

Children's book series explores difficult issues

Catherine Mardon, an Edmonton mental health and disability advocate, has always been interested in explaining difficult topics to kids in a way they can understand.



Catherine Mardon

With the help of her husband, local students – and a basset hound – she found a way continue to explore complex issues of faith, homelessness, post-traumatic stress and diversity in a series of 17 children's books following the fictional adventures of her own dog Gandy and his owner.

"I've had a basset hounds since the 1980s, and I always wanted to write kids stories with the basset hound as the main character, from his point of view," said Mardon, a retired lawyer.

For Catherine and her husband Austin, an adjunct professor of psychiatry at the University of Alberta, their Catholic faith plays a strong part in their lives and in their books.

In December, they were invested into the Pontifical Order of Pope St. Sylvester, one of five Orders of Knighthood awarded by the pope.

In their book *Gandy and Christopher*, the basset hound visits the Marian Centre which serves the needy and the homeless in Edmonton. Other books have Gandy exploring the Vatican.

"Everything that we do comes from our faith," said Catherine Mardon.

The Gandy book series is part fantasy and part child-friendly foray into serious issues like dispelling myths about homelessness and disabilities – a subject deeply personal to the Mardons. The couple's work in the community has been recognized by the Canadian Mental Health Association.

After suffering an injury, Catherine became an advocate for the disabled. Austin himself was a young scientist when he was diagnosed with schizophrenia 25 years ago.

While the title character is a composite of dogs the Mardons have owned, Catherine said the main inspiration was her basset hound Gandy – short for Gandalf, one of the heroes of J.R.R. Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings series.

“We started doing (the books), and they became quite silly. The actual dog, Gandy, who’s passed now, he was allergic to everything! I mean, literally everything. Dirt, grass, trees, air, got carsick. So he never got to go anywhere,” Catherine said.

“And so his persona in his book got to do all the stuff that he never did.”

Gandy’s fictional owner, Barney, is based on her husband Austin. In the series, Barney is a double amputee, having lost his legs in Antarctica. This nearly happened to Austin Mardon, a former researcher with NASA, who suffered severe frostbite during a trip to Antarctica.

“The adventures (Gandy) goes on are things that I’ve either done, or would like to do!” she said.

The Mardons had suffered a big loss when Gandy died this year. Though Catherine hasn’t started a new book yet, she’s considering a return to writing after she brings home her new dog, Ollie – named after Garrick Ollivander, the wand maker in J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter novels.

While Catherine and Austin work on writing and publishing the books, the illustrations are left to dozens of university students who work with the couple each summer.

That experience has been a major part of Adriana Frattin’s career.

“They were such charming people,” said Frattin, a third-year student at MacEwan University in Edmonton who illustrated their books Gandy and the Fiddler and Gandy and Christopher.



Adriana Frattin

“Austin’s compassion in treating us like very skilled adults, rather than children who don’t have their degrees, it was so wonderful,” Frattin said, adding he “helps his designers and cares about them so much as people, and it was so refreshing.”

Frattin has worked with the Mardons for more than a year. At first she was skeptical about 80-page books for children, but now Frattin is sure that the novels are great reads for both parents and children.

“One of the books – I was just typesetting it – and it’s about PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) and about loss, and I could feel myself getting impacted,” Frattin said.

The Gandy series has been translated into 18 languages, but it doesn’t make a profit – and it’s not supposed to, Austin said.

“It’s not about producing graphic designers or newspaper writers, it’s about kids actually participating and getting extracurricular stuff, so they start to explore what it’ll be like to be an adult.”

Parents plant the seeds of child’s education