



Childhood dreaming

A staggering 400 rejections from publishers over the years hasn't deterred **Aleesah Darlison** from pursuing her passion, reports *Melinda Ham*.

Ms Darlison, a UNSW graduate, is now an accomplished children's author, with 16 picture books and short novels for young people published in only the past three years.

"Maybe at times I got a little disappointed, but I just kept on going because I knew I would get a book accepted one day if I kept on practicing and developing my skills," she says.

Two decades ago, Ms Darlison graduated from UNSW with a Commerce Degree majoring in Marketing. She'd grown up on the mid-north coast of New South Wales in a tiny farming community called Tinonee with a population of about 700 people. From the age of four, she started reading, and then writing, stories in every spare moment, inspired by Australian history and the animals she saw on

the farm and in the bush.

Her first big writing break came when she was 16 years old in 1988, when she won \$10,000 in a Bicentenary writing competition. Having always had a clear goal to study at university, the next year Ms Darlison headed to Sydney and UNSW, aged 17.

"I'd had absolutely no exposure to the city before and the first six months were very interesting, almost overwhelming," she recalls.

But Ms Darlison survived and went straight into a corporate marketing job. She stayed in the industry for a decade before resigning to become a full-time mum and focus on her writing again.

"My marketing experience has given me huge confidence to market my own books and run my own business," she says. "What I learned in my degree, and the practical experience I

gained afterwards, has really been invaluable. I'd do it all again, but maybe study a double marketing and creative writing degree - if there is such a thing! Both are so important to the modern author's career."

While Ms Darlison says she doesn't like to pick favourites among her 16 books, just the same as she doesn't love one of her three children more than the other, the one book closest to her heart is her most recently published *Bearly There* (Windy Hollow Books 2013).

"It's about my eldest son's teddy bear which he loved almost to pieces," she says. "I love it because it relates to my own children and immortalises a love for a teddy."

Her *Unicorn Riders* series (2011 Walker Books), six mini novels for 8-12 year olds, is also a stand-out. "These books are about strong, empowered girls who rescue people from danger," she says. "Being a feminist, and having a daughter, makes these books very important to me."

The inspiration for her books comes from a variety of sources.

"I see things or hear things and write them down in my notebook. I hear a particular voice or want to remember a character I meet, or dialogue I've overheard," she says. **"With three kids of my own (under the age of 9) I know how kids think, how they talk and how they experience things."**

Ms Darlison also visits schools across Australia and overseas, presents at writers' festivals, and delivers workshops about writing, while always enthusiastically interacting with children.

"I love being able to talk to children who read my books," she says. "I still get slightly tense before I do public speaking, but the nerves don't last long and it's always worth the effort."

Before she got her books published, Ms Darlison spent years writing while her children had naps, then later when they were away at kindy and pre-school and late into the night on many occasions.

"It takes a lot of guts and hard work to be a writer," she says. "People ask me how I find the time with three kids and I just say 'well, I don't watch a lot of TV, that's for sure'".

Above Left: Aleesah Darlison and her three children. Bearly There, a book inspired by her oldest son's teddy bear.