

Unlikely companion

How a chance dog inspired artist to author children's book

ART
THOMAS
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British painter Sophie Walbeoffe had been battling anxiety ever since she started pursuing painting as a profession. From the time she was 20, driving on big motorways in the UK would trigger her sensitivity to the point of having a panic attack. From the time she turned 21, Sophie had to make a living as an artist.

Sophie is represented by Rebecca Hossack Art Gallery in London.

"Quite a few artists seem to suffer from it (anxiety). It is really tough being an artist, because you never really know where your next money is coming from, and you also never feel like you're really good enough," says Sophie, who followed the story of the Renaissance and realised that even greats like Michelangelo struggled mentally. "I think it's just part of being an artist, actor or as musician. It's quite stressful because the world doesn't look after you. You've just got to fight for yourself."

Even though she came from a prominent family, her mother was the god-daughter of Joseph Rudyard Kipling – an English journalist, novelist, poet, and short-story writer famously known for *The Jungle Book* – she said she had to make a living "from nothing," after having to split the inheritance from her parents with three sisters. She was set up with the foundation of good education and she's grateful for that.

However, after more than three decades of suffering, an unlikely companion has been helping her overcome it. This inspired her to author and do the illustrations for a children's book called *Pepper and Poncho: Adventures on the African Plains*.

Sophie had always wanted a lap dog. She and her husband had a big dog (Labrador) together, but she considered that more as his, while he wouldn't let her have another one because "they" already had one. Then seven years ago, she went and got herself a Dachshund and named her Pepper.

"Anyway, I just got her. And he forgave me. She was small, I could put her in my pocket. I just fell in love with her; she's very sweet," laughs off Sophie about her the black and tan dog. She says dachshunds "really need and they stay on your lap all the time." Pepper would and still follows her to her studio all the time and



Sophie Walbeoffe with her dog Pepper, who is the inspiration for her newly launched children's book titled, 'Pepper and Poncho' at Circle Art Gallery in Nairobi on January 16. PHOTOS: BONFACE BOGITA



watch her as she paints. In time, Sophie just found herself being happier and her anxiety was going away – it's nearly all gone.

"Life sometimes gets a little overwhelming – and it does for us all – and I think having a little dog is just so good; it makes you feel better," she adds.

Sophie and her husband have farmland next to the Amboseli National Park, where they rear more than 60 camels and Sophie gets to work on her art in the park immersed in the landscape. She was excited to see the tininess of Pepper compared to the hugeness of the camels and the elephants they would come across at the farm. The idea of authoring the children's book was something Sophie wanted to do for fun.

"She's almost the same size as their

Sophie Walbeoffe's illustrations during the book launch of "Pepper and Poncho".



Sophie's framed illustration showcased during the launch of "Pepper and Poncho" at Circle Art Gallery.

Inspiration
'Life sometimes gets a little overwhelming ... and I think having a little dog is just good.'

feet! It was the drama of drawing that was such fun that it made me want to do the book," says Sophie.

However, the message in it is a profound one. Pepper, who is very tiny, has to travel across the Masai Mara to rescue Poncho, a very sad and depressed elephant because he can't move very fast. The story was written by Lord Ian Strathcarron, who is also the publisher of the book under Unicorn Publishing Group.

"He's written many books and always wanted to write a children's book. He's published a book for me before and wanted to work with me again. So, I gave him the story and he recreated it," says Sophie, adding it took about a year to work on the book.

"I hope the children (reading this book) learn to be as loving and caring as Pepper is. I'm going to go to a few schools and work with the children to teach and show them how I approached illustrations. I do paint with both hands, a technique I learnt from my tutor, Cecil Collins, when I was very young," she says, adding that her tutor talked about the Ying and the Yang – the female and the male energy – and getting both sides of the brain to work and making one feel much more involved and "less precious about the line."

Sophie describes her technique as "watery strokes", letting the brush loosely go around the form. Though she usually "works from life", with the drawings in the book she worked from her sketch book.

In her other art life, Sophie has worked on the *Garden of Paradise* that showcased in Miami last month. It was inspired after she saw works of the same title done by Pieter Bruegel the Elder in Madrid last year, in which he featured many animals.

"I have lived in Kenya on and off for 30 years, and I've always drawn and painted in the bush. I just think that Kenya is a paradise, and one that I have to respect, keep and look after," she says of the 7-by-5-foot triptych (on three panels) artwork.

Three others will also be in her show in 2026 at the Rebecca Hossack gallery: *How The Camel got His Hump*, *How The Leopard Got His Spot*, *The Butterfly Stamp*. The three are part of series of paintings she had been working on during the Covid lockdown that are from Kipling's *Just So Stories*. She inherited a book of the *Just So Stories* from her mother, who passed away from pancreatic cancer.