

Who's Who ²⁰⁰⁹



showcasing
New Zealand's
leading
ENTREPRENEURIAL
women

Bumper Issue! Including July *Her Magazine*



Gill Pittar

Gill Pittar looks set to be the creator of the next hit children's brand, just like *Bob the Builder* or *Thomas the Tank Engine*. The well-spoken grandmother from Gisborne has already seen her series of *Milly, Molly* books sell over 3.5 million copies in 109 countries and in 26 different languages. She has helped produce the *Milly, Molly* animated TV series, which has been shown in Europe, South America, Scandinavia, Canada, Africa, the Middle East, Asia, Australia and New Zealand. With a second series out this year, *Milly, Molly* looks set to become a major brand in children's entertainment.

The *Milly, Molly* idea began when Gill hand knitted a wool Topsy-Turvy doll to sell in Rural Delivery, the New Zealand-made shop she established in Auckland in 1994. When Gill sold the business and moved back to Gisborne to live, she decided to use the Topsy-Turvy concept to promote the message, 'We may look different but we feel the same'. Milly dark and Molly fair were born.

"Treaty issues were being aired and it seemed the right time to promote the acceptance of diversity," Gill explains. "It helped, also, that the United Nations catchphrase for the new millennium was reconciliation."

Gill was encouraged by her husband, John, to write a children's book to promote the dolls. There are now 67 titles published.

Through the everyday adventures of Milly and Molly, Gill hopes to help children develop the life skills necessary to build self-confidence and a healthy self-esteem so that they are better equipped to meet the challenges of growing up in a multicultural world.

What was your first significant writing venture and what did you learn from it?

I was a runner up in a NZ Woman's Weekly/Hodder & Stoughton

Short Story Competition in 1989, much to my surprise. I can't say that achievement triggered a desire to write children's books but when it was suggested I write the first *Milly, Molly* book, I didn't dismiss the idea as impossible.

What were some of the challenges you had to overcome on the journey to achieving your goals?

To grow a global business takes longer and costs more than one would ever imagine. Our greatest challenge has been growing the business within the constraints of a very limited marketing and advertising budget.

What got you through the 'tough' times?

The continued enthusiasm and support of all those who believe the *Milly, Molly* brand is tailor made to help children build the strength of character necessary to confidently face the challenges that beset them in today's world. The wholehearted support of our foreign publishers, distributors, agents, school teachers, retailers and, more especially, the many letters we receive from the parents and children who read the *Milly, Molly* books and watch the DVDs, gives us the energy and resolve to keep moving ahead.

Who are the mentors/role models that have inspired you and what important lessons have you learnt from them?

We are most fortunate to have some old business heads in our governing team. Their wisdom and experience has been an immeasurable advantage. Less haste, more speed has been a valuable lesson on many occasions.

What do you think are some of the essential characteristics of a successful author?

An author who knows her/his subject well can write with feeling and conviction. When it comes to writing for children, I think it helps to love children's books and to have read hundreds of them.

What were some of the core values upon which you built your brand name and have these values changed over time?

We have built the *Milly, Molly* brand upon the very same values that the brand has been established to promote. Milly (dark skinned) and Molly (fair skinned) specifically promote the acceptance of diversity and sound values. The values they promote (honesty, care and consideration, forgiveness, loyalty, respect, responsibility, appreciation of nature, to name a very few) are as relevant for this generation as for the next. Core values are timeless and equally applicable to all societies.

Milly, Molly is being called the new Bob the Builder or Thomas the Tank Engine. What is it about the series that people love?

The world is a multi-cultural place. Educators recognise that the acceptance of diversity is a 'must' if we are to move forward together in peace and harmony. It is also recognised that character education has slipped and that there are very few values-based books written for children. While the *Milly, Molly* books impart a value, they are firstly stories; the adventures of two lively little girls and their multi-cultural friends who stumble across the everyday challenges that all children encounter, irrespective of race or religion.

Children's publishing is highly competitive. How have you been able to continue to stand out from the crowd?

The *Milly, Molly* brand has filled a void in the market and has been largely instrumental in the development of character education around the world.

What do you hope the Milly, Molly series will achieve, both on a business and social level?

While *Milly, Molly* books are available in most countries now, we still have mountains to climb! We would like *Milly, Molly* to become mainstream and the series of choice for character education around the world and to make a real difference to children's lives by boosting their self-esteem and giving them a sense of purpose. We wish to partner with governments, UNICEF, corporates and foundations to help address specific issues facing children around the world. We

hope Milly and Molly will help raise the self-esteem of not just the children who can afford a book, but of all children. We will do more with our charitable trust, The Friends of Milly, Molly Inc. The Trust's aim is to promote the acceptance of diversity and the learning of life skills – 'for every child, a book'.

Through your career, what is the most important thing you have learnt about working with publishers?

They are delightful people. Book people, like gardeners, are down to earth and lovely! At the same time, they know their markets well and are very selective and discerning.

Exporting your products has contributed substantively to your business growth. Just how hard was it to establish market share in international markets?

We chose early on to license foreign publishers to print and distribute books in their own countries. And to do this, we travelled to the major book fairs: London, Frankfurt, Bologna, Beijing and Johannesburg. The foreign publishers came to us.

What key marketing techniques have you used to achieve success both in New Zealand and offshore?

We have had good exposure to the media through the services of the marketing and advertising company, Admarkit. Because of our success abroad, there has been sufficient interest in *Milly, Molly* to enable us to capture the attention of local TV, radio and magazines.

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What are some of your current goals?

We have recently joined forces with Hubbard's to promote a healthy breakfast – good nutrition and literacy. There is a free *Milly, Molly* book in every Hubbard's children's cereal packet from June through to September.

Is there a significant quote or saying by which you live your life?

Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. And never say, 'can't'.

What single piece of advice would you give to someone wanting to get their work published?

Find a reputable agent.

What distinct advantages are there in being a New Zealand author?

New Zealand has some very good small publishing houses. The New Zealand market is small and responsive. And certainly, as far educational material is concerned, overseas publishers have a keen interest in what New Zealand writers are up to. 

