

1999/May DEBI GLIORI - Publishing News

When it's read out, your new book makes grown men cry at sales conferences; similarly, it sends teachers weeping from the classroom and brings a lump to the throat of a hardened(ish) trade journalist. It's also the only one of the 42 books you've produced that your small daughter actually likes. "She's not really a *Mr Bear* fan," says Debi Gliori wryly, "in fact, she'd rather have anything else!"

The book in question is called *No Matter What* and it is, to understate the case somewhat, doing rather well. "I met the printer, Proost, at Bologna this year," says Gliori, "and he was ecstatic about the run, which is now well over 100,000 copies...I'm dead chuffed because it was good enough just to do the book, but to find people love it is even better" Already sold in the US, Australia (where the publisher, Koala Books, called it the most beautiful book of the year), Germany, France, Holland, Denmark and Norway, Bloomsbury is, post-Bologna, tying up the rest of Europe and Japan. "We are currently quoting on major reprint quantities for Harcourt Brace," says an admirably restrained Rosamund de la Hey, "which, could, in conjunction with the new deals, put us at a second run of 100,000."

Gliori had been mulling over the idea for some three years, but finally wrote it down in response to a need to explain things to her daughter "She was very upset when my marriage went pear-shaped," says Gliori, "and nothing I could say would put it right. Separation is a ghastly thing for children and they do have a tendency to react very badly...it's a confused, horrid time and my daughter had stuffed all her Sylvanian Families in her back pack and was ready to leave home. But as soon as I'd written the book, our relationship improved; at the very least I'd convinced myself that, no matter what, I would always love her."

In the book Gliori becomes Large, the mother fox and paradigm for every parent who's offspring has asked the seemingly unanswerable; her daughter, and every questioning, seeking child, is Small. For a picture book, of necessarily limited physical extent and scope, it tackles a powerfully large and emotionally charged subject area. That she does it with such aplomb is

a mark of Gliori's talents as a writer and an artist, because *No Matter What* works equally well on both levels.

She took the idea to Bloomsbury because, she says, she had a sneaking suspicion that they'd know what it was all about. "I thought other people might try to change it, especially for the US, because I talk about death and the Americans don't do death and toilets," she goes on. "And I was right, because Sarah [Odedina] was just wonderful and I love working with her - she didn't change a single word, and that has never happened to me before, and when I asked her why she said 'if it ain't broke - don't fix it'...I hope we can grow very old, become scary old ladies publishing together!"

Odedina's instincts were obviously right on target because, apart from fascinating children and reducing adults to sobbing heaps, the text has already been used at two weddings. "My brother read it at mine," says de la Hey, "and Debi's written it in such a way that it makes you read it well." Gliori is, she tells me, extremely pleased to hear about the reaction her book is getting "...I feel great," she says, "and then I have to go a stick a pin in my head."

No Matter What has allowed her to say everything she's ever wanted to say. A comment which begs the question - does this mean she now has to hang up her palette and clean her brushes for the last time? "No! I can cheerfully carry on illustrating, especially *Mr Bear*, as well as things for other people," she replies. "But there is this nagging voice in the back of my head that says 'You haven't talked about *that* yet', and Sarah and I are, suffice to say, hatching something as we speak."

News there that will delight her many fans, as well as booksellers the world over (and no doubt printers, too). This worldwide popularity has a lot to do with the fact that her work is, in every sense, accessible and her illustrative style one that children find particularly attractive - so much so that many of them want to copy it. "I have a huge folder of kids' letters, and loads of drawings," says Gliori. "One wall of my studio is full of them." Had she expected the response *No Matter What* has had? The rejoinder comes in her so-dry-it-could-cut-you Scottish accent. "I didn't expect, but I hoped,"

she says, “because you never expect anything in publishing...I did, though, have a feeling it would be good.”

The book looks and reads just as you would anticipate a Debi Gliori book to do, but looks can be deceptive. “I worked harder on this one than on any other to get it perfect,” says Gliori. “I chucked artwork away if it wasn’t right - and when everyone else went off clubbing during last year’s Edinburgh Book Festival, I got packed off home to finish it!” Understandably, by the time she’d completed it the book had become far too valuable to her to consign to the tender mercies of the postal services, no matter what guarantees they gave. “So I got on a train and delivered it in person, which really isn’t something I’d normally do,” she says. “I don’t know what got into me, but when I arrived I walked into the boardroom and announced that what I had with me was going to pay our salaries into the millennium... thankfully, they believed me!”

No Matter What has been, admits Gliori, the most intense book she’s ever done, but she never used the experience as therapy. “I hate that,” she says, very firmly. “What this book is...it’s the promise we make to our children the moment they’re born.” And there, I suppose, lies its power as a piece of work. It tells it like we all suspect it should be: in this life there really is nothing more important than love and kids - the rest, if you’re brutally honest with yourself, is nothing but games we play. But what Gliori has done is say that for us in a simply beautiful way. No wonder people love it.

