

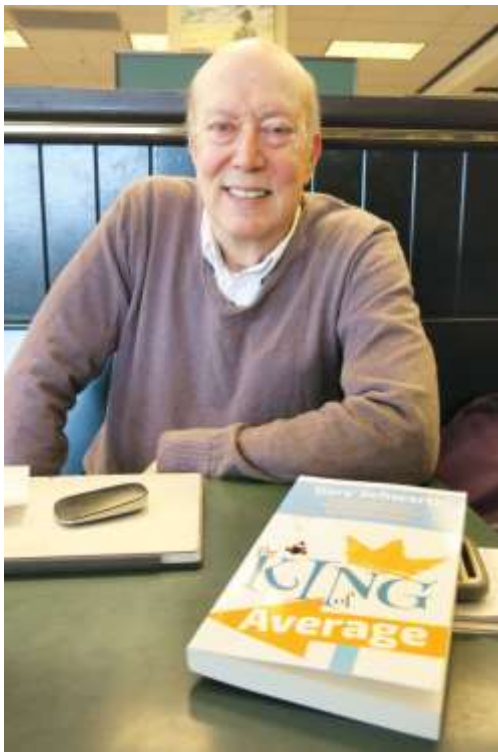


By David Hayes Jan 25, 2016

MEET THE AUTHOR

Gary Schwartz will sign copies of his new children's book, "The King of Average," from 2-3 p.m. Jan. 31 at the Issaquah Barnes & Noble, 1530 11th Ave., Pickering Place.

Move over, Howard Stern — meet the new king of all media



North Bend resident Gary Schwartz, founder of the Valley Center Stage, has a resume from more than three decades in the entertainment industry that itself reads like a novel.

He's been a mime, actor, director, voice-over artist and improv coach. Now, he's ready to add another chapter to his storied career — author.

Although Schwartz's children's novel, "The King of Average," debuted Oct. 6 — he'll be signing copies and reading selections Jan. 31 at the Issaquah Barnes & Noble — it's been in the works for some time.

"Someone asked me at a party how long it took to write the book," Schwartz said. "I told him 52 years."

The idea came to him when he was 11 years old. It was based upon the children's classic, "The Phantom Tollbooth," where the very bored Milo is transported to curious encounters via a tollbooth that appears in his bedroom.

Schwartz's "The King of Average" essentially is a message of self-esteem.

"It's a result of my therapy, picking up my life as an abused kid, although very hidden in book, based on that search for authentic self," he said.

Schwartz ensures the tale would also be a fantasy adventure so adults would like it, too. And then there's the wordplay.

"There's this boy who meets a goat whose name is Mayor Culpa, a play on mea culpa, or

my fault. He's this scapegoat that takes the blame away from the boy who feels responsible for his parents' unhappiness," Schwartz explained.

It was quite the journey from concept to completion.

"I'd told people over the years I had this concept for a book," Schwartz said. "But then a friend at a Christmas party one year says, 'Gary I

challenge you to show me 30 pages.' So I said, 'Mark, you're on.' "

Schwartz sat down to write him his 30 pages, but ended up with 300.

"I was thrilled that I could even write it," he said. "But then I looked at it and said, 'Oh, this is a mess.' "

So away it sat in a drawer for a couple years. He later picked it back up, thinking he still wanted to put this out in the world, but knowing it needed to be improved.

"Anyone can write a book," he said. "But is it something somebody else wants to read?"

So he located a writing mentor online, an award-winning children's novelist in Nova Scotia. He said she was very insightful, asking a lot of questions he didn't have answers to. Schwartz committed to a lot of extra writing just to figure out the background of minor characters, so even though the extra content may not be in the book, their participation in the story made sense.

"With each rewrite — I must have done 20 or 30 — you start to appreciate what a writer does," he said. "Within two years of very hard work, I got her something that was readable. She sent me an email: 'Congratulations, you have a book.' "

The next step was publishing.

He started submitting it and jokes it only took about 60 tries to get somebody interested.

"Typical remark was, 'Interesting concept, interesting book, but I'm not interested enough to champion it,' which was the polite way of saying, 'No, thank you,'" Schwartz said.

Then he came upon the Book Trope Company in Seattle, which was sporting a new publishing model. They put authors together with their worldwide network of editors, proofreaders, managers and promotional people, leaving it to Schwartz to assemble his own team.

"It was fun finding people as enthusiastic as you working with you," he said.

After two full edits and proofreads, "The King of Average" became an even better read from there, Schwartz said.

Having 30-plus years in the entertainment business also help contribute to the crafting of his novel. Schwartz's first acting gig was on the now cult classic, "Quest for Fire." He was on the 1980s children's show "Zoobilee Zoo" and lent his improvisational talents to voice-over work for movies to fill in the background conversations taking place around the main actors. Schwartz has thus worked on more than 600 films and television shows during his 16 years in Los Angeles.

But he perhaps gained his greatest fame for his voice work in video games, most notably Dota 2, Team Fortress 2 and Star Wars: Old Republic.

"Everybody says, even from first draft, they like the dialogue. I can write in a lot of different voices, clear and distinct. Dialogue is my strength, and the acting helps," Schwartz said.

He said he'd love to see the next step for "The King of Average" to be optioned into a movie, most appropriately by Pixar. He saw the animation company's latest work, "Inside Out," about all the emotions living inside a young girl's head, who see the world through her eyes.

"This one," he said pointing to "The King of Average," "is a similar landscape of someone's self-esteem. There's Lake Inferior, Hearsay, the Flatter Lands, Epiphany, Apatheia, Sea of Doubt. All in that similar vein."

And funnily enough, someone inside Pixar knows of Schwartz's desires to see his novel animated.

"When we went to see 'Inside Out' at the North Bend Cinema, it was practically empty. But at the end of movie, the three of us are applauding, and behind us is this family applauding. So we chat it up."

It turns out they're waiting for their daughter's name to turn up in the credits because she works for Pixar. Schwartz gave them a copy of his book. "So they get it to her, she read and

likes it,” Schwartz said. “I don’t know if she has the power to make a pitch, but somebody at Pixar has read my book.”

Regardless of whether “The King of Average” makes it to the silver screen, Schwartz said kids are already asking him if there will be sequel. He says, yes, there will be a second and third book in the series. And Schwartz has already completed the first draft of his next manuscript, following a pair of youngsters taken for an adventurous ride through Beverly Hills, inspired by his own days as a limo driver in Southern California.

“Now that I’ve stepped down as artistic director of the theater, I want to devote myself more to my other two passions — teaching and writing,” Schwartz said.

As he enters the third chapter in his life — knowing he won’t be the next John Grisham or James Patterson — he has no problem becoming the first Gary Schwartz, renowned children’s author.