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Authors bring multicultural, 'mixed-up' heroine to school

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Photo by Juan Carlo
Star staff

Kevin Knotts, left, and Kim Wayans write the popular Amy Hodgepodge children's books, about a multicultural 9-year-old. The pair visited Big Springs School in Simi Valley on Tuesday, reading from the first book and answering questions.

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Students at Big Springs School in Simi Valley could barely contain their excitement or sit still at an assembly Tuesday morning when they were treated to a special visit from the authors of the Amy Hodgepodge series of children's books.

The K-6 school held two assemblies in which authors Kim Wayans and Kevin Knotts introduced their main character, Amy Hodgepodge because she's of mixed parentage. Her grandparents are Korean, Japanese, African-American and white, and the books follow her adventures and experiences when she starts a new school in fourth grade after being home-schooled.

"We've been doing this pretty regularly, going to schools and libraries. As an author, nothing beats that live experience of reading your books to children and interacting with them and seeing how what you have written has affected them," Wayans said.

Wayans and Knotts, who also are actors, have no children themselves, but thanks to Wayans' nine brothers and sisters — including Hollywood actors and comedians Keenen, Shawn, Damon, and Marlon — they do have 38 nieces and nephews.

In fact, they say, many of the characteristics of the children in their books are based on their relatives. "A lot of them are multiracial children. They're not white, they're not black, they're a little bit of everything," Wayans said.

The first book in the series, "Amy Hodgepodge All Mixed Up!" was published last year, and the fifth book, "The Secret's Out," will be released next week.

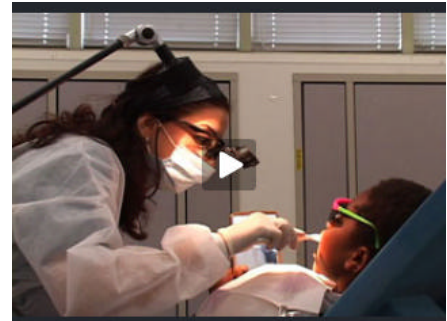
"The book is very timely," said PTA member Debbie Samel, who invited the authors to visit the school, where her son, Michael Hannani, is a first-grader. "We have a mixed school in terms of special-needs children and children of different races and different backgrounds and kids who are new to the school, so the issues in the book really hit home."

After reading a few chapters from the first book Tuesday, the authors held a question-and-answer session. The youngsters wanted to know, among other things, how long it takes them to write one book, how old you have to be to have a book published, how many sentences it takes to make a story, and what tips they could give them for an upcoming state standardized test.



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Abby Westenskow, 9, was enthralled by the event. "The book seems very interesting and the authors are very nice to come here and read us the book," she said.

"It's taught me about how people can be from all different kinds of countries and their families can be from different countries," said second-grader Mikayla Compton, 7.

"I've really been impressed by the kids," Knotts said. "You hear a lot of bad things about our schools, but it's given me a lot of confidence to see these kids and these teachers who do such hard work and see how well-behaved and bright they are."

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