

Visalia teacher Lea Maryanow turns to 'Stripes' book to tell her story of diversity

[Manuel Hernandez](#) Visalia Times-Delta

Lea Maryanow's new children's book "Stripes" teaches children using animals from the African savannah that not all problems are black-and-white.

The book follows the protagonist, Zebra, as he questions other characters, such as Lion, Owl, and Giraffe, whether his stripes are white or black. Zebra is unsatisfied with the animals' different answers, but in the end, he learns to accept their unique points of view.

"I feel like the world needs people that accept diversity; that accept different perspectives; that embrace it. ... There are multiple ways to reach a goal, and one way doesn't have to be better than the other," Maryanow said.

"Stripes" is now available for pre-order at Storybook Genius Publishing's website. If ordered by Wednesday, the books will be delivered before Christmas. Ten percent of the proceeds go to the Fresno Chaffee Zoo.

Maryanow is a middle school English teacher at St. Paul's School, a private Christian school in Visalia. She started as a substitute teacher, but it is now her eighth year teaching full-time at the school.

Born in Germany, she moved to Three Rivers in 2014 with her husband, Jeff Maryanow. She is also a mother of three; a 12-year-old, a 6-year-old, and a 4-year-old. "Stripes" is dedicated to them, her husband, along with Maryanow's mother, Ute Fallscheer, she said.

"They have been the best supporters all along," Maryanow said.

This isn't the first time her work has been published. She's done essays for the California English Journal and one for the New York Times, writing on various topics from improving teaching methods to the importance of self-care after the pandemic.

But Maryanow said she's never done anything like "Stripes." This is the first children's book she's written and published. For her, writing was always an outlet to express her ideas and to decompress.

Writing also helps her be the best teacher she can be, Maryanow said. She doesn't remember exactly why she chose the children's book genre. She reads many picture books at home to her kids, but she said the book was her "desire to share and inspire other people," she said.

Maryanow emphasizes the effect children's and picture books like "Stripes" have on kids' excitement to learn.

"The combination of illustrations and words open up a world of imagination for children that when they're exposed to that at a very young age, it hopefully sparks just their joy and passion for reading," Maryanow said.

The book is also inspired by the Enneagram of Personality, which categorizes people into nine personality types. Each character in the book represents one of those nine types.

Maryanow's first draft of her children's book used the concept of different personalities but was sent back by her current publisher with notes and critiques. Taking those notes, she created "Stripes" eight months later.

"I just wanted to write a book about that had those personalities in there for children. Not really teaching them about the personalities but more like just having them in there," Maryanow said.

Zebra's personality in "Stripes" is impatient at times and wants to know right away the color of his stripes. Maryanow said it's a trait everyone has.

"We probably all know people in our lives, including ourselves, where we want it to be one way or the other," she said.

One of the most helpful answers Zebra receives in the story is from Lion, who is trying to hunt him when he sees Zebra.

"Lion isn't even concerned at all about the colors of Zebra's stripes because of his instinct to hunt and to see Zebra as prey. ... So he was the one who gives away the answer, but at first, we don't know that's the answer," Maryanow said.

Because of the unlikeliness of the source, Lion, Zebra didn't listen to his answer at first, but after reflecting on it, Zebra is OK being both black and white. Maryanow said it's important to be open-minded to all types of answers.

She said most people, even herself, weren't born with the innate ability to be open-minded and accept one's self-identity. Everyone has to take a similar path like Zebra to learn those lessons, she said.

Maryanow learned much from traveling to different countries, North America, Europe, and Africa, and living with multiple host families, she said. That's when she learned there's more than one way of living and to embrace different cultures.

"You cannot enter with judgment. You have to leave that outside and be just open to how people do things and that it's different, and that's OK. I can learn from this, and it's inspiring," she said.

Maryanow speaks several different languages, English, German, French, ancient Greek, and Latin. She majored in English and Theology, but she also studied educational science, pedagogy, and psychology.

She always incorporates what she's learned into her teaching, embracing new teaching styles. Her classroom has colorful decorations; fun and different furniture; and books and framed quotes filling the walls, making it an interactive and stimulating environment for her students.

It can be tough balancing being an author and a teacher, but Maryanow said she has enjoyed the long journey it took to write this book. Now, she's excited to see people's reactions because she wanted "Stripes" to spark discussion and diverse opinions.

There is also a free activity guide available for the book on Maryanow's website. Her website also has her social media and contacts for potential book signings and meetings with the author.

Getting the book

"Stripes" by Lea Maryanow is available at <https://sbgpublishing.com/>.