

Once Upon A Farm

Three authors with a love for agriculture are making their mark on the children's book world.

by **Christy Couch Lee**

There's something special about farm kids and their books. Being a mom of three, I guess you could say I have some experience on the topic.

Nothing lights up the eyes of our 4-year-old son like being outside with the livestock. But, a good book about cattle, horses or tractors is a close second.

Lately, our bedtime routine includes reading five — yes, five — reality-based livestock children's books before lights out.

These books are written by 8-year-old twins and Hereford breeders Rianna and Sheridan Chaney, Thurmont, Md., and South Dakota-based rancher and author Amanda Radke.

Their books delve into the life of a rancher — the life cycle of animals, proper care and handling, the business of it all — with a twist to draw in children. And let's face it: their parents enjoy them quite a bit, too.

By incorporating the truths of the industry and using terminology relevant to today's livestock producer, these authors are educating the next generation about the true modern-day cattleman.

Authors from the cradle

Rianna and Sheridan Chaney could very well be the youngest agricultural authors around. At 8 years old, these third-graders have recently completed their fourth book chronicling life on the farm.

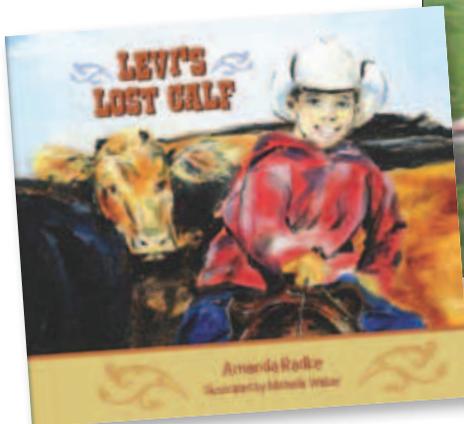


Rianna and Sheridan Chaney have been producing books from the time they were 3, with the help of their mother, Rebecca.

The idea for these books began with their mom, Rebecca. From the time the twins were born, the family Christmas letter was written from the girls' perspective.

"When the girls were 1 month old, the Christmas letters began

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Amanda Radke, a fifth-generation South Dakota rancher and agricultural advocate, entered the world of children's books last year with "Levi's Lost Calf."

being written from their point of view,” Rebecca says. “My friend, Jolene Brown, actually suggested we write a children’s book in the same perspective, about their experiences on the farm.”

And that’s exactly what they did.

In September 2007, when the girls were just 4, twin Hereford calves were born at the Randall Land & Cattle where Rianna and Sheridan’s dad worked at the time.

“My husband, Lee, asked the girls if they wanted to see newborn twin calves — just like them, twins,” Rebecca says. “It was obvious the cow had already orphaned one calf.”

Rianna recalls that moment with a smile.

“We knew without her mother’s milk and protection, she wouldn’t survive,” Rianna says. “Dad asked us if we would take care of her, and we said, ‘Oh, yes, daddy! Yes!’”

That’s how the first book, “Little Star... Raising Our First Calf,” was born.

For my 4-year-old son, Nolan, this book is tops.

“I really like this book — I like everything about it,” he says. “They have to feed Star with a bottle, and they get to brush her, too.”

The second book, “Mini Milk Maids on the Mooove,” focuses on the generational ties of farm life, Sheridan says.

“We are the fifth generation on the farm,” Sheridan says. “In this book, we talked about being fifth-generation farm girls that like to get dirty.”

In “Star Becomes a Mother,” the girls teach about what happens when Star has her first calf, and they touch on the fact that ranchers are, in fact, businessmen, too, Rebecca says.

“We wanted to be sure kids knew that farmers and ranchers are educated,” she says. “In the book, Lee teaches the girls how to register cattle through the American Hereford Association. We believe it’s important for urban children to know we’re educated and we use computers.”

This book, Sheridan says, is her favorite.

“We got to do so much with



In the book, “Star Becomes a Mother,” the Chaney twins talk about the business of raising cattle, including registering cattle through the American Hereford Association with their dad, Lee (center).

our daddy,” she says. “This is the ‘daddy book.’”

Their most recent book, “Cowgirl Up! Let’s Go Ranching,” was just released in June. In this book the Chaney twins visit the Loos family in Litchfield, Neb., and get to experience a true ranch firsthand.

Lifelong passion

Radke, a fifth-generation South Dakota rancher, ventured into the world of children’s books last year with “Levi’s Lost Calf.”

This book features a young cowboy — Levi — who discovers a calf — Little Red — is missing while bringing cattle in from pasture. He, along with his horse and dog, discover other farm friends while on the search for the lost calf.

Nolan says this book is perfect for little cowboys and cowgirls.



Rianna (left) and Sheridan Chaney were first time exhibitors at the JNHE this year.

“I like that Levi is a good cowboy,” Nolan says. “He makes sure he finds Little Red and gets him back to his momma. And Levi makes sure all of his animals have feed and water, too.”

Radke — active in 4-H and FFA as a youth — graduated with a degree in agricultural communications from South Dakota State University in 2009.

She began writing for *BEEF* magazine and contributing a

daily blog — “Beef Daily” — while speaking about agricultural issues and educating producers about social media and “advocacy” on the side.

Although becoming an author has long been a dream of Radke’s, this genre is new.

