



debbie❖dadey



# fate as fiction

Debbie Dadey is a typical Fort Collins mom. She adores her three children, drives them around town, proudly displays their photos all over her house and wants the very best for them.

But not many typical kids can say their typical mom just happens to be a best-selling children's author with more than 130 published books.

Debbie and co-author Marcia Thornton-Jones are best known for their series, "The Adventures of the Bailey School Kids." The 51-book series published by Scholastic is available across the United States, as well as in a few other countries in several languages.

Debbie told Journey the thing she loves about writing is "being able to be anywhere and let anything happen."

During a recent interview, Debbie got comfortable in a big office chair behind her L-shaped cherry wood desk as she explained how she became an author, detailing a path to success that was not easy.

Debbie and Marcia worked at the same school in Kentucky, Debbie as a librarian and Marcia as a teacher.

"One day after school, while we were exercising in the weight room, we started talking about writing and how we both wanted to write children's books," she said.

The two began writing whenever they could find some time together – lunch time, before school, after school. Not knowing much about publishing children's books, they started sending out their stories to publishing houses. For more than a year, they tried to sell a book, but with no luck.

"We finally made our first sale with a greeting card," Debbie said. "We got \$150 for about 10 words. It was great. It said, 'Two words of advice now that you're a working mother – FAST FOOD!'"

The sale was enough incentive to keep them going. One afternoon after a particularly hard day, they sat down to write. They started talking about what would happen if they were monsters who taught school. Students would certainly pay attention then, they agreed.

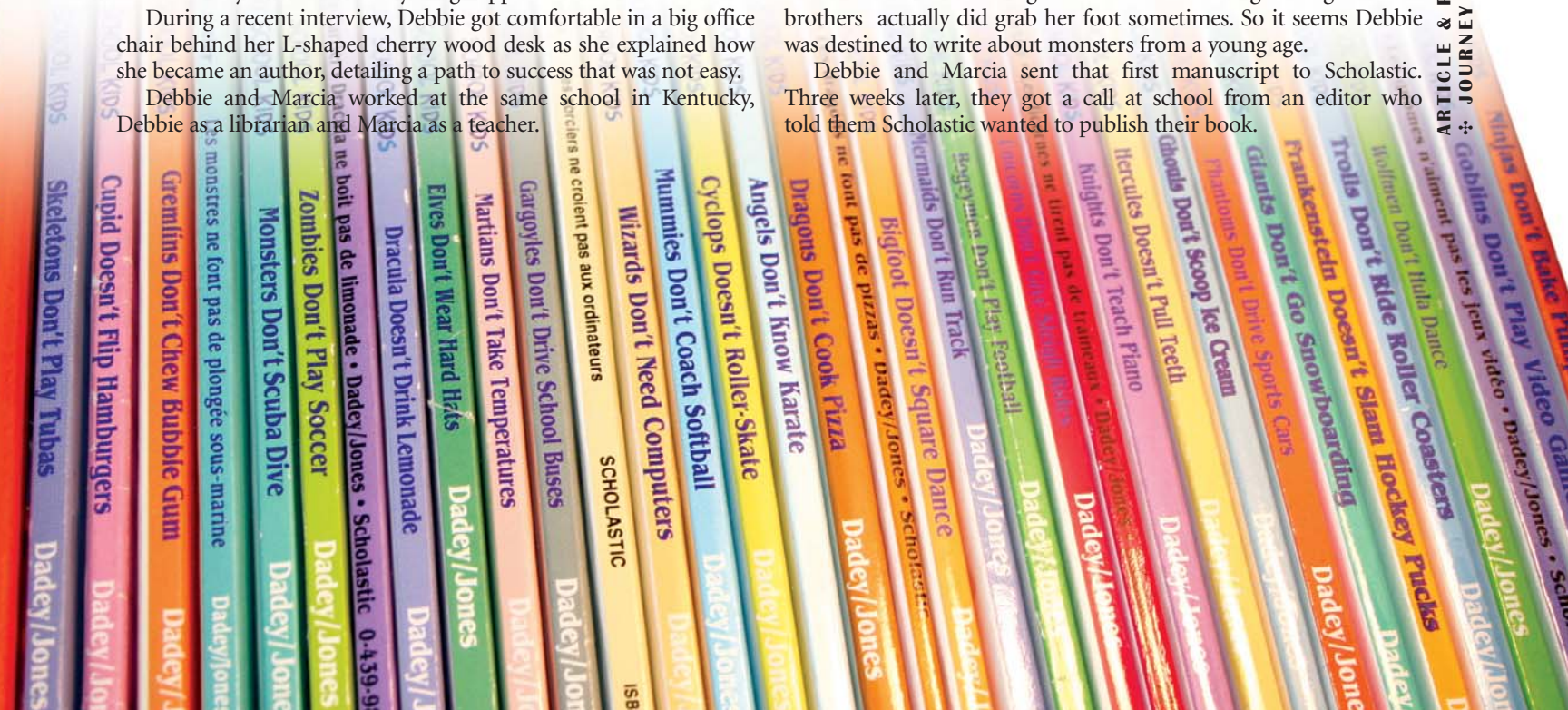
It was here the idea for their first Bailey School Kids book was born and they began writing "Vampires Don't Wear Polka Dots." They picked a vampire as the monster because it was something that terrified Debbie as a kid.

