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Children's book author explores refugees and prejudice in new books

By ROBIN CAUDELL Press-Republican
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PHOTOS PROVIDEDThe covers of “Katinka Refugee Princess” and “I Can’t Play With You”, written by Victoria Ainsworth and illustrated by Courtney K. Mann.



PLATTSBURGH – Children's book author Victoria Ainsworth has a big backpile of projects.

“I have four on the go, one completely finished, but we are actually looking for another illustrator,” the Plattsburgh resident said.

Artist Courtney K. Mann illustrated “Katinka Refugee Princess” and “I Can't Play With You,” which were edited by Ann Hope Ruzow Holland, PhD.

UNCLE RUSSELL, NOT

“I tried to write novels when I was 14, 15 because I was really interested in the Russian Civil War and the Second World War,” Ainsworth said.

“I had this Uncle Russell. He's dead, but Uncle Russell always wrote and wrote and he never finished anything. When he died, he was living in my grandmother's house. Uncle Russell stashed money all over the place.

“The pipes blew up because it froze, and in the basement were dozens and dozens of Uncle Russell's manuscripts. So that's what's in the back of my mind. I'm going to end up like Uncle Russell.”

Ainsworth has written all her life, but never thought she was very good.

“My sister is a really good writer,” she said.

“My mother wrote poetry. I was kind of like the dud in the family. I was not an academic, but I had all these stories in my head.”

FOUND STORIES

Ainsworth has chipped away at one novel for 22 years.

“It's a Holocaust story – stolen art, slave labor, really tragic awful novel,” she said.

“It's all basically true. When I was in New York, complete strangers would come up to me on the bus or the subway and tell me these sad, tragic stories. All of my stories are based on these little stories that other people have told me.”

“Katinka Refugee Princess,” set in 1921, is the story of a displaced mother and child who find their way in a new place, Montreal.

They forge new identities in North America while uplifting their spirits through memories of their royal status in their native Russia.

Katinka studies ballet and learns how to sew for a good cause.

Her mother, Irina, navigates retail in an upscale store to earn an income.

“‘Katinka’ is, again, all like little passages that people told me or some little old lady would tell me ‘I worked in this terrible factory because we were so poor or we had no hot water,’” Ainsworth said.

“All these ideas were filed in my head somewhere in these dusty piles. All these stories are basically little tidbits of things that other people have told me.”

For the book, appropriate for ages 8-12, she had a distinct vision for the clothes, architecture and houses.

“Courtney doesn't have the same historical obsession that I do,” Ainsworth said.

“So it wasn't exactly what I wanted, but I know you can't tell an artist what to do because they have their own vision. That's basically the hardest part. It's a give and take. I'm pretty fussy about historical accuracy.”

WALK IN THEIR SHOES

The Princesses dwell in a one-room apartment in a tall, red brick building and dream of a more spacious abode with a garden.

“You can't tell people how to draw and paint,” Ainsworth said.

“That is probably the hardest part is finding that even ground with the illustrator. I think I was probably a pain in the neck to work with.”

Ainsworth wrote the book to make her readers think about refugees waiting or crossing at the Mexican border.

“People are so nasty,” she said.

“These little refugees could be the person who cures cancer. They could be the next great philosopher, then next great violinist, the next great scientist. Just because they're a refugee doesn't mean they are not of value.”

Ainsworth knows princess stories appeal to children, but she wrote one with a refugee twist.

“I don't want you to judge her because she's dirt poor,” she said.

"She's wearing old boots. They live in one room, but she's a princess. Maybe they will look at a refugee and say she is a very valuable person.

"We don't know who she is or what she would be. Just because she has a dirty T-shirt, and they don't have any physical belongings, they are still valued and important."

Ainsworth pondered the waves of refugees to North America due to crimes through the centuries.

"That are too hideous to bring to the surface," she said.

"It's just unbelievable that civilized people could behave like this. The poor little kids at the Mexican border, how could you do that to a child? How can you take them from their mothers? It's just hideous. It's unforgivable."

'WAKING DREAM'

The author wrote "I Can't Play With You" a year and a half ago.

"It comes in the middle of the night" she said.

"It's like a dream, but you are not asleep. It just is there. It's like a waking dream. You see the faces and you see these people."

The book is appropriate for ages 4-7, and again has a basis in reality.

"There was a girl named Lorraine who was really nasty and wouldn't play with another girl because she was Catholic," she said.

"There was absolutely a Lorraine in my childhood. My mother remembered that story more than anybody else because she was so horrified that a little child should be so aware of being Catholic or Protestant."

The protagonist is critical of children who are not exactly like her.

"It's very timely," Ainsworth said.

"We sort of think that kids are not bullies and they are not prejudice and they're not judgmental, but in fact they really are."

The author, a former international touring professional ballerina and classical ballet instructor, knows this firsthand from teaching classes.

“And I'm shocked,” she said.

“I tell them okay, we are going to pretend there is a garbage can by the door. You dump all that nastiness in the garbage can before you come into my ballet class. No competition. No bullying. No 'You're fat!' in my ballet class.

“I'm really shocked that little kids are like that. You think they are so innocent.”

Her dancer's discipline goes out the window when it comes to letters.

“I give Ann all these sort of messy things that she puts together a little bit because I tend to run on in my sentences,” she said.

“So, Ann helps me to rearrange some things. Some things I wish she would change things more, but she sort of suggests maybe you shouldn't have so much, it's too elaborate. She tows me in when I get a little too over the top.”

Ainsworth's paperbacks are self-published on Amazon and available for \$14.99 and \$9.99 respectively at Bookburgh Books in Champlain Centre, 60 Smithfield Blvd., Plattsburgh.

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