

MELISSA HEKKERS

Flying Across Red Skies

The award-winning author of children's books talks about her latest publication and the challenges of motherhood

Usually, children's book illustrations are created to accompany an existing text. For Melissa Hekkers' latest publication, however, the process was reversed.

Already the author of one award-winning children's book, Hekkers will be presenting her second, 'Flying Across Red Skies' (illustrated by Marlen Karletidou), in Nicosia on June 12.

Hekker's first book 'Crocodile' was published in 2008 and won the Cyprus State Illustration award. Both books are in English and Greek.

"This second book came a bit out of the blue," Hekkers told The Cyprus Weekly recently.

"I was approached by Karletidou, an artist with which I had collaborated with before. She said that she had some paintings that were very child-friendly, very colourful and asked if I would like to adapt a text to them. This was something I had not really thought about before as I am a very visual person and think about the images as I write. I took it as a challenge."

The result is a quality publication aimed at children aged 7 to 10, where the protagonist - a little fish called Nereas - is never actually seen by the reader.

"The story is essentially about a little fish who wants to learn to fly. He learns about the world, makes friends and they help each other along the way and learn the importance of family and home. The text is relative to what the artist wanted to convey in her paintings but I diverted a little from her environment-focused message."

Hekkers' said this book was very different to 'Crocodile' which was about parent-child communication and illustrated by Anna Fotiadou.

"The first book was more educational.

This one is freer, there are moral messages but the children will be able to make up their own minds. 'Crocodile' had a very strong message, which was what it was written for, it is very direct. This book is more laid back."

'Flying Across Red Skies' will be launched at Pantheon Gallery from 5-7pm on Saturday, June 12 during a workshop where children aged around 5-10 will be invited to listen to and participated in the story and paint.

Hekkers already has text for a third book prepared and has found being a parent herself useful in writing what appeals to children.

"My little girl, who will be three in August, was a protagonist in my first book and has a small role in my second - more in name than anything else. I write for older children but having her has helped adapt my sense of humour. I am still interested in the same things but my approach has changed. Having a child helps you see things from a different perspective," she said.

Fluent in English, Greek and French, Hekkers was born in Belgium and moved to Cyprus at the age of seven. She has family in Paphos and Belgium and, although settled in Nicosia, visits both places often.

Having learnt English when she moved to Paphos, Hekkers decided to attend Greek-language state school at the age of 14, in spite of only knowing a few words in the language.

"I was living in Peyia and I found it hard to integrate, especially in a village and mainly because of the language. I had already taken the step in English and I'm quite glad I made the change because I learnt more about the culture of Cyprus," she said.



Photos Stefanos Kourantzis

Studying in Nicosia before taking an internship in London and travelling, Hekkers said she had something of a "love-hate" relationship with Cyprus for some time but is happy here now.

She has also begun to appreciate more of what Belgium can offer her daughter.

"I wanted to show her where I came from. I never used to speak French in Cyprus before but now I make a point of speaking to her in French."

Working within the Pantheon Cultural Association for the last six years, Hekkers is involved in many aspects of its activities. She recently moved her office to the first floor of the Pantheon building, to 'The House of Larimeloon - This Must Be The Place', a shop and alternative display venue where she creates many of the items on display.

"There were two voids - one for a more relaxed area where people could share art work, discuss it with me and with the artists, perhaps enjoy a drink. The other was for somewhere artists and craftspeople could display work that was not of the type usually shown in a gallery," she said.

"I had my sewing, my books, my handcrafts and most of all an appreciation of all these kind of things. There is also restored furniture, which is something my parents work on too- so this is really a place where a lot of loves converge," she said.

'Flying Across Red Skies' is currently available from 'The House of Larimeloon' and will be available from main bookshops around Cyprus after June 12. Call 22-670843 for more information.

