

The write way

Children's books ought to feature kids with disability. Why? Because stories and pictures can help normalise their attitude towards those with special needs, say three American authors in email interviews.

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Image Credit: Supplied

That was Alicia May on the previous page. That little girl in the green dress with golden locks held by a pretty hairclip in a matching colour and with fingernails painted red.

She has Down's syndrome.

In the picture, the author writes that she peers long and hard at crickets and June bugs and dragonflies. She watches ladybugs warm themselves on the red door.

She counts their dots.

Alicia May says, "One lady dot, two lady dot, three lady dot...", thinking that God must be glad someone notices these things.

Nancy Tupper Ling, the author, didn't write a fictitious story in her first book *My Sister, Alicia May*. Rather she wrote about two real sisters, whose mother Cheri Crossley, is Ling's childhood friend; they were preschoolers in Connecticut.

"My story developed from sheer observation," says Ling. "I went to visit Cheri's family in the summer of 2006. Alicia was six and Rachel was nine. I noticed Rachel loved to ride her bicycle, sometimes away from her younger sister. And Alicia took the time to notice bugs and flowers - things that the rest of the world might pass by. These details became the fabric of the story."

The book attempts to teach children to respect anyone who is differently abled. Though the phrase Down's syndrome doesn't appear in the story, even Ling's youngest readers know that Alicia May has special needs. "I never set out to write a story that addressed special needs or, in this case, Down's syndrome. I wanted to tell a story about two sisters whom I treasure in real life. I didn't want it [my story] to be didactic or come across as a lesson on disability," says Ling.

The book was nominated for the Dolly Gray Award presented annually to children's books on disabilities. (Ling is also the winner of the prestigious American Writer's Digest Grand Prize and the Pat Parnell Poetry Award.)

Lina recalls her publisher Jean Cochran's comment after she submitted her

manuscript. "She [Cochran] had the foresight to realise that my book filled a void in the market. There weren't many books on disabilities that looked at life from an older sibling's perspective," she says.

Ling is among several authors who address disability through children's literature. She believes that doing so can help normalise children's attitude towards those with special needs.

She says, "Picture books are a window into a whole new world for a child. It might be a world of fantasy or history. No matter how different that world is the child will imagine himself there. Why? Because in that world he can relate to universal feelings of fear, longing, triumph, love, etc, even if the situation is totally new."

In the book, Ling includes several realistic portrayals of a child with Down's syndrome. "Alicia May has a hard time leaving a place she loves. This difficulty in transitioning is common to children with certain disabilities. The bus scene is another realistic portrayal; it isn't easy for a [special needs] child to fit into society."

When parents write to Ling, they say they are grateful because the character is so delightfully real. Several siblings too have told her that they relate to her characters Alicia May and Rachel though they aren't children with special needs.

Ling hopes that many more children's book authors will write on disability. "I'm so grateful that my book has reached a wider audience. Not every child with autism is the same or every child with Down's syndrome. Each child has his own story. The goal should be to have many books with a variety of characters - just like life.

"Certainly, the integration of children with special needs in the classroom has helped to foster this relationship as well. I have a young friend named Ian who volunteered to be a buddy to a young girl with Down's syndrome at his school. It didn't take Ian long to consider her much more than his charge; he calls her his friend," says Ling who lives in Massachusetts with her husband, Vincent, and their two daughters.

Communicating without sound

From Alicia May counting bugs to a little boy experiencing a sunrise without being able to hear the accompanying chirping birds, author Patricia Lakin talks about her book *Dad And Me In The Morning*.

Lakin says, "It is the story of a boy who experiences his first sunrise with his Dad. Jacob is deaf. Communication with his Dad means reading lips, sign language and just 'reading' one another's emotions."

In the book, she writes: "Dad and I have lots of ways of talking to each other, like signing or lip reading or just squeezing each other's hands. That's our secret signal."

Lakin, who lives in New York City with her husband, Lee, and has two grown sons, Aaron and Benjahmin, recalls her own memory of witnessing a sunrise with her father.

She says, "I was with my Dad and we were driving to the airport in Boston, where I grew up, to pick up my favourite uncle, Max. Years later, I took an early morning walk with my husband on the beach. We were early enough to watch the sunrise. Memories of that magical fiery ball rising up in the sky came flooding back. Well after that vacation, and back in New York City, as I began writing the story, I visualised the beach and its many sights and sounds."

This eidetic memory also brought to mind two persons - her son's childhood friend and a neighbour, both of whom are hearing impaired.

Lakin says, "While they lack one sense, I thought that it doesn't exclude them from rejoicing fully in the other senses. And so I created Jacob [the character in the book]."

For research, she says her neighbour was invaluable. She showed Lakin her alarm clock with the flashing numbers and how she knows when her doorbell rings. She also learnt of the divisions within the hearing-impaired community: those who use signs and those who lip-read.

"As a result, I chose to give Jacob and his family the ability to communicate in two ways, as well as their secret way. My own family uses this [secret way] when we want to say, 'I love you and care about you' with just a gentle squeeze of our hands," she says.

Lakin has published more than 40 children's books. Speaking of *Dad And Me In The Morning*, she says, "Communicating and sharing something special with

someone you care about is what I wanted this story to celebrate. If a book of mine teaches and inspires, that, for me is a bonus. I am not an expert on how children should learn about others with disabilities, but I know that any good story has to entertain and come from a writer's passion rather than from a need to teach a lesson."

She believes that feeling "less-than" or "not-quite-measuring-up" can hold any one of us from reaching our full potential. "I was someone who felt less than adequate as a speller given my rigid early school experience. I never thought I could be a writer. I became an elementary school teacher instead. After my husband's encouragement, I enrolled in a children's writing workshop in New York City where our instructor urged us to write every day and write what we care about. And so, for the last 30 years that is exactly what I have been doing."

Lakin often visits schools in Taipei, Chengdu, New Delhi and New York, and has had different experiences. And yet she finds that we are all defined by one universal fact - we long to connect and communicate with one another. "A twinkle in one's eye or a smiling face proves to be that 'secret' language that binds us all."

Such examples of the human bond can be found everywhere.

No prejudices or apprehensions

When Oregon-based author Stephanie Stuve-Bodeen saw how two brothers treated their sister - with Down's syndrome - like she was just as normal as they were, she was inspired to write a book.

She says, "My inspiration for *We'll Paint the Octopus Red* came when my children were little. I worked at the local fitness centre in the day care division. A family had two boys with a little sister who had Down's syndrome. I thought her brothers and the other kids would treat her differently, perhaps be kinder and gentler. But they didn't. They treated her like just another kid. This showed me that children have no preconceptions about disability. They saw another child to play with, not a child who was different."

Stuve-Bodeen, an award-winning children's book author who teaches creative writing at Gotham Writers Workshop and is a visiting author in schools in the US and internationally, wanted to capture her experience in a story.

In the book, Emma, a third grade student, has a list of things to do with her new baby brother, Isaac. But she learns that he has Down's syndrome and might not be able to. Gradually, she realises that Isaac can still do everything and she loves him for who he is.

Stuve-Bodeen followed Emma and Isaac's story with a sequel titled *The Best Worst Brother*. In the book, Emma struggles to get along with Isaac who cannot communicate.

She says, "Several state Down's syndrome associations have put the book [*We'll Paint the Octopus Red*] in welcome packages at hospitals for families who have babies with Down's syndrome. I've had parents tell me the book means so much to them and that it sends such an uplifting message."