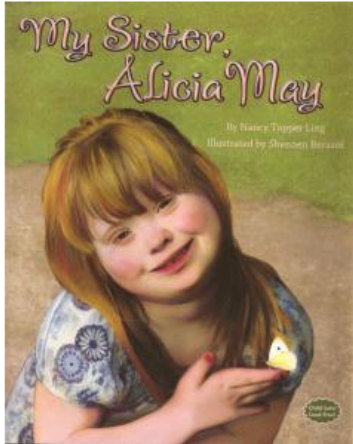
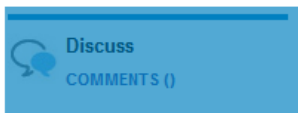


Emotions illustrated vividly in children's book



By Beverly Beckham
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Nancy Tupper Ling lives in Walpole. When her childhood friend gave birth to a daughter with Down syndrome, Ling wrote the baby a poem, "Our Fragile Emissary," a love song that has been e-mailed around the world.



Six year later, Ling wrote her first children's book about this child, "My Sister, Alicia May." She sent it to a Raynham publisher, Pleasant St. Press. Co-owner Jean Cochran, a children's

book author herself, loved the manuscript, bought it, and then went looking for an illustrator.

What happened next is a tale of fate and serendipity and maybe something more.

"I first saw Shennen [Bersani]'s work on a British website for illustrators," Cochran said. She fell in love with her art, but assumed two things: that Bersani lived in Europe and that she would never be able to afford her.

She contacted her anyway and learned in a telephone conversation that Bersani lived just 10 miles away in Weymouth, and that "My Sister, Alicia May" could easily be Bersani's story.

"Shennen informed me that just as with the sisters in the book, she too had a sister, her only sibling, who has Down syndrome," said Cochran. "Of course, I had no way of knowing this. We were both in shock at the coincidence."

It took Bersani a month to decide whether to illustrate the book. "I thought if I take this on, it will bring up all the emotional stuff," Bersani said. But she chose to do it, she said, because she knew "no one will be able to do it the way I can."

When her sister, Holly, was born 40 years ago, there were few programs for kids with disabilities. So a lot of the day-to-day responsibility for caring for Holly fell on Bersani.

She didn't go away to college. She went to art school during the day and watched her sister on nights and weekends. And although Bersani is a successful artist, illustrating books for children and selling more than a million copies of her work worldwide, she had never used her work to explore her feelings about her sister.

"I can tell you honestly, I sobbed and wept over a few of the pages as I tried to work on them - I 'became' Rachel [Alicia May's older sister]. I felt every emotion vividly because they were my own."

The book is filled with these emotions, the drawings and text honest and real.

Cochran, whose publishing company is only three years old, said, "It is extremely important to us that our books are as good, if not better - in content, art, and production - as the larger, more established houses with whom we must compete."

My granddaughter Lucy has Down syndrome. I have spent the last five years in search of a book like this. Until "My Sister, Alicia May" I found nothing.

Cochran said there is a huge void in the market for children's books, especially picture books. "In publishing, there's a saying that everything under the sun has been done. This has not been done. Not like this."

"My Sister, Alicia May" which will be released May 1, is the story not just of two real girls, Alicia May and her sister Rachel, but of every child who has a sister or a brother or a friend. It is the story of what it's like to love someone. Sometimes the people you love irritate you the most. Sometimes you want to pretend you don't know them. Sometimes you don't want them tagging along. Sometimes you're so proud of them you want to tell the world.

"Classrooms, libraries, doctor's offices, and ordinary households need this book," Cochran said. "I feel that it's important as a person and as a publisher to bring awareness, to tell this story."

This is also the kind of tale that belongs on every child's bookshelf, too, because it is a story first, and only subtly, like all good stories, a lesson.

"She looks like me," an 8-year-old at the Canton Library said Monday afternoon after studying the book's cover. Alicia May has long, dark blond hair and bangs and pink cheeks and a beautiful smile. And what this 8-year-old saw was not a child with Down syndrome, but just another little girl with blond hair, like herself.

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