



Mom First, Author Second

Melissa Finkelstein Releases Children's Book Focused on Empathy, Coping and Kindness

BY KEVIN CZERWINSKI

Melissa Finkelstein has always dreamt of writing children's books. It took some time, however, for the dreams to coincide with the inspiration and the opportunity.

It wasn't until the Woodcliff Lake resident got married and had three children, all with different per-

sonalities, struggles and needs, that the perfect storm brought the three factors together. Finkelstein, 36, recently published her first children's book, *Picky the Panda and the Tickly Tail*, which is a story that teaches lessons about empathy, coping and kindness to young children.

The book, which is one of three she has written [the other two have yet to be published], was inspired by her 4-year-old daughter Skylar, who has sensory processing disorder. The neurological condition hamper's the body's ability to receive messages from the five senses thus making it difficult to turn those messages into appropriate motor and behavioral responses. The condition can be overwhelming at times, especially for a young child.

"She's struggled with it since birth," Finkelstein said.

"When she was a baby, she was pretty fussy and challenging because, as we now know, she was uncomfortable. She was diagnosed as a 1-year-old and we have learned quite a bit since then about how to cope and support her.

"Being highly sensitive, as both Skylar and I are, brings with it some struggles and difficulties but it also allows her to shine and that's one of the book's main messages. Embrace your sensitivity. It [the sensitivity] may make you seem fragile or weak at times but it's really your superpower, allowing you to empathize, think deeply and open your heart to others."

Finkelstein explained that Skylar is very sensitive to touch and doesn't like things that are "slimy, sticky or icky." Her response to such conditions can result in pain or extreme discomfort.

Picky the Panda, who is based on Skylar, finds herself in similar situations in the book. The love and support Picky is shown, though, is meant to serve as a lesson for both children and adults that some folks may not have it as easy as others, but they are no less special or deserving of support.

The book, which was recently released, is available on Amazon and is also available at Bookends Bookstore in Ridgewood, Ave

Lumi in Tenafly and at My Gym in Glen Rock. Expect at least two more books to follow – *Bobby the Snake* and *the Broken TV*, which was inspired by Finkelstein's 7-year-old son Myles, and *Squeaky Kiki*, which was inspired by Skylar's twin sister, Kayla.

Finkelstein said the background, research and brainstorming, "the thinking part," can take a very long time when putting a book like these together. She said *Bobby the Snake* was an idea three years in the making. However, the physical part of writing the book comes much quicker to Finkelstein, who typically writes the first draft in just a couple of days.

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“Everything has to be perfectly marinated,” she said.

“There is a lot of thinking in the shower and in the car and waking up in the middle of the night when the lightbulb goes off. You ponder it all and when everything is perfectly aligned, I like to get it all out onto the page quickly.”

That Finkelstein, who is a Florida native, can be so prolific shouldn’t come as much of a surprise. She has been writing poetry since she was a youngster and has a custom poetry business, Designer Rhymes. She also writes daily nursery rhymes for her children and honed her skills for years writing litigation briefs while working as a lawyer. She is not currently practicing.

“I’m not practicing law, but I am still barred and current on my credentials,” Finkelstein said. “I don’t want to litigate right now, though. I’m really focused on this creative outlet. My favorite part about being a lawyer is writing and I’m excited to do that in more of a creative, joyful and whimsical way during this next chapter.”

That creativity is clearly evident in each of her books. Finkelstein said that she wanted to share a message about each of her children that “captures the essence of who they are” while focusing on one part of their personality. The intent is to make the story relatable to other children so that they can feel supported and not alone.

“One of the biggest parts of Skylar’s personality is her heightened sensitivity,” Finkelstein said. “She loves the book and is really proud. My other two children want to know when their books are coming out. That will be soon. Count on Skylar, though, to make her way to the front of the line.”

Finkelstein said the book about her son was going to come out first but when she found the right illustrator [Catarina Neto] for *Picky*, she decided to go back to the beginning and retool the other books. Each of the books, as well as future books, will see some crossover in characters.

“Bobby the Snake and Squeaky Kiki character each appear in *Picky the Panda* and the *Tickly Tail*,” Finkelstein said.



“The main message in *Bobby the Snake* is to get off the [TV, iPad and computer] screens and get outside. It’s the story of a snake who wakes up cranky and wants to watch TV all day, but to his dismay, the TV is broken. Once his parents convince him to play outside, he has a wonderful day and recognizes that movement and nature can reinvigorate us.

“*Squeaky Kiki* is a book whose main theme is about advocating for oneself. Kayla, or as we call her Kiki, is very mild-mannered and easy going. She tends to go with the flow, whether it’s with family or classmates. So, her book is about her finally learning to stand up for herself and her needs, which by the way she has done beautifully.”

Finkelstein said that she learned the process of writing, editing and publishing her own book by doing as much research as she possibly could and seeking out others who have done this before and even those who haven’t but whose opinions she trusts.

“I’ve done it by listening to my gut,” she said. “I’m grinding and doing the best I can.”

Picky the Panda, Bobby the Snake and Squeaky Kiki should be proud.