pleasant instead of coming across as an arrogant buffoon.

But there’s another purpose for your book signing tour that’s just as important in the long run: developing relationships with the bookstore staff. Treat them well and earn their respect, and the long-term payoff is far greater than what you get the day of the event.

Your publisher can help you with that relationship building. After all, increasing sales of your books is their goal as well.

I did a book signing at the Grand Canyon Visitor Center on the South Rim in 2006. We didn’t have much swag at the time, so the only thing I brought along for my table was a sign. I arrived at the event to find all of the store staff wearing Who Pooped in the Park? t-shirts. I didn’t even know we had t-shirts.

As it turned out, Farcountry Press had decided to try making some shirts, and they surprised me by sending them to the store without telling me. The staff was in on the surprise, and thoroughly enjoyed my stupefied look when I saw them.



I don't think I've ever felt quite so much like a rock star as I did when they all asked me to sign their shirts—just look at my face in the picture (I'm the one without a *Who Pooped* t-shirt on).

How to make a signing work

Talk to people

It never ceases to amaze me when authors come in, plant themselves behind the signing table, and curl up as inconspicuously as possible. You are there to promote your book. So *promote!* Chat with people. Introduce yourself. Tell them you are in the store signing books. Recommend a book (even if it's not yours). Ask their names.

Tips & Tricks from the Pros

One tip, especially with new authors: make sure they understand that sitting down behind a table and waiting for people to come to you is wasted time. Stand in front of the table and engage with people. Say things like, “do you enjoy a good story?” And have your 30 second “elevator pitch” ready.

I had one author who was self published and virtually unknown who sold every copy of his books each time I brought him in because he talked to people.

Stand up and speak up. It works.

Drew Goodman, former bookstore manager at University of Utah bookstore and Borders.

You will be rejected sometimes, of course. There will always be people walking by with their heads carefully averted to avoid making eye contact. There will be people who glance at your book, say something dismissive, and move on. But there will be far more people that will exchange a few pleasant words with you, remember you in the future, and possibly buy one of your books.

Don't be pushy, though. If someone does start to walk away, don't try to stop them. You're being pleasant and friendly, not being a loud street vendor hawking goods to passersby.

While you're at it, engage the staff. Be pleasant. Chat with them (when there isn't a customer waiting). Offer to sign a book for them. Make them want to send customers over to your table. This will pay off in spades the next day when they're telling everyone how wonderful you were and showing off your books. The signing is only the beginning. If they like you (and you wrote a decent

book, of course), then they'll still be hand-selling your books long after you leave the store.

On the flip side, don't monopolize the staff. Keeping the employees from doing their job does not lead to happy store managers!

Hand customers your book

People are much more likely to buy something once they've handled it. Say something about the book, and then put it in the customer's hands. Let them look through it while you talk about it.

When customers are nearby, stay near the table

When hosting signings in my store, I've gotten customers interested in a book, and then not been able to find the author to sign a copy. Don't wander away unless you tell the bookstore staff where you're going and when you'll be back.

Don't undercut or bypass the store

Want to piss off a store owner? Hand out bookmarks that say "available at Amazon." Tell people they can get your other books at the store down the street. Tell customers to call you direct for more copies instead of coming back to the store. Even worse, sell books out of your trunk right after the signing. The store has worked hard to put this event together, spent money on promotion, and showed their faith in you by providing space in the store. Return the favor and send them business.

