

Sample Student Profile

Senior staff reporter Lauren Ruth's profile of Pulitzer Prize winner Russell Baker at Thomas Jefferson High School for Science & Technology in Alexandria, Va.

Russell Baker ambled down the main hall. As the dignified 81-year-old made his way to room 107, students sped by him on their way to eighth period, unaware that they had just passed a two-time Pulitzer Prize-winning author. On Friday, Dec. 1, Baker gathered with about 30 students for an intimate chat about "Growing Up," the depression-era childhood memoir for which he won the 1983 Pulitzer Prize. The visit was kept under wraps (at Baker's request) to avoid over-exposure. A sign taped to the closed door spelled out "SPEAKER IN SESSION-DON'T KNOCK!"

Students settled in while Baker good-naturedly signed autographs and posed for pictures. Friends snapped photos with camera phones. "I'm astonished that you can now take a snapshot with a cell phone. That's preposterous," he said later. The students laughed. Baker, whose inner smile was conveyed more by his witty words than by his face, came fully prepared for his science and tech audience. He read from an old column he wrote about his disastrous first encounter with physics. "I read this to persuade you that I have good reason to feel humble in your presence," he said. Describing himself as a "super-idiot" in science and technology, he spoke with the same self-effacing humor that has been a signature of his books and columns through the years. Baker explained how he "wandered" into journalism-"in those days, a disreputable business," he said-and mentioned majoring in English. "All failures in life begin as English majors," he remarked. The English teachers in the room chuckled. It seemed that every other sentence Baker spoke elicited laughter from students or teachers.

Eventually, he turned to the students for questions. "Some of you have been reading 'Growing Up,' I take it." "All of them," their English teacher Jennifer Seavey assured him. "She THINKS all of you," Baker said. When students began asking their questions, though, it became evident that they had indeed read the book, inquiring at length about the specific places and people which are the focus of "Growing Up." At one point, Baker was asked how he might want to change his book. Baker's reply was immediate. "The book is perfect," he said. "Never ask a writer that." Discussing how "Growing Up" came to be, Baker said he drafted the book twice and rewrote certain passages 20 to 30 times. "It's a strange process because you're leaving so much out." As much as 95 percent of the whole story cannot fit, he said. Additionally, a memoir does not write itself. "You're trying to impose a narrative line on random events." "Writing isn't always easy," said Baker. "But I couldn't have done anything else... I was really born to write."

After Baker left, the students buzzed about the session, admiring their freshly autographed notebooks and copies of "Growing Up." "It wasn't really formal at all," freshman Nihaar Sinha said of the chat. "It was refreshing." "He's really, like, down to earth," said freshman Michelle Johnson, who eagerly showed her classmates the page where Baker signed her notebook. In angular yet fluid script, Baker had written, "To Whom It May Concern: This will authorize Michelle to be absent from school on account of her reading my books. Russell Baker." "It should work," Johnson said. "It better!"