

Illustrating Positivity Through the Pandemic

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Anna Marie Roberts used her time positively and became a self-published author and illustrator and has recently launched her new children's book 'The Swimming Pool Mouse'. Here Anne Marie, a STA swimming teacher, shares her story.



I have worked for Poseidon Swim School for nearly thirty years. It is a family run business, based in Swansea South Wales and is owned by my sister and her business partner. Poseidon has taught thousands of children to swim over the decades.

I began as a lifeguard in 1992 and by 1993 I had been taken under the wing of STA Tutor Jane Coode to begin my teaching career.

When Covid hit in March of 2020 my sister and her business partner Jane watched their school grind to a sudden halt. The uncertainty was devastating and it took a toll on everyone. Like many other small businesses up and down the country with staff to pay and the worry of how long this pandemic would last, my sister was under a tremendous amount of pressure. The strain was all over her face.

I was living alone at the time and I had boundless amounts of time on my hands. I spend much time thinking of the situation we would be in when we eventually returned to work, with many young children having now spent half their lives with only their parent and having no experience of the swimming pool environment. I made my mind up that by the time we were back in work I would have a children's book printed and ready for our little swimmers to be able to read at home. In essence, the swimming pool brought in to their home.

I had never undertaken writing a children's book before but I did have a whole lifetime of devouring books behind me (my nickname from my Mother: Bookworm) and I would be able to illustrate it myself having drawn my entire life. Books and drawing were my everything.

As the months went by (with much pencil nibbling!) I would share my story with my sister. Each illustration I would send to her, helping her stay positive with all the strain and worry and she in turn would help and encourage me to continue on my journey. It gave me a focus and helped me so much through each long day on my own throughout that first (and second!) lockdown.

My imagination got me so far with the book, but actually getting a book from paper to print ready is no small task! Slightly overwhelmed I found myself begging for advice at the desk of Debbie Stevens of Transmedia Technology Ltd. I told her the whole story of the mouse, the children and my sister and this wonderful lady came alongside me (when many others didn't want the extra work) and converted my hand drawn illustrations to 'computer ready' on what must have been the machine to equal that of the breaking of the enigma code! In a world where most drawings for children's books are done straight on to the computer, so much of the colour detail could be lost by the scanning process. I wanted to offer the children a great quality, vibrant book. Debbie is one of those rare people you meet in life and through this process I know I have gained a life-long friend. Another positive from Covid.



My niece, Jess Killa, with no prior experience, got the book compiled and print ready, giving much of her spare time to learning the process. We smiled many times at how much joy compiling the book and seeing it come together gave her. With her creative eye and determination, she did a fantastic job and without her help there would be no book. We determined that we would not show my sister (her Mum!) the book until it was properly printed. We were counting the days until the proof copy arrived and the print run order could go in.

And so `The Swimming Pool Mouse` was created.

The story of a small, mischievous mouse who learns to swim having quietly watched the children`s structured swimming lesson. But the mouse himself was not a new idea. As a qualified STA swimming teacher, I have specialised in the young and very nervous beginners and over the decades have adapted my teaching style to accommodate them. Used initially as a distraction technique, the swimming pool mouse has become much more than that. Brought to life by the children`s imagination he became much loved by the children and the parents alike.

The swimming journey is begun with such a big and important first step, it is vital that children have a positive beginner experience. There is so much scope for structured play, song and imagination in early years structured swimming and `The Swimming Pool Mouse` reflects that. The book encourages children to talk about swimming lessons and covers the basic skills which are the building blocks for learning to swim. It is a lovely story in itself and I believe it will really benefit children. Swimming should always be a Positive Swim Journey.

After more than a year in the making I am thrilled that I am a self-published author and illustrator. The mouse has been so much to so many people. To my many little swimmers he was the fun and imagination we had in the swimming pool (he was often known to pinch my biscuit!), to the parents he was fond memories of their children`s early years swimming and to myself and my sister he became a large part of helping us cope with the strain and worry of lockdown. That`s quite a lot for one small mouse!

...I am now on my second book of what will be the `My Positive Swim Journey` series.

I have that same passion for smiles in the pool and learning through imagination, play and fun for little ones that I did 28 years ago. If you would like to purchase a copy of the book you can do so through our Facebook page @TheSwimmingPoolMouse - we also take bulk orders for swim schools if you would like to sell them to accompany your beginner swimming lessons. Please feel free to send us a message with any of your needs!

