

Author Spotlight

With

Lori Ries



Photograph by Julie Padbury, JMP Services

What made you want to become a children's book author?

My grandfather gave me a great love for books by reading to me often as a young child. I've had a passion for story my whole life, but in truth, never really thought anything of it. Writing poetry and stories simply made me happy.

In time I had a family, and like most moms, spent many hours rushing kids here and there until my fast-paced life was slowed by a major surgery. I was tired of books and tapes, and turned to my childhood love of writing. I wrote and liked what I wrote, so out of curiosity, I submitted. Then I wrote and submitted again. These were to a magazine called "The Friend." To my surprise, while I was still recovering, both were accepted.

After submitting to Highlights, they sent me "the Chautauqua Report." This was a large set of speeches from a recent Highlights writer's workshop. I'd never felt so hungry for learning, and the more I indulged, the more I craved, and I read something that struck me. "You gotta have a dream, or how can you have a dream come true?" That's when I knew. I wanted become a children's author, and something inside me told me I had it within me to grow that way.

Do you remember the first story you ever wrote? What was it about?

"Jo-Jo the Raccoon" was my first full story. I was ten years old when I created the book, using construction paper for a cover. My mother lived on a farm as a child. My grandfather, on his way home from work one night, saw a baby raccoon on the roadside. He scooped up the little masked creature and brought it home.

My mother liked to talk about Jo-Jo, and being visual, I could picture him walking upside-down on the clothesline and playing with furniture fringe. I could see him washing his hands. I wanted to create a book for my mom about this rascal of a pet, so I did in my fifth grade class.

Where did the character of Aggie come from? Do you have a dog of your own?

Aggie came from meeting a loveable hound, the real Aggie. At that time, my husband and I served as advisors of a group of young singles ages 18 to 25. We'd arranged for a BBQ and to take them boating at our bishop's beach house at Devil's Lake. My daughter, Jennifer, was quite young then, and she and I stayed ashore.

Our bishop's wife gave Jennifer bread so she could feed the ducks swimming near the dock. As soon as she tossed the bread into the water, Aggie picked herself up from her sunbathing and came bounding across the way, leaping high. She came down with a huge splash! Ducks squawked in flight, bread drowned, and Aggie swam back with what seemed like the smirkiest doggie grin. Did she plan this duck attack? She shook herself off all over us, and then went right back to slumping on the cement. I knew she was a character and met with my friends often after that trip to learn more. I was so taken with Aggie. Shortly after Aggie stories began, we went to the pet store and fell for a husky. This little girl pup was so fun to play with, so we brought her home.



What about Ben? Is his character based on anyone in your life?

Our bishop loved Aggie. In the beginning I tried to picture this grown man as a boy with that kind of love for a pet. That was the idea seed of Ben, but Ben evolved from that love all on his own. He has his own voice and personality. He's completely himself, and Bishop McCasline isn't really there anymore except for in the heart of the story, which is in that true relationship between a boy and his dog.

Another character you'll see making appearances in the Aggie series is Mr. Thomas, a blind neighbor. I attended Powlesland Elementary School in Syracuse, New York. I struggled with math, and for a time, I regularly met with a math specialist. I cannot remember her name, but she was blind, and she taught me using an abacus. I saw the curious book she was reading, riddled with bumps, and she introduced me to Braille. I thought it was the coolest thing I'd ever seen. I was quite young, but I'll never forget her. She was very caring and personal, and she could teach me in such a way that I could learn. I think my admiration of her led to Mr. Thomas. I like this jazzy character very much.



How do you think Frank Dormer's art complements your stories?

I cannot imagine any other illustrator for Aggie. Frank is brilliant. His art is humorous and pure fun. You can tell by the art that Frank likes to play. He plays with Aggie and Ben, and the art shows they love it. The quirky fun characters and his angular style is fitting. The drawings have simple lines, but are so filled with energy and life. Frank always seems to go beyond my imaginings, and when I get to see a combined work for the first time, I laugh out loud.

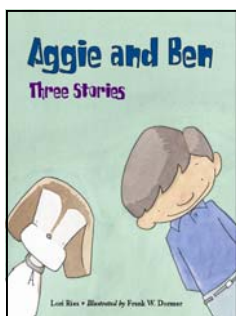
When you visit schools, how do the students react to the characters of Ben and Aggie?

Kids love Aggie and Ben, and it's so cool and moving when they laugh out loud or say "oh no!" or get to giggling. My favorite school experience happened in a fourth grade classroom. I had planned to stay for just the time offered, but when I felt my time was up and I closed, the kids wanted me to stay on. I told them it was time for their teacher to teach. "But you're teaching us!" a child said. Oh, my heart jumped. That has to be the most moving experience in presenting that I've ever had.

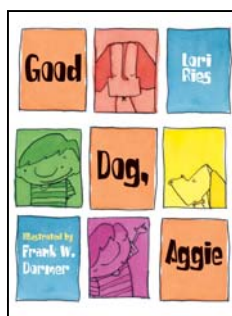
Can you tell us a little about the fourth Aggie and Ben adventure, *Aggie Gets Lost*, which will be coming out within the year?

In *Aggie Gets Lost*, Ben has to deal with the realities of losing a pet. He's not sure why Aggie is gone, he just knows that she didn't come back when he threw the ball and she chased after it. Ben does what every child would: he tries every thing he can to publicize his lost pet and looks for her. When night comes, Ben wonders if Aggie's lost, or if she ran away. This poses a deeper problem to Ben. He questions if he was a good pet owner. In the end, Ben does find Aggie. He learns she wasn't lost, and she didn't run away, but had another problem altogether that kids are going to enjoy. We'll save the mystery on that one for when the book comes out.

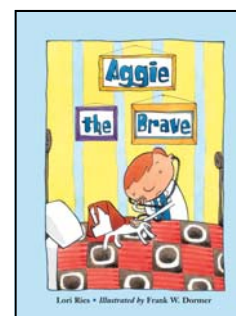
The Aggie and Ben Series by Lori Rjes



978-1-57091-594-9, HC, \$12.95
978-1-57091-649-6, PB, \$5.95
978-1-60734-000-3, E-book, \$6.99
Also in Spanish as *Tita y Ben*:
978-1-57091-934-3, HC, \$13.95
978-1-57091-935-0, PB, \$5.95
978-1-60734-195-6, E-book, \$6.99



978-1-57091-645-8, HC, \$12.95
978-1-60734-128-4, E-book, \$9.99



978-1-57091-635-9, HC, \$12.95
978-1-60734-226-7, E-book, \$9.99

Illustrations copyright © by Frank W. Dormer