

Bella Skaja: Eighth-grader publishes first book of trilogy

'Demons Unfolding' now available online or from publisher

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Writing the great American novel is the dream of many authors working within the publishing industry.

But when a Columbia Academy eighth-grader cranks out not just one novel, but a trilogy, one wonders if she realizes how lucky she might be.

Bella Skaja is aware of the support she has had in reaching the accomplishment of publishing her first book.

Last week, a special book signing was held for Skaja at the Columbia Heights middle school, allowing her peers to ask questions and for Skaja to explain how she has been so successful in her efforts.

Her first book of a trilogy, "Demons Unfolding," was released last month with plans for her second book to be released next summer and the third of the trilogy sometime after that.

She described the first book succinctly: "It's about

a girl who lives in a tiny village and gets attacked by demons. Her sister is taken by demons and she has to go rescue her."

She was asked what inspired her to write about demons and she had a quick answer: "It's kind of a funny story. So, there is this Christmas thing at Murzyn Hall and me and my friends were in the basement and we were really bored. Hannah, she said, 'you should tell me a story.' The story I told was pretty cool and I thought, 'I should make this into a book,' so I did."

As a writer, Skaja finds time just about anywhere to write, but provided an unusual admission about her writing habits.

She said that many times she writes while in class - but it's not like she is skipping her school work.

"I'll be totally honest - most of the time [I write] is during classes. When they tell us to do something on our Chromebooks and I've already done everything they've told us to do, I'll just write," she said.

The inspiration to write also began at a very young age. She said that when she was in elementary school the class was assigned to write a piece and while most would write a page or two, she was writing chapters.

With that background, the process of writing her trilogy has been her baby, but she's also relied on her friends to not only encourage her, but to help her with the project.

She asked three of her close friends to be her editors and to also design the cover of her first book.

Working as editors were Hannah Severson, Sophia Cedillo and Lidya Kennedy, who also designed the cover.

"A lot of times I asked my [friends] about what they thought. I just try to think about how I can make things more creative and detailed. They gave me ideas about what to write, so there were a lot of critiques," she said.

With a need to design the cover art, Skaja turned to Kennedy who put together a drawing that was approved and finally digitized by Skaja's father.

Kennedy's original draw-

ing is being divided into thirds, with each of the books displaying one-third of the drawing. When set up side-by-side, the books together will display the entire drawing.

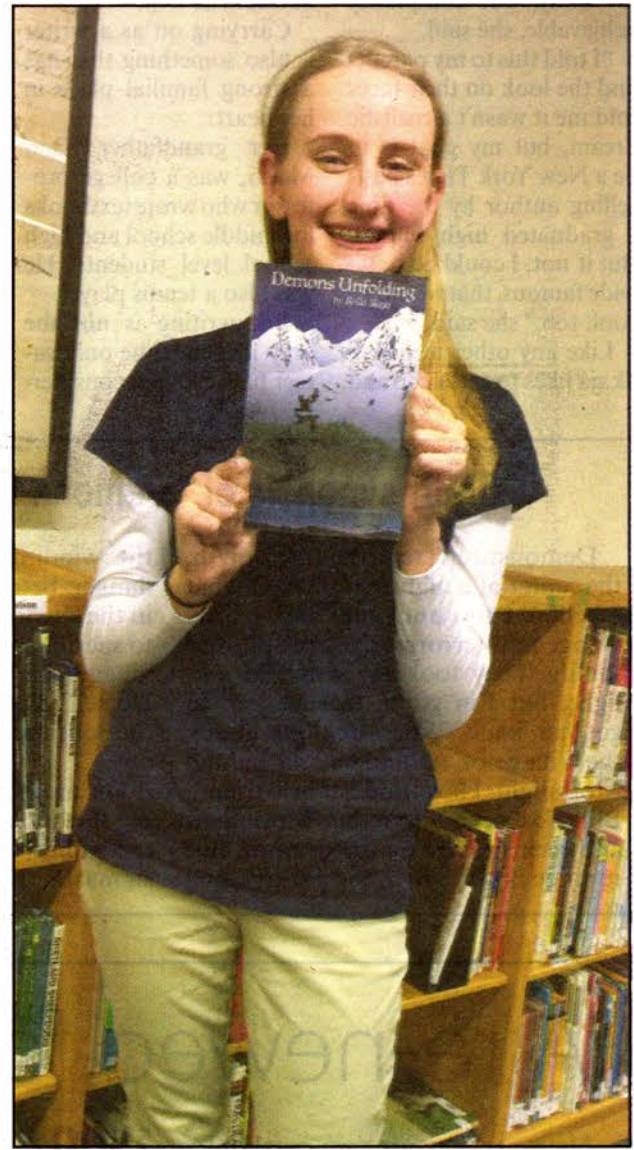
"Bella gave me some suggestions and ideas, and I looked at pictures on the internet to see what other covers looked like," Kennedy said. "Two weeks later, I've had a sketch, I gave it to her and she said, 'That's pretty good.'"

