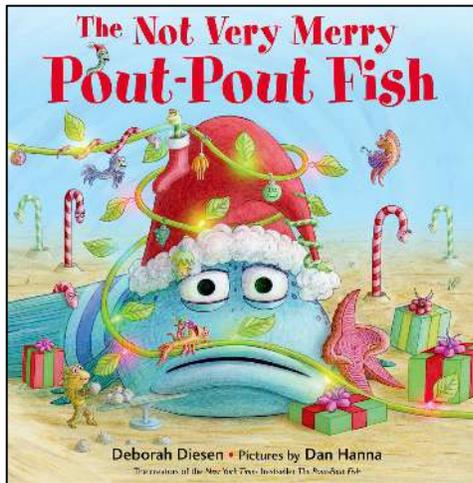


The Not Very Merry Pout-Pout Fish

A Conversation with author Deborah Diesen



How did you come up with the original Pout-Pout fish book in 2008?

The story grew out of an actual pout! One day many, many years ago, when my elder son was a preschooler, he was having a very grouchy afternoon. Hoping to amuse him, I made an exaggerated pouty face at him. He smiled and then pouted right back, which got us both laughing. “We look like fish,” I said. “Like pout-pout fish!” As soon as I said that out loud, it became a story idea. I jotted the idea down and I started writing *The Pout-Pout Fish* that same day. Years later, I started sending the story to publishers, and in 2005 it was accepted at Farrar, Straus & Giroux Books for Young Readers. The book was published in 2008 and began a series of stories, all featuring Mr. Fish, his friends, and their adventures.

Since the first book, we’ve seen Mr. Fish go to school, learn to smile, face the dark, discover how to dream and play hide-and-seek. What do kids (and their parents) love most about the series?

I think one of the things that makes Mr. Fish an appealing character for many kids and parents is that kids and parents alike can identify with his experiences. Toddlers sometimes pout; so do adults! Preschoolers have things they’re scared of; so do adults! Kindergarteners get nervous about starting something new; so do adults! Mr. Fish’s experiences provide a way for kids and grown-ups to explore those issues together. In addition, the stories have rhyme, repetition, and wordplay, which are fun in a read-aloud book. And Dan Hanna’s illustrations! They’re fantastic. They truly bring the stories to life.

What is Mr. Fish up to now? Does he have a case of the “dreary wearies” in the latest book, too?

Mr. Fish’s newest adventure is called *The Not Very Merry Pout-Pout Fish*. In it, Mr. Fish is in a bit of a holiday panic, searching for perfect gifts for all of his friends. His shopping trip is unsuccessful, and Mr. Fish is sure that he’s let all of his friends down. But his friend Miss Shimmer reminds him that the best gifts of all come straight from the heart, and she helps him craft simple and meaningful presents to bring to the holiday party. His friends are delighted with their presents, and together everyone celebrates peace, joy, and love – what a very merry gift!

What do you hope young readers (ages 3-6) will learn from The Not Very Merry Pout-Pout Fish? Is there a message here for grown-ups as well?

I hope that Mr. Fish’s latest tale will help children to realize that presents don’t need to be expensive or complicated or splashy. Simple, heartfelt presents that connect us to one another are the best gifts of all. A drawing; a craft project; time spent together; even just a smile! These sorts of gifts are the most cherished and the most enduring. It’s a lesson we grown-ups have to re-learn periodically as well.

Do you have any tips for parents of toddlers about the joy of giving presents, rather than just receiving them, this holiday season?

Kids love to give presents, and they especially love having an active role in the process of creating the presents. Try a craft idea or project that's extremely simple and stress-free, and then let your child have at it with a minimum of help. The more messy, lopsided, and imperfect the results the better! Have fun with the process, and as you do you'll create not just gifts but memories as well.

How do you and the illustrator, Dan Hanna, work together on the books? (Are there any special stories about the illustrations on Not-Very-Merry that you can share?)

I absolutely adore Dan's art, and I credit it as the reason for the success of the series. We work independently of one another during the creation of the books. I work with our editor on the stories; then, when a story is finished and ready, she passes it along to Dan. Dan moves through the art creation process, from sketches to finished product, working with our editor and with the art director. I do see some of the steps along the way, but during the illustration process the author's most important task is to stay out of the way! And that's for the best, because it allows the artist to bring the story to life in the way only an artist can. Dan brings a thousand times more to the illustrations than I could ever begin to imagine – the characters and their expressions; the settings and their details; and all the funny and quirky extras. For instance, in *The Not Very Merry Pout-Pout Fish*, one of the spreads shows a store full of what I describe in the text as shiny trinkets and handy gadgets. Dan took that description and brought it alive by imagining, drawing, and labeling shelf after shelf in the gift shop with hilarious and unique sea gifts. His creativity is amazing. I feel very grateful and happy to get to make books with Dan!

Any future plans for Mr. Fish? What adventures can we expect to see him in next?

Mr. Fish has a new mini-adventure coming out later this year called *Kiss-Kiss, Pout-Pout Fish*. This mini-adventure, like the previous mini-adventures *Smile, Pout-Pout Fish* and *Sweet Dreams, Pout-Pout Fish*, is a very short board book with just a few words per page, meant for babies and young toddlers. In spring 2016, there will be a touch-and-feel alphabet book and a sticker book. Another mini-adventure, called *Trick or Treat, Pout-Pout Fish*, will arrive later in 2016. And in 2017, Mr. Fish will be in a new full-length hardcover called *The Pout-Pout Fish, Far, Far From Home*. He stays pretty busy these days! But he's enjoying all of his adventures.

As am I!