"Every night, I'd have to pull the covers over my neck all the way up to my chin," she said, laughing. "I knew I was safe as long as my neck was covered – because we all know vampires can't pull down covers!"

She also wouldn't ever let her foot dangle over the edge of the bed for fear of something from under the bed grabbing her. Her brothers actually did grab her foot sometimes. So it seems Debbie was destined to write about monsters from a young age.

Debbie and Marcia sent that first manuscript to Scholastic. Three weeks later, they got a call at school from an editor who told them Scholastic wanted to publish their book.

ARTICLE & PHOTOGRAPHS BY KERRIE FLANAGAN  
❖ JOURNEY CONTRIBUTING EDITOR



"I was so excited," Debbie said, "I jumped up on the table in my library and danced."

Debbie and Marcia began a series of book signings across the country and their first book sold 250,000 copies.

Riding on the wave of success, they wrote the second book, "Werewolves Don't Go To Summer Camp." They rewrote it and submitted it to Scholastic three times before the publishing company finally said "Yes."

Through it all, even after more books were published, Scholastic kept telling Debbie and Marcia it was not interested in publishing a series of books.

After her sixth book, Debbie made a decision that would change the course of her life – she decided to quit her job and become a full-time writer.

*"It was incredibly scary to stop working at a regular job," Debbie said. "I have worked since I was 14, so to give up that constant paycheck was a great leap of faith... Thankfully, right after I'd quit my day job, I got the news that Scholastic had turned the Bailey School Kids books into a series."*

Debbie, who moved to Fort Collins from Illinois in 2001, continues to work with Scholastic today and she and Marcia are working on a new series titled "The Adventures of the Bailey School Kids Jr. Chapter Books." She collaborates with Marcia, who lives in Lexington, Ky., through e-mail.

Over the course of her 15-year career, her books, some written with Marcia and others on her own, have sold over 34 million copies, with new fans picking up her work every day.

In the "Bailey School Kids" series, there are four main characters: Liza, Melody, Howie and Eddie, described as the ornery kid in the bunch.

When asked which character she is most like, Debbie immediately responded with, "Eddie."

"When I was young, my mom said I did just enough to not get in trouble," she said. "I never got in serious trouble, unless you count the two times I almost burned down the house and the other time I backed a car into our house. Oops, and totaling a car when I was 16."

"I can remember always getting in trouble for talking at school," she continued. "I had to write lots of pages and ended up learning a few things because of it. For instance, one fifth-grade teacher made me write the Gettysburg Address 50 times – more than once. I can still remember that pretty well."

When coming up with new ideas for her books, Debbie draws from real life.

"I think it is interesting how as a writer you pull from all different places in your life and put them together in a story," she said. "'King of the Kooties' is based on my next-door neighbor jumping on his trampoline singing 'Circle, circle, dot, dot, now I have my kootie shot.' 'Cherokee Sister' is based on the fact that I am part Cherokee Indian. That is part of my heritage that I feel is important."

Debbie attributed her success to hard work and loving what she does. She said the trend in children's publishing right now is the wackier, the better.

"The biggest mistake writers make is trying to teach a lesson," she said. "When I was a kid, books had lessons. That doesn't work today. Kids want to be entertained. You are competing with video games, TVs and cell phones."

Debbie explained the difference between a successful writer and an unsuccessful one is that anyone can be a writer, but successful writers rewrite and rewrite in order to make the story better.

She advises aspiring authors to read Publishers Weekly to see the trends in publishing, read good children's books by the truckload, attend writers' conferences and write every second they can.

Debbie shared what she would like to be doing in 10 years: "I'd love to be watching my children happily grow older with the possibility of a grandchild, enjoying writing and spending time with my husband at a cabin retreat. I'd also like to use that cabin as a place to host writing retreats for others."

Painted as a border on the walls of Debbie's home office are the words of American poet Max Ehrmann:

*"You are a child of the universe,  
no less than the trees and the stars;  
you have a right to be here.  
And whether or not it is clear to you,  
no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should."*

The passage, Debbie said, gives her peace and makes her feel that God chose her to live at this particular time for some particular reason.

Maybe that reason is to help children be excited about reading. Maybe it is to inspire writers to pursue their dreams. Either way, Debbie Dadey has made her mark in the publishing world and in the hearts of many children. ❖

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