

Hear Author of Funny Novel about a 5th Grader and a Teen Bully on Blog Radio's "Book Bites for Kids"

By North Coast Communications

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Author M. LaVora Perry on the "Book Bites for Kids" BlogTalkRadio.com program discusses her humorous middle grade novel, TANEESHA NEVER DISPARAGING, its quirky heroine--who is urban, black, and Buddhist--and writing, promoting, and selling books.

Cleveland, Ohio...

AUTHOR'S "GUTSY" PHONE CALL

"Very few people would do that kind of thing. That's pretty gutsy," commented Suzanne Lieurance, children's book author and host of "Book Bites for Kids," a BlogTalkRadio.com program. Lieurance was speaking to her guest, children's book author M. LaVora Perry, about the unusual way that Perry landed a publishing contract for her debut children's novel, TANEESHA NEVER DISPARAGING.

For Perry, the deal began with her making what Lieurance's described as a "gutsy" telephone call. By phone, Perry asked a publisher if they would even consider a story like hers because she couldn't tell by the books featured on their website if her book fit their publishing model. She was thinking at the time, "I don't want to waste my time. I don't want to send it anywhere where it's not going to be sold." That phone call led to TANEESHA NEVER DISPARAGING becoming the first novel ever published by Wisdom Publications--a company whose most notable author is the Dali Lama.

ONE-OF-A-KIND HEROINE

"[It's] a different book," Lieraunce said of TANEESHA NEVER DISPARAGING. "That's what enriches the story so much," said Lieurance. "You don't read many books about little African-American girls who live in the city that are Buddhist."

"You don't read any," Perry replied. "[Taneesha's] the first."

How did Perry come up with the idea of writing about her urban and African-American heroine, 5th grader Taneesha Bey-Ross? She says her three children inspired her. Like Perry and her husband, Perry's children are Buddhist. "I wanted my children to feel, as they got older in school, comfortable," Perry said. "In terms of religion, we are definitely in a minority."

"THIS KID IS JUST LIKE ME"

Perry said, "I read a lot, and the character's faith is a part of who that character is. That's just what the reader accepts." Perry's challenge was to "write a story about a character that was Buddhist and have the reader feel like, 'Oh, this kid is just like me in so many ways and isn't this interesting.' "

In TANEESHA NEVER DISPARAGING, as Lieurance mentioned, Buddhism serves as a backdrop to several conflict's that Taneesha faces at once--conflicts any child could encounter at one time or another.

Taneesha is a very reluctant class president nominee, she believes that her parents habitually disregard her point of view, she becomes the target of a teenage bully, and she suffers constantly from what Perry said is "the thread that runs throughout the whole story...Taneesha has...what she calls her 'evil twin'--the part of her that thinks she's not capable of achieving her goals...She just wants to get through the day without being

embarrassed by something."

Lieurance remarked that one of the elements that makes TANEESHA NEVER DISPARAGING seem true to the experience of today's children is the way Taneesha explained to her best friend, Carli, who is Irish-American, that parents aren't around every day to fix things that go wrong in what Taneesha calls "the school world." Referring to the situation with the teen bully who stalks Taneesha daily after school, Laurience said she thought many children would relate to the way Taneesha realizes, "I better get out of this myself."

BATTLING SELF-DOUBT--AND WINNING

When Lieurance asked Perry about the most difficult part of the process of taking TANEESHA NEVER DISPARAGING from idea to a book released by a general trade publisher, Perry said it was facing the inner doubts that surfaced when an agent rejected her manuscript. Perry said she went through a month-long depression after the rejection and felt like she wasn't "a good enough writer." Finally, Perry "got up and started really digging in and making revisions" the agent had suggested for her story.

"The most difficult part," said Perry, "has been to not give in to feeling defeated...The hardest part was coming to a point where I was like, 'No matter what happens, I'm going to achieve this goal'...[and defeat] that little voice that says what I'm not capable of doing.'" Perry had to not only challenge her own inner negative voice but outer doubts as well--she was once cautioned against writing about a Buddhist character even though, as she said, "that was dream."

Perry eventually decided, "I don't care what I've got to do, I'm going to get this book published and it's going to stick to my original goal of this girl being a Buddhist girl..." The author said, "I was willing to do whatever I needed to do in terms of developing the story so that it was viable on the market."

Perry revealed that even today, "I'm still at that place where I have to come back to that point." She said she has to face down self-doubt much like the character Taneesha has to rise above the constant put-downs of her irritatingly vocal but "totally imaginary" "evil twin", Evella, in TANEESHA NEVER DISPARAGING.

GETTING & OFFERING PUBLISHING PROFESSION TIPS

Perry talked about the children's book professionals whose advice helped her develop TANEESHA NEVER DISPARAGING, these included editor Eileen Robinson of FirstPages.com editing services, a former Scholastic executive editor, and award-winning authors Jerry Spinelli and Rich Wallace. Perry met the two authors at a Highlights Foundation children's book writers' workshop in Chautauqua, New York.

Perry discussed a few of the publishing business strategies she developed when she launched a small press and self-published an earlier version of Taneesha's story in 2003, a version that Perry said was "very well suited for a religious bookstore" but "too preachy" for the mainstream book market. She said the experience of running a small press gave her the "priceless training" she needed to successfully sell the first Taneesha story and other books published by her company.

CURRENT & UPCOMING BOOKS

Perry's first books include "Successful Self Publishing"--a reference book that's still available today. Perry describes "Successful Self-Publishing" as "handy." The book features marketing and promotion tips she's learned along the way. Among Perry's upcoming projects are a teen girl health series coauthored with Linda Bradley, M.D. of the Cleveland Clinic, whom Perry describes as a "Wonder Woman physician," and a young adult sequel to TANEESHA NEVER DISPARAGING that tells the bullying girl's side of the story.

ASPIRING AUTHORS, "REWRITE, REVISE, STICK TO YOUR VISION"

For Perry, what's been the most enjoyable part of the process of bringing Taneesha from its self-published version to the book it is today? "It's really wonderful when a child comes back and says they really enjoyed the story or they can relate to that," said the author. "For people to respond positively to it is a great feeling."

Perry offered this advice for aspiring children's book authors: "Be willing to get critiqued, don't take it personally, go back and rewrite and revise. But," she added, "stick to your vision for your book."

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ABOUT M. LaVORA PERRY

M. LaVora Perry conducts author visits at schools, libraries, and bookstores, as well as writing and book publishing workshops for all ages. Hear her "Book Bites for Kids" radio interview at <http://www.blogtalkradio.com/bookbitesforkids/2008/09/09/Book-Bites-for-Kids-M-LaVora-Perry-is-Todays-Guest>

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