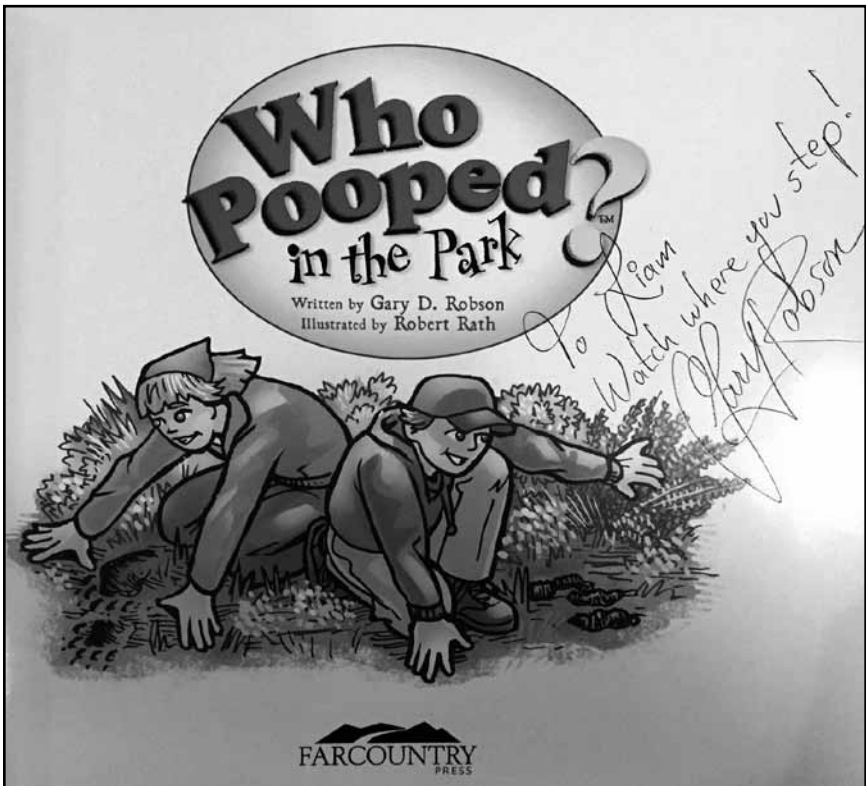
A few specific notes for children's authors

There are a lot of things that are different for an author who writes books for children—especially picture books.

No cursive. I was born in 1958, so handwriting was a big thing in school. We learned to write beautiful cursive script, and that's what our generation uses for formal occasions. Today's children, however, are often not taught cursive. Schools in our area have

dropped it, and many others around the country as well. If you handwrite a clever little note to the children, odds are they won't be able to read it. This doesn't apply to the signature itself, but...

Sign on the title page near where your name appears. When the child is looking at the book, they see your name printed in the book and your name signed close by. The younger the child, the harder time they have grasping that you're the person who created this book. That proximity of printed name and signature helps reinforce it.



This is how I usually sign "Who Pooped" books.

If you're the illustrator, draw something. It doesn't need to be anything fancy. Even a little smiley face like Mario Acevedo uses (see page 92). *What* you drew doesn't matter. What matters is that you drew it *just for them*.

Use a clearer signature. When I'm signing a check or a legal document, my signature is a scrawl. If you didn't already know my name, you'd never be able to decipher the signature. As grown-ups, we get this. An illegible scribble is the standard for signatures. Little kids don't necessarily get it. If the family is plopping down \$11.95 for a copy of my book, I figure the least I can do is make it readable. I know kids who don't read cursive won't be able to read a signature, but the letters are close enough to identify if you know what you're looking for. Speaking of which...

Always include the child's name. You probably do this anyway, but it's doubly important for little children. One of the first things they will learn to spell and recognize is their own name, and it's infinitely cool to them when they see their own name in the book.

Always ask them to spell their names. Again, you probably already do this, but it's more important with children's books. If you are signing a book for a 60-year-old named Ellen, it's almost a sure bet that her name is spelled E-L-L-E-N. Young parents today are much more likely to use unique (strange, odd, phonetic...) spellings than their parents or grandparents. A six-year-old with that name is much more likely than previous generations to spell it Ellyn or Elin or Ellan or Ellin or Elhen or Elen.

Talk directly to the child. I see far too many authors of children's books that speak to the parents and barely make eye contact with the kids. The book is for the kids. The experience is for the kids. Ask children what their names are and how to spell them, and look to the parents for confirmation if you can't understand. Children are used to being ignored by grown-ups. Be the exception.

Helpers

At a really busy book signing with a popular author, having an assistant at the table can make a huge difference for everyone. Make sure the author isn't seated too close to the cash register,

Tips & Tricks from the Pros

Trivial as this may sound, it is very helpful to have an assistant handing the signer the book open to the appropriate page, especially at a crowded book signing. You wouldn't believe how much smoother the signing process goes when that one motion is shared by two people.

Chrysti Smith, a.k.a. Chrysti the Wordsmith, author of *Verbivore's Feast: A Banquet of Word & Phrase Origins*.

so there's plenty of room for two separate lines. Then set up two chairs at the table and arrange it so that the people in line reach the assistant first.

Getting spellings of names for the author

I've already mentioned the importance of spelling people's names right. The assistant can talk to each customer and make sure the names for the inscription are written neatly on a piece of paper for the author, along with any special requests.

Opening to the correct page

If the book is a hardback, someone should "flap" the books in advance, finding the page where the author prefers to sign and putting the front flap of the book jacket there. When the author is ready to sign, it's easy to open the book to the correct page.

