

Berenson's books: They keep going and going

Middle school teacher can't keep shelf filled with funny kids' stories

By ELIZABETH WADE HALL

The Herald-Sun

Daniel Berenson has yet to publish a book, but he is the most popular author at Githens Middle School.

Berenson, a sixth-grade social studies and math teacher at Githens, has written six books ranging from what he calls the "quite silly to the suicidal."

"His books are like eating potato chips — once you read one you have to read another and another," said Becky Ballard, a Githens sixth-grader who has read several of Berenson's books and some of his poetry.

While Berenson searches for a publisher, the Durham school system has been printing and binding the books, which include humorous novels, psychological mysteries and historical fiction. He also has written poetry.

Carolyn White, a librarian at Githens, said Berenson's books have been checked out about 250 times since 1990, when his first book — "Hey, It's Willie" — was printed.

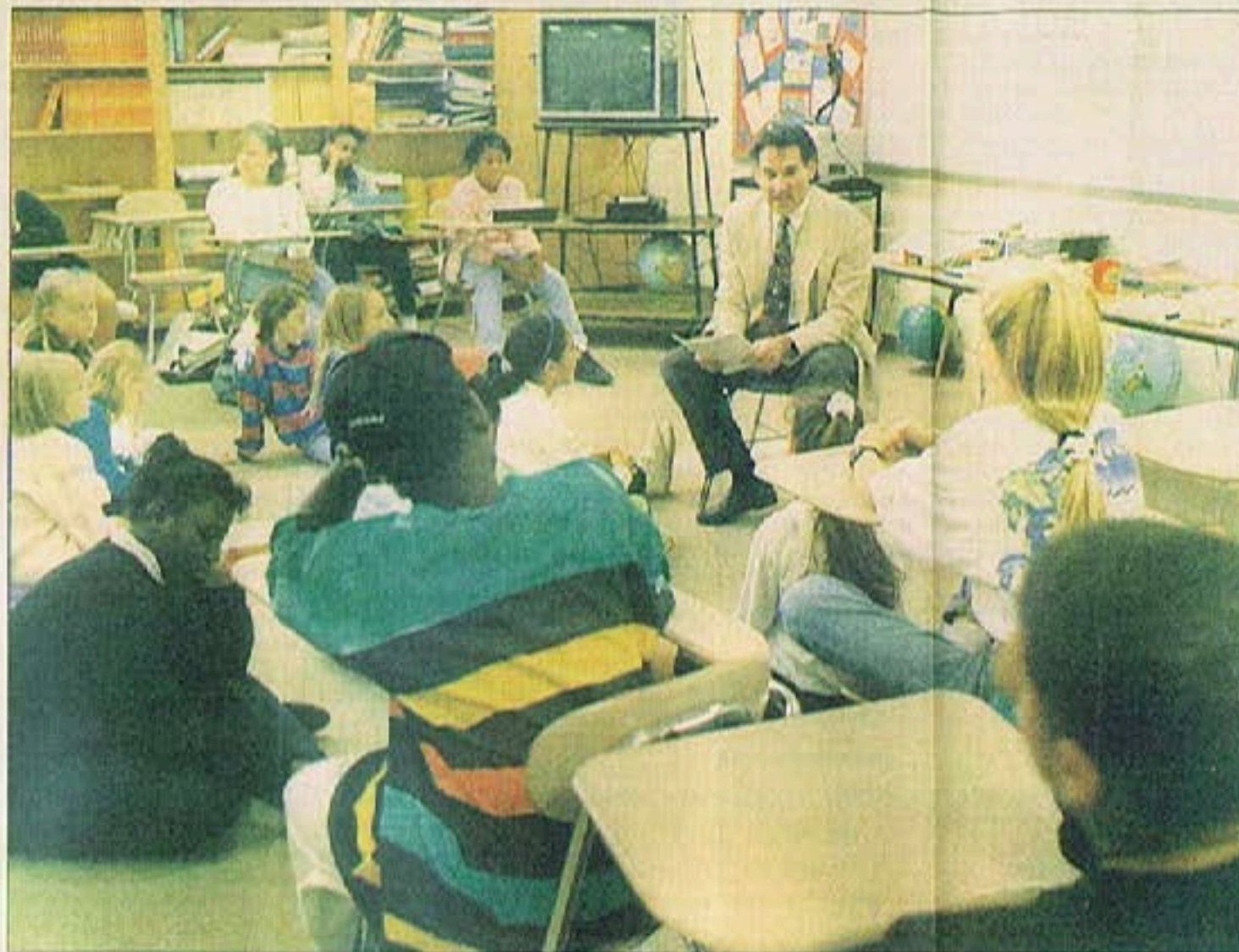
"He's probably the most popular author at the moment, especially with sixth-graders. It seems to be rare that any of his books are in," White said. "The kids like the books because they're funny. They're written at the middle school level."

The school library has reserved a special shelf for 33 copies of Berenson's books, but it's almost always empty.

