



The World Peace and Harmony Day



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Milly and Molly's
Monday

We are the World

How one Kiwi grandmother is spreading a message of hope and tolerance to children around the globe

BY HEIDI KRAUSE

As a child in rural New Zealand, Gill Pittar would spend her days building tree houses, swimming in creeks and chasing cattle over the rolling green hills. The daughter of a farmer and physiotherapist, she went to a small school in Waikato that was predominantly attended by Maori children. She can still vividly recall her friends getting the strap for speaking their native tongue. The huge injustice of this situation deeply upset her as a little girl. She knew it was wrong and, in her heart, she decided it had to change.

Today, the Kiwi author and grandmother is a champion of multiculturalism through her creation, the “Milly, Molly” series, which has become an international publishing and media phenomenon. Milly, Molly books have sold more than 3.5 million copies in 109 countries. They have been translated into 26 languages and adapted into an animated TV series.

It all started back in 1992 when, having abandoned a career as a

medical technician, Pittar was managing a shop in Auckland for New Zealand-made products. A woollen, topsy-turvy reversible doll of her grandmother’s that featured both a dark-skinned and a fair-skinned face intrigued her. “I decided to make one and sell it at the shop”, says Pittar. “It sold straightaway and I made more. They were an immediate hit. We couldn’t make them fast enough.”

Around the same time, the UN was focused on issues of reconciliation and peace as indigenous groups all over the world struggled to find their place in society. Pittar realised the dolls were a perfect vehicle to promote the acceptance of diversity, and subsequently developed the concept into a book series. It featured two girls from different ethnic backgrounds, Milly and Molly, with the simple, timeless message, “We may look different, but we feel the same.”

“Beyond our appearance, we all have the same feelings, our hearts all beat



Message of diversity and tolerance: New Zealand Defence Force members distribute the dolls to children in Afghanistan

the same, and it's just so important for children to know that," says Pittar with a sigh. She's speaking from her publishing headquarters in her home town of Gisborne. "They have so much to offer one another. And I think, today more than ever, kids who are different in some way find it very tough."

It's critical, says Pittar, to teach children when they are young, so they grow up without bias or prejudice.

Aside from the message of tolerance of differences, the mother of three has tucked a particular value into each book, inspired by experiences from her own childhood. She promotes virtues such as honesty, forgiveness and compassion, along with life skills: caring for the environment, coping with bullying and living with grief – issues that all children face, no matter where they live.

And for Pittar, that really is at the core of it. "You can give a child a fabulous education, but unless they

have a healthy self-esteem, it will be lost on them. So I guess the heart of what we are trying to do is help build strong characters and allow children to flourish."

In this capacity, the Milly, Molly series is also used as an educational resource for teachers and parents, with reading instructions included at the end of each book. In fact, the New Zealand police force has selected a number of book titles that focus on keeping children safe, and address sensitive issues such as sexual abuse and anger management. It's an aspect of the project that gives Pittar "a real sense of accomplishment".

Aimed at children age four to eight, the success of the books lies in Pittar's talent to weave in morals without being didactic. "First and foremost, I like to think of them as stories. But there are hidden layers and implicit values that you can pull out and explore with a child afterwards."



refugee who lives with his grandmother, Maxter the little boy who watches too much television, and an unhappy guinea pig called Betelgeuse, who rates as one of Pittar's favourites.

"The book encourages children to go out at night, lie back on the grass and stare up at the stars. It was moments like these that were the joy of growing up for me," she explains. "And I want to make sure these precious things are passed on to the next generation."

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It is hoped these open discussions will help fuel children's imaginations and stimulate thought and change.

"My generation was brought up with strong values and good manners, and sadly I think that has slipped today for some kids," says Pittar. "Today, if you paint on someone's fence it's called graffiti, yet in our day it was called vandalism and a crime."

A cast of lovable, colourful characters joins Milly and Molly in their adventures, including Alf the orphaned

The momentum and growth of the series has been remarkable. Along with the animated TV show that brings Pittar's characters to the screen, and a nomination for a prestigious Italian literary award, there is a charity-based organisation called Friends of Milly, Molly Inc focused on teaching life skills along with literacy and tolerance. The organisation has partnered with non-profit organisations to bring the doll and books to needy children in kindergartens and schools in countries including Afghanistan, East Timor and Tanzania.

The positive feedback she receives from children and educators worldwide provides Pittar with the motivation to continue making a difference. "It's our ultimate aim to get a Milly, Molly book into the home of every child. The world's a lot smaller now and we all need to pull together for the good of mankind and the planet." ■