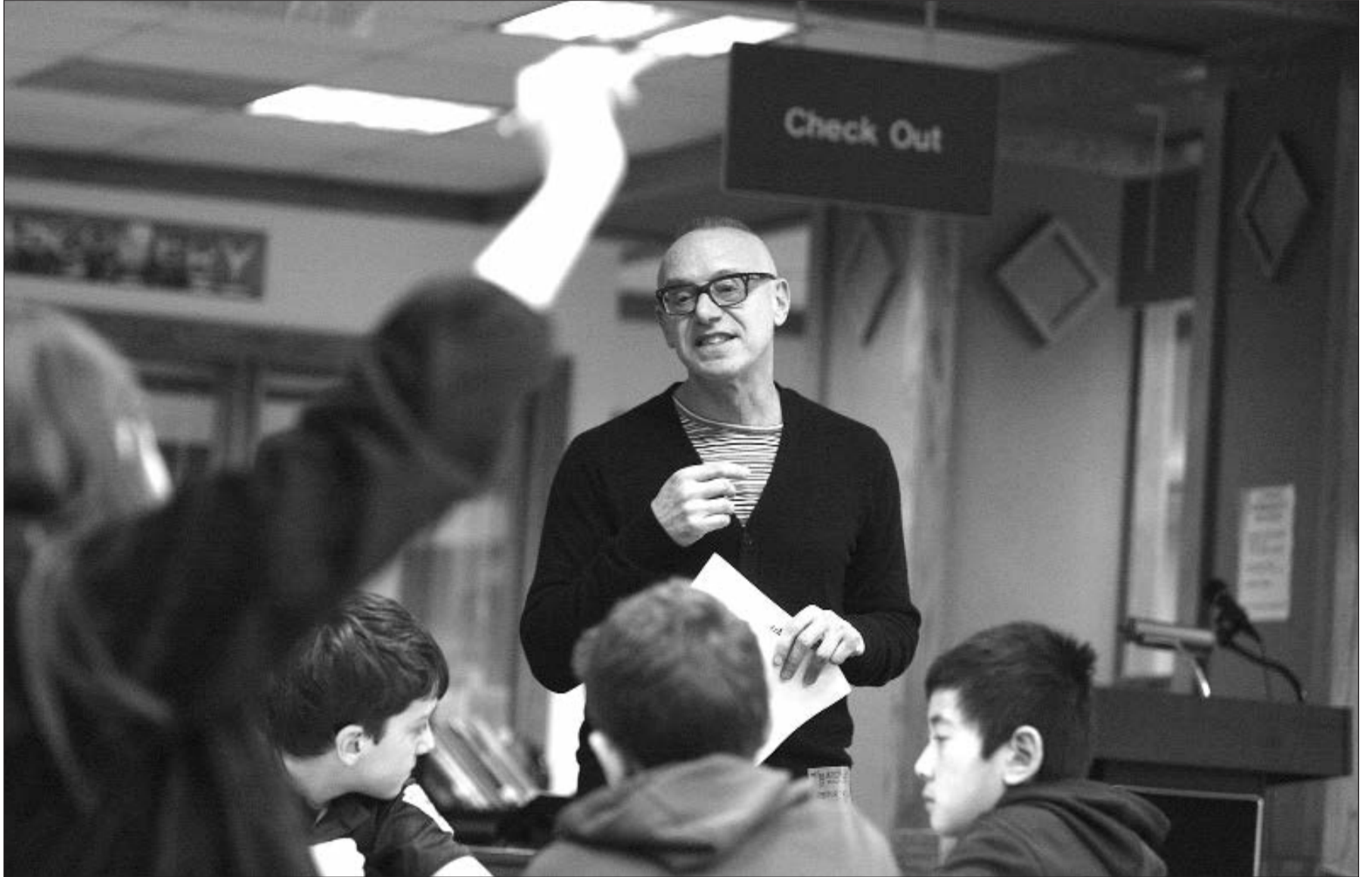


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JIM MACLEAN/RIVERTOWNS ENTERPRISE

Jeff Baron talks with students at Ardsley Middle School on Friday, Jan. 25.

