

Father's bedtime story takes off, thanks to airline

Alison Flood

A father who tried self-publishing the bedtime story he made up for his daughters has landed a surprise order of 2,000 copies from Virgin Atlantic to help children sleep on night flights.

Stephen Holmes, who works in data management, has been telling his daughters Madison and Ella a tale about two children who go on a magical balloon ride for years. Madison, who is now seven, finally convinced him to publish it earlier this year. They found an illustrator, Kev Payne, online, and Holmes ordered a print run of 1,000 copies of *The Great Hot Air Balloon Adventure*, thinking he would sell the book to family and friends, and at local fairs and fetes.

Holmes has now sold about half of that number, but after he decided to "try his luck" by sending the book to Virgin Atlantic, he was shocked to discover that the company loved it, and it ordered 2,000 copies to give away on night flights.

"My eldest had said we should make the story into a book as a keepsake - I thought we had better do it this year or she'll be 12 and have no interest," said Holmes. "I'd thought we'd sell a few to friends and neighbours, but people were saying it looked like a proper book and should be sold. I knew how difficult it was to get an agent, so I thought of a few companies it would be a good fit with, Virgin being one of those."

The story tells of best friends Tom and Jessica - the names chosen by his daughters

who are taken on a night balloon ride by a "very well-spoken" rabbit. They drink hot chocolate and bounce on clouds, before meeting a friendly owl and flying home to bed.

Holmes tracked down the name of someone from Virgin on LinkedIn, and sent him the book one morning. By the afternoon, he had heard back.

"I thought hot-air balloon equals Richard Branson. I was trying my luck," said Holmes. "I was stunned when ... they wanted to take it up. They flew the books out to Orlando on Tuesday, and they're handing them out from today to families on the night flight back to the UK. It still feels a bit bizarre."

Virgin Atlantic's Matt Webster said: "We were instantly charmed by Stephen's endearing book, as well as the story behind it, and felt it would be a great hit with families on night-time flights.

"It was the icing on the cake that Stephen is based in Haywards Heath, just around the corner from Virgin Atlantic's HQ; we always like to support up-and-coming local talent where we can."

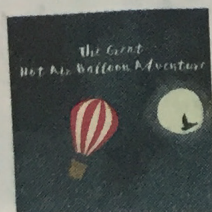
If the book proves popular, Holmes hopes Virgin will roll it out to the wider fleet. He is now keen to find an agent and a publisher, to give the story a wider audience, and to continue writing.

Self-publishing is a rapidly growing route to market for authors. In March, a report found 40 of Amazon's 100 top-selling ebooks in the US were self-published.

The majority of success stories are from novelists, although Carl-Johan Forssén Ehrlin's self-published picture book, *The Rabbit Who Wanted to Fall Asleep*, which promised to help children drop off at night, topped the book charts last summer and he landed a deal with Penguin Random House.

Holmes said: "The original plan was to sell a few to make some money for the girls. That's not changed, it's just on a larger scale now. We are going to donate to the Make a Wish charity for every copy sold, and if it sells well it will be a legacy for the girls.

"I'd certainly never thought of myself as an author, just a dad making up stories for his kids. But what's happened with *Balloon* has been incredible. I've definitely got the bug now and I'm testing out new stories all the time with my two biggest critics and supporters - my girls."



The Great Hot Air Balloon Adventure, which Stephen Holmes wrote for his daughters, is being distributed by Virgin Atlantic



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