



A celebration of

difference

Rebecca Elliott's picture book *Just Because*, starring her daughter who has cerebral palsy, has been praised for its sensitive representation of disability. SHARON BARNARD talks to the author and illustrator about her groundbreaking title

"IT'S JUST an astonishing dream come true," says Rebecca of the glowing commendations that have been coming thick and fast for her book – from former children's laureates Jacqueline Wilson and Michael Rosen to groups like National Postage. "To get such great support from both the children's book and the children's disability worlds is just unbelievable!"

Not bad when the book is amongst the first she has written (there are two more due out this year: *Cub's First Winter* and *Milo's Pet Egg*) – and she is a self-taught illustrator, albeit a very experienced one, having worked on other people's publications over the last eight years.

"I did a degree in philosophy (a choice which made sense at the time, although ironically nothing

really makes sense after you've done a degree in philosophy!) and consequently did a lot of my [artistic] training on the job.

"I finally feel that I am now creating high-end quality picture books which will be treasured by children and remembered fondly when they grow up. Well, that's the aim anyway."

She believes one of the reasons authors steer clear of representing disability is that most have no first hand experience of it. "There is a fear of offending and a trepidation of entering unknown delicate territory."

And when disability is mentioned in the media "it is usually in the negative context of a bitter-sweet tale of the parents coping and ploughing on despite it all. But we're not just coping with it – we're enjoying her," says Rebecca who "wanted to put something positive out there" about severe disability.

"Clemmie's our fabulous, funny, curly-haired little girl who does nothing and is perfect just because of her uniqueness. And it is this celebration of difference, of life being better because of the existence of children with disabilities that is so rarely represented."

Since Clemmie's birth, Rebecca has been drawn to John 9:1-3 where the disciples ask why a man born blind is the way he is. She says Jesus' answer that it was so that he could be used by God to show what great things the Father can do, helps her understand that Clemmie's disabilities "are of God".

"In contradiction to the outlook of our meritocratic society, our worth is not in doing – in achieving, acquiring and winning, but rather in being.

"Clemmie proves to me that you don't have to *do* anything, to *achieve* anything, indeed to walk, or talk or dance or sing in order to be utterly perfect, enchanting and loved. And what better analogy for God's own unconditional love for us."

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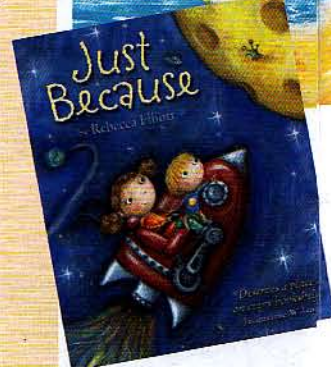
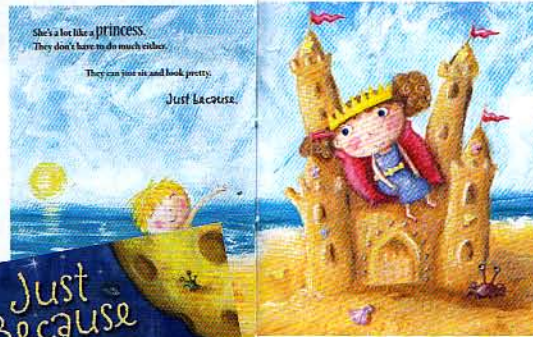
Writing about her five-year-old daughter Clemmie, who has cerebral palsy, and toddler son Toby might have been daunting for some, but she says her children made it easy for her to write what is reckoned to be the first picture book to star a profoundly disabled little girl.

"The way Toby interacts with his sister is effortlessly hilarious, intriguing and heart-warming – all the necessary ingredients of a good picture book.

"Whereas an adult might view my Clemmie as an unfortunate soul, might see the tubes, the wheelchair and immediately consider the medical implications, the necessary care, the tragedy of what might have been and so on, Toby just sees a beautiful princess of a sister who's not mean to him.

"She has time to play with him, has a great chair on which they can fly to the moon together, and doesn't get scared so is there to comfort him during a storm."

Rebecca finds it "astonishing and disgraceful" that severely disabled children are still almost entirely unrepresented in books. However, this trend is beginning to change, thanks to initiatives like the charity Scope's 'In The Picture' campaign to encourage authors to include more disabled characters in their work.



Just Because by Rebecca Elliott (Lion Hudson, £5.99) is published on 20 August and we have 5 copies to give away. Send your details to the address on page 3 by 20 August 2010.