With paperbacks, you can accomplish the same thing using a promotional bookmark or using that piece of paper with the names on it — assuming they were written with quick-drying ink on paper that won't smudge!

Tips & Tricks from the Pros

Tips for a successful book signing: Dress up a little. Remember, people take the time to shave and comb their hair before they come to see you. You can do more. As the Sisters in Crime handbook on book signings (*Shameless Promotion for Brazen Hussies*) points out: You're the star. Shine a little.

Margaret Coel, author of the Wind River mystery series.

ATTITUDE

Careful what you say and who you say it in front of!

Some book signings do well and some don't, no matter how well you prepare. And some stores are larger than others as well.

An author came into my store for a book signing. From the beginning, it was clear that she was used to dealing with much larger stores. She hadn't told me in advance that she needed a projector screen, and didn't arrive early enough to give me time to fetch one.

I decided that the best move would be to take down the big sign behind my tea bar and let her aim the projector at the blank wall behind it. I went into the back room to get my ladder, and she pulled out her cell phone and made a call. Doug, the tea bar manager, had coincidentally gone back in the kitchen for a moment.

We got the projector hooked up and adjusted. A bit later, when the author went out to her car for a moment, some customers that were seated in the tea bar pulled Doug aside.

"Do you know what that author said when you were both out of the room?"

"No," Doug responded.

"She made some comment about being in the middle of nowhere and asked her husband why they even bothered to come to this place."

I suppose it never occurred to her that in a small town indie bookstore, the customers sitting at the table might be friends of the owners.

Needless to say, this exchange made us feel rather uncomfortable when she came back in the store. Because I like her book and was looking forward to the talk, I didn't say anything to her.

As it turned out, this was one of those rare events where nobody shows up. Where most authors would be setting up a table

Tales from the Front Lines

I had one author, published through a major publisher, who came to do a book signing during the bookstore's biggest night of the year: our University Staff and Faculty night. We'd get 2-3,000 people who come those evenings. We book three authors to do a signing those nights.

He came in, sat down and started pulling attitude with me from the beginning because he had to share the spotlight with two other authors. He complained that not enough people were coming to talk to him about his book (see above). He was nearly contemptuous of the other authors, me, and the customers. His attitude with the customers was awful and he wouldn't personalize books, and he finally got up and left a half hour early, because he said, "this was a waste of my time."

Drew Goodman, former bookstore manager at University of Utah bookstore and Borders.

and engaging everyone who came in the store, she hung back and stood by the projector. When customers came in, I told them about the book and encouraged them to take a look. I had to specifically ask her to come over and engage.

After 15 minutes, there was nobody sitting down waiting for her talk. She declared that since nobody was there for her presentation, she was leaving. I talked her into staying another 20 minutes or so, and then she signed a pre-sold book and left, even though the event was scheduled to go on for another hour.

As an author, I've done book signings where we didn't sell anything, but I never packed up and left early. I never stopped trying to engage a customer. And I definitely never bad-mouthed about the store or the town.

As a bookseller, I've had big-name authors in my store who didn't get enough people to justify standing up and giving a talk. What did they do? Sit down and engage with people one-on-one. Offer to sign stock. Talk to the employees about their books. Do pretty much anything but trash-talk the store and leave early.

Either this author didn't realize that my customers might actually talk to me, or she didn't care. When her publisher called the next day to see how the signing went, I passed on that little story.

Tales from the Front Lines

On my way to Vroman's bookstore in Pasadena, I was shocked to find a line of people a block long outside the store! Good heavens. For me? No, sadly. Bill Clinton had done an earlier signing and he was still signing for the crowds.

Margaret Coel, author of the Wind River mystery series.

But what if nobody shows up?

I wish I could predict how many people will be at a signing or talk, but I can't. I've had some amazing authors in the store that only drew one or two people, and some unknown self-published authors that drew big crowds. Sometimes, the weather affects attendance. Sometimes, the promotion just didn't get that viral "click" where everyone is telling everyone else about it. Sometimes, another business sets up an event at the same time.

Low sales don't mean your book sucks. It doesn't mean there's anything wrong with you. And it doesn't necessarily mean the store didn't promote the event. Sometimes, you just don't catch a break.

Tales from the Front Lines

When Linc [co-author Lincoln Child] and I were touring for our first novel, *Relic*, we were split up and toured individually. In one book signing in Minnesota, Linc's mother was the only one who showed up; and that same week, at a signing Linc did in Cambridge, Mass, my mother was the only one to show up.

Douglas Preston, author of dozens of books, including the bestselling *Pendergast* series with Lincoln Child.