

For Kids' Sake

Fort Collins children's author turns reluctant readers into lifelong fans

By Maryjo Faith Morgan

“Sometimes our writing is stinky, and that’s ok. Sometimes you have to write the stinky stuff to get to the good stuff.”
—Debbie Dadey



SEEKING AUTHENTICITY is an aspect of Debbie Dadey's writing style that drives her to new heights—literally. She believes there is nothing like first-hand knowledge to give stories resonance. If the grandmother in *Will and Emma* was going skydiving, so was the Fort Collins children's author. When Dadey signed up for the experience, she brought her son Nathan with her. For the tandem jump, each was harnessed to an experienced instructor. She describes watching her son exit the plane.

"He just dropped out of the airplane. I was so scared. I was telling the instructor I didn't think I could do this, when he simply pushed me through the open doorway and out into the air. It was fun, but I was scared until the chute caught."

When Dadey wanted to make a book about Will Rogers more convincing, she insisted on lasso lessons. An engaging tale about an infamous character resulted, and today she can still twirl a rope overhead.

Dadey has developed a synergy that makes successful publishing look like child's play. Since 1987 she and her colleague Marcia Jones have collaboratively penned more than 90 titles for Scholastic, with grabbing kids' attention as their primary goal.

"We really try to key into those kids who wouldn't pick up a book otherwise," says Dadey. The fact is, *Vampires Don't Wear Polka Dots*, *Ghouls Don't Scoop Ice Cream*, and *Sea Monsters Don't Ride Motorcycles* lure those very kids to pick up book after book until they've read an entire series.

Dadey admits that kids want different things from fiction today than they did when she was growing up. "They don't want a lesson. They don't want to sit still if it's not going to be fun. Children are used to being entertained, so books have a lot to compete with." She lists Game Boys, TV, videos, and cell phones with games as her toughest competition.

Dadey succeeds because she and her writing partner really connect with kids from 6–12 years old, who can't wait to find out what new monster the Bailey School kids will meet next. Jones describes the duo's creative process as a real treat, and divulges that the two women have very different writing styles.

"One is more left-brained, one more right-brained, so between us we have a whole brain," Jones says. She isn't teasing, though, when she says that their combined style is strong.

Shannon Penney, associate editor at Scholastic, praises the writing team for their proficiency at juggling several projects at once and using e-mail so effectively for brainstorming and quickly developing their thoughts into outlines and solid plots.

"It's fun to work with them," she says. "They are always

full of humorous ideas and have found so many monsters to incorporate. You never know what they are going to come up with."

Ask children you know what they like to read, and don't be surprised if they tell you about a marshmallow-roasting abominable snowman or a Bigfoot who square dances. Children's enthusiasm over these wacky stories is the reason the Bailey School Kids is one of the most popular series ever for Scholastic Trade Paperbacks. Fan mail attests that kids eat it up. Heather, a Massachusetts fifth grader writes to Dadey, "You should make another book because writing is good for you, and reading is good for me."

As a former first-grade teacher and school librarian, Dadey loves stories. She has always liked to share stories with children, whether students or her own children. One summer she decided it would be fun to co-author a book with her son Nathan, then in junior high. Although not initially enthused with the idea, he gave it a try. Nathan says writing with his mom was pretty much just bouncing ideas off one another.


"She made it easy; she'd weave stories around my responses." He came up with a story line about kids not getting along, added a slime pit, and *Slime Wars* became a reality that eventually grew into a second volume, *Slime Time*.

Writing has been good for Dadey and her family. She claims it's one of the best jobs to have, writing when her children are at school and shutting down at three o'clock.

"I wrote *Story Sparkers* with my youngest either on my back in the backpack or riding the trike out on the front driveway. Laptops are great."

When she was invited to the Cairo American College in Egypt, Dadey took Nathan along. While she was teaching reading and writing to English speaking elementary students, their mothers became Nathan's personal guides. They took him jeeping over the Sahara and camel riding at the Old Market, and travel ended up being good for the family, too.

Dadey enjoys making "author visits" to schools and encourages young students to develop reading and writing skills. During her presentations she reminds them it takes practice, just like basketball, skateboards, or music. She incorporates skits and interactive activities. Her furry skunk puppet "Stinky" emphasizes a very important part of the writing process—rewriting. Dadey explains the concept by saying, "Sometimes our writing is stinky, and that's ok. Sometimes you have to write the stinky stuff to get to the good stuff."

With titles like *Cherokee Sister*, *Whistlers Hollow*, and *Santa Claus Doesn't Mop Floors*, and a growing fan club of young readers, it is very clear that Dadey has a knack for getting to the good stuff. 

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