Skaja also received help from Tara Lorence, one of her favorite teachers.

"Ms. Lorence has been my favorite teacher and she knew I was writing a book and she knew the publisher. She said she would check it out and sent in a manuscript and they agreed to publish it," she said.

The publisher, Sigma's Bookshelf, is a relatively young company out of Minnetonka that focuses only on children's literature.

From start to finish, the first book took Skaja about 18 months to finish. She started it while in sixth grade and finished at the



(SUN FOCUS STAFF PHOTO BY RAYMOND T. RIVARD)

See **Book**, Page 24 Bella Skaja with the first book of a trilogy, "Demons Unfolding."

Book

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end of seventh.

With such an impressive start to her writing career, Skaja also has dreams that at this point may be far away, but completely achievable, she said.

"I told this to my parents and the look on their faces told me it wasn't a realistic dream, but my goal is to be a New York Times best-selling author by the time I graduated high school. But if not, I could be state-wide famous, that would be cool, too," she said.

Like any other teenager, Skaja likes to eat, sleep and

binge-watch television.

"But I like reading, writing, hanging out with my friends, and being a kid," she said.

In addition to those activities, Skaja is also a member of the high school tennis team and competes in track, as well.

Carrying on as a writer is also something that has a strong familial place in her heart.

Her grandfather, Don Merki, was a college professor who wrote textbooks for middle school and high school level students. He was also a tennis player.

But writing is not the only love, nor the only career path Skaja is consider-

ing.

"I'm looking to see if I could get into the University of North Carolina and if that doesn't work out maybe stay here and go to the University of Minnesota."

Her path of study will probably be in the sciences.

But in the meantime, she said she will continue to focus on her skills as a writer and to, most of all, continue writing.

There are other books in the works outside of the trilogy and so many ideas bouncing around in her brain about other projects.

But for now she is going to revel in her accomplishments, just for a bit, before moving on to other things.

Short synopsis of "Demons Unfolding"

Demons aren't real, they are a myth, the center of a nightmare. That's what I believed too until they burned my village and terrorized my people and family. They took my sister, Moonlight, but I'm going to save her, to get her back. When demons attack the Village of Ashinders and kidnap Moonlight, Hazel and her best friend, Blue Fox, set out to rescue Moonlight and seek revenge on the demons. But revenge is no walk in the park. Along

the winding journey of this book, danger, betrayal and heartbreak lurk in the shadows. What is Hazel willing to sacrifice to get her sister back? Her village? Her trust? Her best friend? Herself? Find out in this first part of the journey in the Demon saga trilogy.

For more information about ordering the book either online or through the publishing company, visit www.sigmasbookshelf.com.



(SUN FOCUS STAFF PHOTO BY RAYMOND T. RIVARD)

Students from Columbia Academy attended a special book-signing program at the middle school.