“I’ve always wanted to write books, and my long-term goal is to write romance novels, through which women will fall in love with the American cowboy again,” she says. “I thought I would get my feet wet with a children’s book, which was pretty naïve. It actually was a big project.”

The birth of a book

The process for developing each book is quite involved, Rebecca says.

Rebecca’s best friend since second grade — Kelly Hahn Johnson — provides the photography for each book. After numerous photo sessions for each book, they are left with up to 3,000 photos to choose from.

“Our photographer lives 45 minutes away, so we plan photo sessions focusing on small aspects of each book on various days,” Rebecca says. “For the dairy book, we had to schedule appointments with local dairies. And for the ranching book, we completed the photo session in one week, on the Loos family ranch in Nebraska.”

Sheridan says the process for each book takes about one year.

“You have to take lots of pictures and have lots of photo sessions,” she says.

When the first book was written, Rebecca says, the girls weren’t old enough to actually write the words. So she wrote the stories from their perspective.

“But on the fourth book, they were 7,” Rebecca says. “So we sat

down at the computer, and they were on either side of me. We started with the first page and decided what went on it. And we proceeded throughout the book.”

Sheridan says her mom lets them write about most of their experiences — but not all.

“I wanted to write about eating Rocky Mountain oysters at the Loos ranch, but mom said ‘no,’” Sheridan says with a smile. “But at least we get to make them and eat them at home, now.”

Once the book is in manuscript form, Rebecca says, she sends it off to numerous industry professionals within the agricultural communications and cattle industries.

“It’s important that we get it into the hands of industry professionals to ensure we’re on the right track with our books,” Rebecca says. “I’d say each book goes through about 20 rounds of edits before it’s considered ‘done.’”

Radke’s process, although different, also is similar.

In order to develop a children’s book, Radke first did her research.

“I bought a lot of children’s books and discovered what made a good children’s book — alliteration, adjectives and powerful verbs,” she says. “I began writing in April 2010, and sent manuscripts to people I worked with, teachers and friends. In June 2011, probably 100 manuscripts later, the book was born.”

Radke also enlisted the help of a college friend — Michelle Weber — for the illustrations for her book.

“She had posted a painting on Facebook, and I asked if she’d be up for the challenge,” Radke says. “We embarked on the adventure together.”

In order for the books to attain the success they’ve reached, promotion and distribution have been critical.

Spreading the word

The Chaney girls’ books have been distributed across the country, from Florida to North Dakota and from California to Pennsylvania.

Rebecca says the Pennsylvania Beef Council has been instrumental in the development of lesson plans that accompany each book for the Agriculture in the Classroom initiative.

And the beef council has ordered 1,000 copies of each book to be distributed to every school in Pennsylvania. In addition, more than 40 cattle women groups, beef councils and Farm Bureau associations have ordered books by the box to distribute throughout their states.

To date, nearly 21,000 books have been printed, and 14,000 have been sold.

Radke timed the release of “Levi’s Lost Calf” for state fair season.

“I worked so quickly because I knew I wanted it to be out and finished before the state fairs, and the book is set during fall roundup,” she says. “We set up book promotions at state fairs, I worked with magazine writers to write about it, and I set up a Facebook page. Through this page, followers could keep track of events and be a part of the experience, as I went along.”

More than 5,000 copies of “Levi’s Lost Calf” have sold in its first year on the market.

Each book is finding its own success, as well.

Writers being recognized

Each of the Chaney’s four books and their accompanying lesson plans have been added to the Ag in the Classroom National Resource Directory.

And, “Star Becomes a Mother,” was just selected as the Wyoming Ag Book of the year by the Wyoming Farm Bureau.

That makes Rianna happy.

“That’s my favorite book, because it’s another story about Star and Star started it all,” she says.

What a start it was. And the future most definitely looks bright.

What’s to come

Today, Star has three daughters, which all were gifted to the girls by Betsy Randall, owner of Randall Land & Cattle, which Lee managed for years. These will serve as the foundation for the girls’ Hereford herd.

As for future books, Rebecca says she and the girls are constantly brainstorming ideas.



Radke’s friend, Michelle Weber, provided the illustration for “Levi’s Lost Calf.” Radke says Weber’s career has blossomed since the release of the book.

Radke says she’s not certain of where her book-writing career will head next.

“Some people say they want me to feature a little girl in my next book, or see Levi grow up and take Little Red to the state fair,” Radke says. “Maybe there will be another children’s book in the works. Or at this time, I may focus on novels.”

One thing is certain: this book has allowed another agricultural advocacy channel for youth, Radke says.

“I’ve conducted book readings from Virginia to California,” she says. “It’s been a way to engage young people and use the book as a vocabulary or spelling list for classrooms. It’s a way for me to help incorporate agriculture into America’s classrooms, even after I’m gone.”

Promoting agriculture is a noble endeavor for all involved in the industry, these authors say.

Speaking out

Rianna says speaking up for the livestock industry and promoting our lifestyle is easy. You just need confidence.

“Don’t be afraid,” she says.

Radke agrees, saying her best advice is simply to be yourself.

“The consumer wants to trust the American farmer and rancher, and they want to know where their food comes from,” she says. “The truth is on our side — that we produce a safe, wholesome product. I think by telling our story, we can show we have their best interest at heart.”

By incorporating the truths of the industry through compelling and interesting stories, these authors are educating America’s youth about the true American farmers and ranchers.

No greater tale could be told, indeed. **HW**