



Debbie Larkin, as Debbie Graham, has written several books about diversity, including “Graham Crackers’ Nutcracker”, “Painting Rainbows with the Angels” and “Magic in the Air.” Her stories include children of different cultures.

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Liz Neely
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Writing children's books was never a goal for Debbie Larkin. But her experiences teaching dance to disabled and disadvantaged children got her thinking.

“I wanted to re-create the magic that happened on stage,” Larkin said.

The gregarious redhead taught dance to children around East County for more than two decades with her Graham Cracker Kids and Co. But it was her involvement with the now-defunct Performing Arts Theater of the Handicapped, or PATH, that inspired her to write.

Larkin, 54, self-published her first children's book, “Graham Crackers’ Nutcracker,” in 2000. Two more followed. The latest debuted in October. All are aimed at children ages 2 to 11.

“I’m trying to address subjects that have been taboo,” said Larkin, who lives just outside El Cajon.

Her books, illustrated by Lesley and Tim Snyder, depict children of different ethnicities and cultures. Some characters are blind, deaf, on crutches or in wheelchairs. One has a prosthetic leg.

Even a dog, Buddy, is missing a leg in one book and, in another, a cat named Guess is blind.

Larkin's books never focus on the disabilities. One tells the story of children performing in a production of “The Nutcracker.” Another touches on a child dealing with the death of a parent. The third is a tale about twin girls who live with their grandparents.

Larkin, who uses the pen name Debbie Graham, leaves some details to the reader's imagination. In “Painting Rainbows with the Angels,” she doesn't say how the child's father died. In “Magic in the Air,” the reader isn't told why the twins live with their grandparents.

The intent, Larkin said, is to spark discussion among children and their parents while they read, and to show that kids don't want to be treated differently because of circumstance. Her motto, she said, is that “kids just want to be kids” no matter what is going on in their lives.

It's a lesson Larkin learned when teaching children of all abilities and economic backgrounds. She still remembers staging the first version of “The Nutcracker” that included children from PATH.

The boy who played the prince was deaf, she said, but the audience didn't know until the end. Children in wheelchairs were among the actors. One child, who was blind, memorized all the speaking parts in the play.

When the performers took their final bows, “everyone was so proud of themselves,” Larkin said. “Everyone had a sense of accomplishment.”

“Nobody was different on stage in that one moment,” she said.

Chris Bricker, who worked with Larkin at PATH, said “minor miracles” happened when the kids performed.

“Children with disabilities need to feel included and that everyone has a way of participating, that everyone has a way of bringing things out in themselves, that we are all different and we all have something to contribute,” Bricker said.

Those kinds of experiences prompt understanding, Bricker said, and they are reflected in Larkin's books.

The mother of six adult children and grandmother of 11 hopes to turn her books into an animated series to reach more children. Larkin recently gave away hundreds of books at the Family Literacy Fair at the Joan Kroc Community Center.

Her dream is to establish a nonprofit to fund a theater camp for disabled and disadvantaged children.

“I'm taking baby steps at this point because I want any step I take to be the right one,” Larkin said.

Children's books

Debbie Larkin has written three children's books. They are available at some bookstores and online at www.grahamcrackerkids.com.