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Gordon Korman encourages 100 budding writers

By JANET DUVAL

Special to the Independent/Free Press

Gordon Korman wrote his first novel when he was 12 years old.

Eighteen books later, with a fistful of writing awards and over three million books in print in six languages, he hasn't lost the ability to delight young readers with the hilarious antics of his junior high characters. And he's only 29 years old.

Korman kept an audience of 100 youthful fans in stitches recently, speaking in the Gallery at the Halton Hills Cultural Centre.

His first book, *This Can't Be Happening at Macdonald Hall*, was a Grade 7 English assignment. "Our teacher was really the Phys. Ed.

teacher, because they ran out of English teachers. He said we could work on whatever we wanted for the rest of the year. He didn't know English, but he was a great teacher."

Korman, who was class monitor for the Scholastic Book Club at his school in Thornhill, shipped off his finished work with the class book orders. Weeks later, a letter came back. "We kind of like your novel. We might even, possibly, some day, publish it."

In the book world, he says, that's an enthusiastic response. He signed a contract at the age of 13, and was in print a year later. The teacher gave him a B+.

His books, set in a Toronto boys'

boarding school, are based on things that really happened to him, plus pure imagination. "Teachers tell you to write from experience. But that's boring. You have to add to it."

So his personal experience playing on a hockey team in North York will translate to *The Toilet Paper Tigers*, due out in September 1993. "Have you noticed you never get cool sponsors for your teams? Ours was the Stay Fresh Cleaning Service hockey team."

While a student of Fine Arts at New York University, he worked on the campus radio station. That inspired *Radio Fifth Grade*, a fictional station sponsored by a pet shop. In one chapter, Winston Churchill the Talking Parrot refuses

to talk on air, is fed sour cream and jalapeno crackers, gets the hiccups, and faints when someone bursts the cracker bag. Horrified listeners hear only "Pop! Klunk. Oh no I've killed him." It's amazing where imagination leads you, he says.

"Make your characters seem real," he advises. "Make them talk and act like people you know." Everyone has a favorite word they use, he says, like *dude*, or *whatchamacallit*. A butler-type character might always answer "Indubitably" when he means yes.

"I love humor," says Korman. "Technically, it's not polite to laugh at your own jokes. But sometimes I crack up just writing my own books."

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