MONSTERS OF THE MIND

Marita van der Vyver's classic kids' book is a vivid exploration of the young imagination

Compiled by JANE VORSTER



RHINOCEPHANTS ON THE ROOF ★★★★
By Marita van der Vyver, Tafelberg **R113***

If you have young children who are scared of the dark and whose overactive imaginations keep them awake at night this book could be the answer. It tells the tale of Daniel who's plagued by all kinds of scary fantasy creatures when he goes for his first sleepover at his grandparents' house. There's a blue gnuraffe in the cupboard, a dangerous baborilla under his bed and a whole herd of noisy rhinocephants on the roof. But luckily his grandmother and grandfather have a few tricks up their sleeves to help allay his fears.

Van der Vyver's vivid tale was originally published in 1996 but has been updated with new illustrations by Dale Blankenaar. The Cape Town illustrator went to great lengths to create artwork that would speak to a new generation, even going so far as to shut himself in a dark cupboard so he could see things from a monster's point of view.

All of this loving dedication to detail reflects in this beautiful book, which is suitable for children aged four and upwards.



ANOUK VAN DER BERG (5) says, "Night-time can be scary. I also imagine things when I'm lying in the dark. At night my lampshade sometimes looks like a vampire's face and the door is a huuuge giant. Daniel is a very brave boy and his grandparents seem very nice."



ABOVE: Marita van der Vyver's re-released children's book is beautifully illustrated (RIGHT).

SOUTH African author Marita van der Vyver now lives in a small town in France. We tracked her down to quiz her about her re-released children's classic, Rhinocephants On The Roof, and pick her brain about what parents can do to get their kids excited about books and reading.

What inspired you to write this book?
When my son Daniel was three he spent a night with his grandparents and became scared because he heard these strange noises on the roof… So he called his granddad, who thumped the ceiling with a broom to chase away the "rhinocephants".

When I heard about this incident my imagination simply took flight. With Daniel's help I invented some more monsters.

What ideas were you trying to get across to children?
That it's okay to be afraid – of the dark, of imaginary monsters, of many other things.

What was it like working with Dale Blankenaar?
Absolutely delightful. His youthful enthusiasm was like an injection of energy.

Why did you revise the illustrations instead of simply using the original ones done by Piet Grobler?
Piet Grobler's wonderful illustrations were awarded the Tienie Holloway Medal for children's books nearly 20 years ago but we wanted to give the story a more contemporary edge. Dale is a former student of Piet's so we enjoyed this sense of continuity. He kept the references to "real" animals in his illustrations but brought them into the 21st century. The rhinocephants now look like invaders from outer space!

What do you enjoy most about writing for kids?
Children don't read reviews or pretend they like a book to impress other people. They have a real gut reaction – and it shows on their faces when you read to them.

Is it a challenge to refine ideas so they're simple yet remain interesting and engaging?
A huge challenge. A good children's book is like a good poem. Every word counts.

What was the book you most enjoyed reading to your own children?
The fairytales of the Grimm brothers. I insisted on the original fairytales, though, not the Disney-fied versions!

Do you remember being read to when you were a child?
I have more vivid memories of being told bedtime stories than being read to. I also remember my dad singing us to sleep with songs in which he kept changing the lyrics to make us laugh. I think this is important to mention in a country where many parents still can't afford books or can't read. Everyone can tell stories to their children. Children need stories like they need food and fresh air.

How can parents inspire a love of reading?
Most important is that you love reading yourself, otherwise they'll see right through your act. Then start reading to them shortly after birth – I actually started reading aloud while I was still pregnant – and continue long after they've learnt to read. Reading a story for yourself is great but listening to a loving parent reading to you at bedtime is very, very special.

■ **Go to maritavandervyver.info for more.**

MATCHING WORDS WITH PICTURES

Illustrator Dale Blankenaar (RIGHT) tells us why he has the best job in the world.

Do you have a special interest in illustrating kids' books?
I prefer to call them "picture books" because I create books for myself, not for any specific age group. I don't think I've ever grown up so hopefully children will like the worlds I create. I feel the picture book can appeal to people of any age.

There's a random teddy bear on every page. What's his story? That's for readers to figure out for themselves. It's not that random at all. One clue I can give: he's not running away.

ELNA VAN DER MERWE



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