Students fuel, feed off writer in residence

By Eric Lebowitz

Playwright, screenwriter and first-time novelist Jeff Baron has developed a symbiotic relationship with Ardsley Middle School's seventh-graders over the past two years, as both Baron and the students strive to become better storytellers.

Baron grew up in suburban New Jersey and later earned a film degree from Northwestern University and an MBA from Harvard Business School. He spent several years working in the corporate world before transitioning into a life in the arts in the early '80s.

Baron is best known for his play "Visiting Mr. Green," which opened off-Broadway in 1997 at the Union Square Theatre and went on to become an international smash, winning numerous awards and garnering critical praise. The two-person drama — about an 86-year-old widower and a younger man who, driving recklessly, almost hits the senior citizen and is subsequently given a court order to help take care of him — has since been translated into 22 languages with more than 400 separate productions in over 30 countries.

After all the success Baron has had writing for the stage and screen, it might

seem odd that he'd take his first crack at a novel now. But to him, the idea made perfect sense.

"The idea of not having to get a producer, director and actors was very appealing," Baron explained. "In theater today, six actors is considered a big cast. I wanted to be able to write as many characters as I want."

Ardsley Middle School Principal Edgar McIntosh met Baron years ago and the two became friends and remained in touch. Last year, Baron was finishing his first novel, titled "I Represent Sean Rosen," and wanted some feedback about the authenticity of his 13-year-old protagonist. So the author reached out to McIntosh, asking if he could come read some of the book to seventh-graders at AMS, a favor the principal was happy to grant.

"I wrote the novel without showing it to anyone," Baron said during a Jan. 25 interview in the school's library. "When I finished, I thought, 'I don't have any kids and I'm not around kids that much. Is this character credible?'"

"I Represent Sean Rosen" is the story of a 13-year-old boy with a dream of breaking into Hollywood and revolutionizing the entertainment business. McIntosh believes

it is a unique work of contemporary young adult fiction in that it is grounded in realism and features a young male protagonist. So many of today's "real world" young adult novels have a female hero, according to the principal, while most fantasy or dystopian works revolve around a young man.

Baron got primarily positive feedback from last year's seventh-graders, which, he said, gave him the confidence to begin shopping the book. The author quickly found an interested agent and soon signed a multi-book deal — Baron's second novel will also star Sean Rosen — with Greenwillow Books, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers.

During the editing process, it was suggested to Baron that he include more school scenes in the book, and after writing some new ones — including a fire drill and cafeteria scene — he came back to Ardsley to get feedback from this year's seventh grade. Additionally, Baron began working with the students on their writing.

"He's doing a true artist in residence, where he's visited us many times," McIntosh explained.

Baron's love of writing is immediately evident when he speaks to students about the process of crafting stories. The impact

of his enthusiasm on the AMS seventh-graders is just as apparent and was on display last Friday as several English classes filed into the library, formed small groups and intently discussed ideas as Baron floated from table to table to offer advice and encouragement. "The kids are really engaged," said Library Media Specialist Jean Mancuso, who has been heavily involved in the project. "Middle school is full of conflicts, and it's always nice when you can do something that bonds them together."

Mancuso noted that the AMS eighth-graders are anxiously awaiting the book's release, knowing their experiences and input last year had a real impact on the final product. And while all the students — in seventh and eighth grade alike — have quite obviously been energized by working with the author, it's clear that the energy flows both ways.

"It's just been a great experience," Baron said. "I'm around the kids who are in my book."

"I Represent Sean Rosen" is currently available for pre-order from Amazon (\$16.99) and Barnes & Noble (\$16.48) in hardcover or for Nook/Kindle for \$10.99. The book will be released officially on March 19.