

Author to Author with Mindy Friddle

The Author: Mark Johnston

The Book: *Secret Agent* (Simon & Schuster, \$16.95) by Robyn Freedman Spizman and Mark Johnston

Greenville, SC resident Mark Johnston has plenty to show for the 25 years he's spent writing: shelved manuscripts, stacks of rejection letters, tantalizingly near acceptances from editors, and a writing habit he can't kick.

But wielding the double-edged sword of tenacity and talent, Johnston has scored a victory: His first children's novel, *Secret Agent* (Simon & Schuster, \$16.95) has just been published. "What kept me writing through all those rejections wasn't anything noble," he said. "It was stubbornness and shame. I refused to be the guy who didn't get published."

A New York native who grew up in Florida, Johnston has taught English at Greenville Technical College for sixteen years. He teaches afternoon and evening classes, and writes mornings, six days a week. "If I wasn't writing I'd be a better teacher or a bitter teacher," Johnston said. "I can't decide which."

He began writing plays "that were supposed to be comedies" while in the Army in the early 1970's. All were rejected. Like many writers, Johnston became an expert at wringing out any word of encouragement from "thanks but no thanks" letters from publishers. "Some of the rejections said, 'we enjoyed this. It's good. But not for us.' "

One of the most difficult parts of the publishing process for many writers is acquiring an agent to sell their work to publishers. Not so with Johnston, who is represented by a supportive agent. It's the editors who gave him fits. A detective novel he wrote in the late 1980's got very close to being published, but was in the end, nixed. A close friend of Johnston's who owned a children's book store encouraged him to write for children. He did. A subsequent children's book was nearly accepted by Scholastic, who kept it under

consideration for more than a year. But the editor left, and so did any hopes for Johnston's manuscript. And on and on.

At this point, many a writer would have engaged in primal scream therapy or considered skydiving without a parachute. But Johnston jumped at an opportunity his agent Mary Lee Laitsch presented him with in 2001: teaming up with Atlanta writer Robyn Freedman Spizman to co-author *Secret Agent*. Spizman, who has written several nonfiction books, had an idea for a children's novel. The authors collaborated via email and phone calls. Johnston followed the plot and filled in with characters and developed scenes. Eighteen months later *Secret Agent* was sold to Simon & Schuster.

Billed for readers in the 8-12 range, *Secret Agent* tells the story of Kyle Parker, a young boy who must convince the most famous editor in New York to publish his dad's book. With the help of his friends (plus a crazy dog named Shakespeare), Kyle goes undercover to become his dad's secret agent.

After discovering the publication date for his first published book was April 1, Johnston admits to a fleeting fear that he was a victim of a cosmic joke. The book is now in stores such as The Open Book where Johnston will be signing copies on Saturday. "I've had a lot of near misses and no's," Johnston said. "I'm finally enjoying my yes."

Johnston and his co-author are teaming up again to write a sequel, and he is taking a second look at his stacks of dusty manuscripts. "I've got no advice to give anyone about writing," Johnston offered. "But I can provide some hope: it took twenty-five years to get my first novel accepted; it took two days to get my second."

Mindy Friddle is the author of the novel "The Garden Angel" (St. Martin's Press/Picador.) Visit her website, www.mindyfriddle.com, for more information on writing and publishing.