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Michael Morpurgo cuts the ribbon with the help of Academy pupil Markos Jethwa.

“I declare this school open”

Renowned children's author Michael Morpurgo officially opened the Archer Academy at the end of November. Asking all the children to give him a hushed (but getting louder) countdown from 10, he unveiled a commemorative plaque with the help of pupil Arsham Moti-Ghavanin.

“They've spelt it wrong,” joked the former Children's Laureate as the plaque was unveiled and he kept everyone laughing as he roped in students Alex Warwick and Markos Jethwa to help him cut a ribbon across the entrance.

Once the formalities were out of the way, Mr Morpurgo, author of War Horse and Private Peaceful, went back inside where he'd earlier read some of his short stories to the students and taken part in a Q&A.

English is a specialism of the new school in Beaumont Close, now nearing the end of its first term. To show their appreciation for the author's visit, students are investigating ways to raise money for his charity Farms for City Children.

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Tales from Fukushima

By Nicola Grove

I visited Japan this summer as part of my work on storytelling and disability, travelling north from Tokyo to Fukushima, then to Matsuyama right in the south, and then up to Ikaho, a spa resort north west of Tokyo.

This was my second visit to Japan; the first time was just after the tsunami and nuclear accident in 2011, when I had been very moved by the stoic but generous and caring response across Japan to the disaster.

Safety issues

Before I went, people asked if it was safe to go to Fukushima, but since my Japanese friend and mentor was quite happy to visit, I felt very confident. We were meeting two storytellers and running a workshop for families who had been evacuated from the radioactive zone to Aizu Wakamatsu, the capital of the province, hosted by a tiny charity, the Aizu Radiation Information Center. This is based in a church, and was set up in 2011 to provide families with reliable information, and moral and practical support.

The situation is very difficult. Here is what the Director, Terumi Kataoka says: “Families and communities have been rent apart, causing much pain and suffering in their daily lives. In Fukushima Prefecture, where economic recovery has become the primary concern, it has become hard to talk about one's fear of radiation.”

We were very impressed and moved by the work this tiny group are doing, in the face of a great deal of opposition. Just as I flew home, in fact, they were vindicated when the government conceded that the leaks from the reactor are continuing at an unacceptably high level.

Samurai heroine

After our workshop we were able to do some sightseeing and find out what the tourists are missing. Aizu is a beautiful town with so much history. At the Samurai palace, a deceptively peaceful hillside location, we heard the terrible stories of the suicide of a platoon of boy soldiers and of the women and children of the palace, in the doomed Boshin rebellion of 1868.

But then I discovered the wonderful story of Yae Nijima, a Samurai crack shot who defended Tsuruga castle, just across from the palace, at the head of a brigade of women warriors. After the rebellion, Yae converted to Christianity and worked tirelessly for women's education, training as a nurse in her fifties and leading the first cadre of nurses to tend wounded soldiers on the battlefields.

She is a truly inspirational character, and thanks to a TV soap opera about her life which has transfixed audiences on Sunday evenings, is acting as



Nicola Grove, second left, with her hosts in Japan.

a focus to bring tourists back to Fukushima. Do go, Archer readers! Japan is one of the most exciting and beautiful places in the world; you will have an unforgettable time!

Nicola told tales of Fukushima at Black Gull books on Thursday 14 November. With Yumiko Mitsudo, she is planning to write a children's biography of Yae Nijima. Her charity can be found at www.openstorytellers.org.uk. Please donate to the Aizu Radiation Center if you can at <http://aizu-center.com/greeting>

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