

# Mesa author's puppets accent her message



Vicki Riske and Leo Lizard travel to schools, libraries and scores of other venues under the brand of We Are Puppeteers as Leo brags about the number of push-ups he does.

**BY SRIANTHI PERERA, Tribune Contributor**

Writing and puppeteering for children have been lifelong passions for Mesa author Vicki Riske.

Most of her books have messages for her audience. Bullying, climate change and memory loss in elderly loved ones are heavy issues that youngsters may encounter at some point in their lives and Riske has found a gentle way to educate children on these topics.

Riske is the author of seven children's books. Among them, "My Teeth Are Too Big" features Jackie Rabbit, teased and bullied by her school friends after her adult teeth grow into place; "Grandma Bibi" (illustrated by Laura Best) tackles the difficulties of memory loss in older loved ones from a child's perspective, again using the character of Jackie Rabbit; "Fishy Tales" is about a fish that loves to swim and play in the ocean and, along with friends, encounters a large trash island when they are trying to save an octopus.

For most of her stories, Riske has created puppets, which she uses for storytelling with young audiences.

Currently, she has more than 30 puppets at home, including her storybook characters Jackie Rabbit, Leo Lizard, Rosie Roadrunner and Diamondback Dan.

"Puppetry is very collaborative. It only works if the performer and the audience agree that this sock or piece of paper are actually a character in a story," she said. "Puppetry is magical."

Under the brand of We Are Puppeteers, puppets in tow, Riske visits schools, libraries, book stores, farm stores, parks and other locations around the East Valley and Phoenix. Rapt audiences are the norm because she makes the children actively participate.

For example, when she reads "The New Polka Dot Tea Party," another of her books, she talks about Leo Lizard and his love of counting his push-ups.

"We will do a test session of counting push-ups with Leo. This activity makes the kids feel like they are part of the story," she said.

She also conducts shadow puppet shows with the children, who are fascinated with the shadows they create.

Riske said her chosen art form came naturally. "I think it has always been part of my imagination," she said.

Her interest in puppets started when she was in elementary school in Minot, North Dakota. Her neighborhood was full of kids, and on rainy days, they would make puppets and create stories to entertain themselves.

In high school, she participated in theater and played the role of Pinocchio. At North Dakota State University, she continued her interest by designing and building props and creating puppets for the musical, Carnival.

After graduating with a fine arts degree, she earned a grant to tour elementary schools in Fargo with Charlotte's Web. She adapted E.B. White's book into a 45-minute puppet show, with puppeteers playing Wilbur, Charlotte and Templeton, and later produced and directed it.

She also produced a puppet show for a shopping mall at Christmas and a TV puppet show that ran for two years on the CBS affiliate in Fargo called "Owlwitness News with Olivia de Hoot and the Owlwitness News team."

In 1985, Riske moved to Mesa, where she lives with her husband, Marc, and her adult children.

In 2014, she was an artist in residence for two international schools in Shanghai, China.

After studying for a master's degree in computer animation from Arizona State University, she shifted to computer graphics and worked for a local animation company.

She has also painted scenery for local commercials and movies. Her last job was producing ancillary content for grades K-12 at the learning company, Pearson.

But her love for authorship and puppeteering endured. We Are Puppeteers participates in the annual Day of Puppetry organized by the Phoenix Guild of Puppetry. She also conducts literary workshops with the Friends, Family and Neighbors Program of Pinal County.

Despite her connections with local organizations, Riske knows that her books and puppetry have to be vetted by the children first.

"It's a huge part of my process," she said.

"I am always looking for validation that the story is worthy of my audience. I am lucky to have many nieces, nephews, and friends with kids, that I can send out drafts," she said.

"I generally receive honest responses because kids don't worry about pleasing me, they're really frank about what they like and don't like."

Riske's latest book, "Dear Grandma and Grandpa"/"Queridos Abuelos" is a dual language book she co-authored with Sonia Elizabeth Urrutia de Soto. The book will go on sale in the next few days.

In this, Jackie Rabbit learns how to write a letter to her grandparents, and in the process, discovers the joy of writing and receiving letters.

"This book has traveled around in my head for years. I love writing and receiving letters. For years I have written letters to seniors, who for the most part, are not able to write back," Riske said.

At one time, she would write weekly letters to 10 people, who showed her the stack when she visited them and told her how much each letter meant to them.

Writing and directing puppetry for children have many rewards, Riske said, especially when she finds out that one of her books is a repeat book for them.

"Reading to children is a special experience like no other, they are receptive to the world that you have created and add their own interpretation of your book," she said. "They keep me feeling young with their limitless imagination and energy."

Vicki Riske's books are available for purchase on amazon.com. Details: [wearepuppeteers.com](http://wearepuppeteers.com)