"Every time I come to the library I go to that shelf to where his books are," said Joseph Adegboyega-edun Jr., a sixth-grader who is a native of Nigeria. "His books make you learn, and it's not boring. Sometimes you read things and they're so boring and you don't learn."

Sandy Vinson, a sixth-grade language-arts teacher at Githens, said children's literature today is not humorous and focuses on big issues that don't relate to children.

"We need more humor in children's literature," Vinson said. "Daniel has found a way to take the same issues and treat them in a way



IN THE FLESH: Author Daniel Berenson reads from his books to a Githens Middle School class.

that's funny and instructive, but that still gets the message across."

Vinson said her classes enjoy Berenson's poetry because it deals with issues they face, such as cafeteria food, lockers, acne, first dates, "geeks" and bullies on the bus.

"All the poems hit on the things that worry sixth-graders and yet they are done in such a funny way that it puts the problems in perspective," Vinson said.

Sue-Anne Solem, a second- and third-grade teacher in the Exploration Program at Pearisontown Elementary School, said she has used some of Berenson's books in her classes.

"I think they're fabulous. He really knows how to speak to the interests of students," said Solem, whose students critiqued Berenson's

books and invited him to speak to their class as a visiting author. "It's just incredible how they get into those books. They were rolling in the aisles laughing."

Berenson's students — who are flabbergasted that their teacher's books have not been published — said they like his writing because of the variety of characters and "kid" plots they can relate to.

"Mark Twain just wrote about adventures boys had, but he can write comedy, sadness and horror," said Mark Templeton, a Githens sixth-grader. "It's incredible how he can combine seriousness with silliness. His books are interesting."

Berenson solicits critiques and ideas for his books from his students. He has two folders hanging on the wall behind his desk where students

can put their ideas.

"All I need is a kernel of an idea and I can take it from there," Berenson said. "A lot of the stories actually happen in class and I just exaggerate it. I take what happened and take it to the comic limit."

Berenson began writing five years ago during his Christmas vacation. He writes about 10 hours during the weekends and he spends his summers writing in Montreal, Canada, or San Miguel, Mexico.

Berenson said students compare him to Roald Dahl, author of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*.

"You create a world for children that children understand and not adults, and that's what kids like," Berenson said of Dahl, who is one of his favorite children's authors. "They identify with the characters, and that's what I do."

BOOKS FOR YOUNG ADOLESCENTS BY DANIEL BERENSON

Humorous Novels:

■ "Hey, It's Willie!" is a first-person account by Willie, a typically incorrigible sixth-grader whose main goal in life is to become famous. He and his friends achieve his goal, but not in the way he intended. Outrageous humor for 10- to 13-year-olds.

■ "Our Man, Woompy" is about further misadventures of Willie, Woompy and their friends. This time, Willie does become famous, but no one knows he is. It's hard to explain, but that's the point. In the meantime, Willie gets his first kiss and almost gets assassinated. More outrageous humor and silliness for 10- to 13-year-olds.

■ "Year of the Tater" is a novel that uses kickball as a metaphor for life. While other middle school classes are called the Panthers or Lions or Eagles, the Taters have a hard time adjusting to their name and to the idea of losing at kickball all the time. The novel is for 9- to 11-year-olds.

■ "Can't I Do Anything Wrong?" Billy Cantrell is a sixth-grader who has a crush on Veronica LaBelle, but Veronica only has eyes for Lester, the class troublemaker. Billy tries to win her affection by getting tough and getting himself suspended. Time after time, he meets with spectacular unsuccess. He just can't seem to do the wrong things right. The book is for 10- to 13-year-olds.

Psychological Mystery:

■ "Telephone," Shannon Shannahan is the new girl in the school, fresh from her parents' divorce and father's remarriage. She becomes part of the in-crowd, whose favorite pastime is making prank phone calls. When threatening phone calls start coming to Shannon, she is faced with a crisis she never could have imagined. The book is for 10- to 13-year-olds.

Historical Fiction:

■ "The Sleeping Knights" is about 10-year-old Tomek, a Polish boy from Gdansk, who is excited by the news that his family is going on a vacation. Little does he know that his parents will use this vacation to defect from Communist Poland to the United States. But the family is forced to jump ship in Italy and must live in refugee camps for two years before reaching America. The transition from Poland to Italian culture is both a trial and an adventure for Tomek and his family, and their experiences serve as a multicultural primer for American readers. The book, based on a true story, is for 10- to 13-year-olds.

Poetry:

■ "Voices: An Owner's Guide to the Adolescent Mind." Forty adolescents speak their minds in poetry about school, home, love and heartache, and all the other joys and travails of adolescence. Whether silly or sorrowful, angry or depressed, these poems speak to kids about the world in which they live. For 11- to 17-year-olds. The book also is available on audio tape in the kids' voices.

For more information on Berenson's books, write him at Githens Middle School, 4800 Chapel Hill Road, Durham 27707, or call him at 560-3966.