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In 'Jasper's World,' friendship is more important than a ton of dog treats

By *Sophie Braccini*



Local author Sarah Gunn just received the prints of her first book, "Jasper's World." Photo Sophie Braccini

Sarah Gunn has been carrying the stories of Jasper the dog in her mind for many years. It has been a long process, but the local author is now published and starting a new adventure: promoting her new children book, "Jasper's World."

In doing so she meets in the classroom with young students who get interested in her characters and their adventures, as well as in the story-writing process.

Gunn is a Moraga mother from England who raised her two children here and continues to serve the community as a reading tutor at Camino Pablo Elementary School. When she came to California, she did so with her British roots and as she started imagining stories for children set in the British countryside with its pastel colors and lush greens that came naturally to her. There she created the adventure of Jasper, a feisty Jack Russell belonging to a local vet.

The figure of Gunn's father-in-law, who was a local vet in the southern British countryside, came to her mind. Her husband Neil had grown up there, with two successive family Jack Russells. Gunn remembers one of them and heard stories about the other one, and she loves that breed of dog for its energy and spirit. She also remembers fondly visits she made with her father-in-law to local farms, and still has with her the images of a Christmas Eve night when he delivered a lamb.

But she also wanted to tell a story that illustrated a life skill for her young audience and she choose friendship. Not just any friendship, but the friendship between Jasper and Nellie, a young sheep who was adopted by a nearby farmer who the vet often visits to attend to the farm animals. So beget "Jasper's World." Let's not spoil the mystery, but in that sweet story, something happens to Nellie and her friend Jasper will save the day.

Gunn believes that friendship can flourish between very different people, including different species and breeds. The author has incorporated in her story how one can complement and teach things to the other and enrich each other's experience. She is also a keen observer of dogs, and as she transcribes in the story of Jasper's thoughts, they are quite believable. The dog is driven by his instinct and his unique abilities, such as his remarkable sense of smell.

Gunn worked with an editor at Mascot Books to get her book published. She explains that its model is a hybrid, part self-publishing, part traditional promotion by the publisher, putting "Jasper's World" out with Barnes and Noble, Amazon and the Ingram Content Group, which places books at such places as Costco and Whole Foods. She submitted her story idea and there was a lot of back and forth to tighten the plot, make the story shorter with a lot of room for illustrations, something Gunn really wanted.

She explains that it took about two years to edit the text to its final form, decide on an editing format, and work with the illustrator, Thomas Hilley. She details how the editor proposed a number of illustrators, and how she chose one who best brought Jasper to life and matched the vision she had in her mind.

The final books arrived at her place mid-June. Before school ended Gunn took a printout of it to read in one third-grade and one second-grade class at CP. The young students enjoyed the experience and asked many questions, she said. Of course they wanted to know if the book was based on a true story and if Jasper really existed.

They also asked about the writing process itself and Gunn told them that for a book it works just like what they do in class: It takes a lot of rewriting and editing before the story is finished. The children were also interested by the fact that Gunn is a familiar face around the school; for them writing and publishing a book now appears to be something within reach.

Of course the children asked if Jasper would have other adventures, and Gunn says that he very well might.

The children proposed other life skills the dog could explore, such as perseverance.

Gunn says that she will spend the summer contacting independent bookstores in the area and offer to come and do readings. One of the first ones will be at Orinda Books, where Gunn will appear from 6 to 7:30 p.m. on Thursday, Aug. 10 as part of that local bookstore's Summer Fun for Kids program. The book can be purchased there or online.

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