

Writing Children's Stories

An accomplished surgeon, youth coach, educator, and father explains how he added children's book author to his resume.

BY ROBERT H. OSHER, MD

Writing children's stories is my latest passion. I certainly have enough to keep me busy when I am not taking care of my cataract patients, because I am a fitness fanatic, a video fanatic, and a fanatical coach! Every day, I try to run, bike, kayak, or lift weights. After work, I always dash to the baseball field or basketball court where I coach young athletes year round. The *Video Journal of Cataract and Refractive Surgery*, viewed by anterior segment surgeons in more than 100 countries, is like a second full-time job. I enjoy gardening, playing music, and golf (my handicap has dropped into the single digits). But, there is something exceptional and something wonderful about telling stories to children.

BEYOND A BEDTIME RITUAL

I began telling stories at about the same time I began operating. It became a ritual to put each of my five children to sleep with either a bedtime story or a song, which we would compose on a keyboard in their rooms. Sometimes, the theme would stress values, other times humor, and occasionally suspense or mystery. On Thursday mornings, I would take my daughter to school and tell stories to the class. There was great satisfaction in making the children smile, giggle, or laugh. A number of teachers had suggested that I publish these tales, but I did not seriously consider doing this until I was diagnosed with malignant kidney cancer. Suddenly, I had to prioritize what was really important in my life, and the stories seemed like a worthwhile legacy for my children.

Bound with determination, I began resurrecting the characters and themes

from memory, but many of my old favorites were long forgotten. With the help of my kids, I was able to recall about 20 stories, enough to contact the local art school in search of an illustrator. I was given the name of a young mother with three children under the age of 5. She was enthusiastic and talented, so I hired her on the spot.

To my surprise, I learned that putting together a children's book is far from child's play! The paragraphs did not correlate with the illustrations, and I often wished I had paid more attention in my high school English class. The number of pages was not divisible by four, and the illustrations' sizes and margins failed to meet the printing requirements. Although I knew very little about the mechanics of publishing, I had confidence that 30 years of educating and another 30 years of coaching children should somehow qualify me for the job! We managed to put together a mockup of a book about a lightning bug that had a burned-out light. The first publisher to whom I sent the book offered me a contract, but only on the condition that I fire the illustrator. It would have been unconscionable to write books about values and then abandon this young artist. I walked away from my very first book deal. I sent out several samples to other major New York publishers and received very kind, somewhat encouraging rejection letters. The process was going nowhere, but I just could not give up.

FINALLY, SUCCESS

Sometimes when we least expect it, things have a way of working out for the best. Toward the end of 2006, I was contacted by Beech Acres, an organization devoted to abused and underprivileged children. I have

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Dr. Osher signs his books at Joseph-Beth Booksellers in Cincinnati.

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donated gifts to the organization's annual Christmas party for decades. At that time, I mentioned to Beech Acres' president that I was taking a stab at writing children's books, and he offered to review them. A few days after I sent several mockups to him, he asked me if I would be interested in signing the books at the upcoming For the Love of Kids national conference at the Cincinnati Convention Center. Although the conference was only 3 weeks away and I had no clue how to get the books published in time to meet the deadline, I accepted his invitation. With the help of two superb local publishing companies, three books were completed in time for a 30-minute signing scheduled during an intermission.

MY DEBUT

It was a lonely feeling sitting by myself at a table with my three books on display. In my hands were the surgical charts for the following Monday, because I expected to have 30 uninterrupted minutes to prepare my cases. Astonishingly, parents and educators began lining up to leaf through the pages, and I found myself signing personal notes to countless children. More than 2 hours later, my right hand ached, and my rear end was sore. The positive comments I overheard around the table, however, filled me with an enormous sense of satisfaction. I could envision so many children being tucked in and falling asleep dreaming about how Larry the lightning bug learned the meaning of courage when his light blew out. I was also happy to see how much money was being generated, because I was donating 100% of the proceeds to charity.

Word of mouth must spread fast, because I have committed to raising money for half a dozen other worthwhile organizations. I hope that my stories have a positive impact on youngsters and give parents another reason to finish the day with a wholesome bedtime story. Selfishly, I am leaving my own children with a lifelong legacy that will remind them of my unqualified love. Would I give up operating to become a full-time writer? Absolutely not! I am, however, looking forward to writing more stories that can capture children's imaginations, tickle their funny bones, and teach meaningful values. ■

Robert H. Osher, MD, is Professor of Ophthalmology at the University of Cincinnati, College of Medicine and Medical Director Emeritus of the Cincinnati Eye Institute. His practice is limited to cataract surgery. He is a frequent lecturer, prolific writer, and recognized authority in this subspecialty. In addition, Dr. Osher has coached more than 60 youth sports teams, won seven consecutive Ohio State Amateur Athletic Union titles, and reached the Final Four at the National Basketball Championships with both his boys' and girls' teams.