

NEED FOR READ



Last month ALIA announced that *The Speedy Sloth*, written by **Rebecca Young**, illustrated by **Heath McKenzie** and publishing with Scholastic Australia later this year, has been selected as the National Simultaneous Storytime book for 2023. We sat down with Rebecca and Heath to talk about the book, their collaborative process, what libraries mean to them and, of course, sloths.



Congratulations on your forthcoming picture book *The Speedy Sloth*! Can you give us a quick snapshot of what the book is all about?

Rebecca: Sure! It's about a sloth called Spike who decides to join a running race. The other sloths think it's bananas since sloths are known for how incredibly slow they are. But Spike doesn't care. She's incredibly determined, and even though the other racers (like a gazelle or a cheetah) are traditionally faster and they speed right by her, it doesn't deter her from reaching that finishing line.

What was it about the character of a sloth that you found compelling and what kind of story did it allow you to tell?

Rebecca: Well, I've always loved sloths – and the thought of a sloth running a race for no other reason than to finish it just really appealed to me. It's a great way to tell a story about the importance of running your own race at your own pace, and to tell a story about perseverance and never giving up on something, even if you're the only one who knows you can do it. This is so important for everyone to keep in mind, but it is especially important for children so that they can take on challenges for reasons other than the goal of just coming first.

Heath: I agree, and it's very much about determination too and refusing to quit. Spike is determined to achieve her goal, no matter how long it takes. In fact, if you look carefully at some of the illustrations, you can see that her training takes place over the course of a year! That's true determination.

Can you tell us a bit about your collaborative process?

Heath: When authors and illustrators collaborate, the story always comes first. When this story came into my world I drew a sloth or two – but they were very rough and don't look like what we have now. Things changed course and I didn't hear anything about sloths for a while, and when the project reappeared we revisited the drawings I had done until we got where we wanted to be. So it's always an evolving process, and getting the main character right visually is so important.

Rebecca: I'm a long-time fan of Heath's work so the thought of being able to collaborate with him on our story was unreal. Our publisher, Tiff, is amazing too, and had a great vision for the book. She worked with us on getting the look of Spike just right.



What drew you to your respective careers as children's authors/illustrators?

Rebecca: As far back as I can remember I've loved reading. I was lucky enough to have a mum who saw the value in it and I was surrounded by people who did whatever they could to get books into my hands. Whatever I had, I just devoured. I loved children's books then and they used to inspire me to write, so I'd just write stories and poetry all the time. I think there's so much magic in children's books and they can transform hearts and minds for little kids.

Heath: Well, I have always loved to draw and I seemed to be OK at it. While I didn't know where I was going to take that, or what I was going to do, I just knew I enjoyed doing it. I would copy cartoon characters, which taught me an awful lot, so I started drifting down that path and even considering animation. Eventually I met an author and illustrator called Anne James through a university course on illustration, so I asked how you become an illustrator and I pursued that path.

What role have libraries played in your lives and how have they shaped you as artists?

Rebecca: Libraries are paradise to me – they always have been. They give opportunities and access to absolutely everybody, and they give you that chance to experience things and travel to places that you wouldn't be able to without their collections. My schools had great libraries and I would just walk in there and feel a sense of opportunity. To be around like-minded people and to have the librarians who would be able to recommend things and talk books with you was magical. My library bag was one of my prized possessions – it was so important to me to be able to jam as many books in there as possible.

Heath: I have very clear and fond memories of my primary school library, and we were very close to the local library

too, which we would visit often. The local library actually became more important and a bigger feature in my life as I got older (particularly in high school and uni) because it was a place where I could access things I couldn't access at home at that time. I could access the internet, I could check email – even something as simple as the fact that the library had a photocopier! Early on I self-published a comic book and because of the library I was able to get the pages ready.

What are you looking forward to most for NSS2023?

Rebecca: Oh gosh, I mean, it's just mind-blowing and surreal. When I look at the numbers – over two million readers – I've always been in awe of NSS and have joined in every year. To be a part of it now in this way is completely surreal and I just can't wait. My daughter will be five then so she's at an age where I can get her school on board and the thought of her being able to experience that too is incredible. Just picturing all those kids reading at the same time is something I can't get my head around.

Heath: I agree, and it's quite an honour if you think about it. Every year when the book is announced I think to myself, 'Maybe one day I'll be involved' – and now all of a sudden I am! And it's amazing because I have no idea what to expect in any way, but this is a great start, being interviewed! 🌟

The Speedy Sloth will be published in November 2022 by Scholastic Australia.

National Simultaneous Storytime will take place on Wednesday, 24 May 2023 at 11 am (AEST) and we would love it if you could join us! Visit the ALIA website for more details and to register: bit.ly/3ReDIJi