

Lori Mortensen

Children's Book Author On Chasing Goals and Following Ideas

interview by Sharon O. Blumberg

Lori Mortensen is an award-winning children's author of more than 100 titles. Her books, which reviewers have praised as "stellar" "as good as it gets" and "begs to be read aloud," have been published by such notable publishers as HarperCollins, Henry Holt, Abrams, Bloomsbury, and Peachtree. Popular releases include, *Arlo Draws an Octopus* illustrated by NYT bestselling author/illustrator Rob Sayegh, Jr., *If Wendell Had a Walrus*, illustrated by NYT bestselling author/illustrator Matt Phelan, *Mousequerade Ball*, *Cindy Moo*, *Chicken Lily*, *Cowpoke Clyde Rides the Range*, a Bill Martin Jr. Picture Book Award Nominee and the sequel to Amazon best-seller *Cowpoke Clyde and Dirty Dawg*, and picture book biographies, *Nonsense! The Curious Story of Edward Gorey*, and *Away with Words, the Daring True Story of Explorer Isabella Bird*.

When she's not greeting geese at the lake, or putting her nose in a mystery, she's tapping away at her keyboard, conjuring, coaxing, and prodding her latest stories to life. Today, she lives in the foothills of Northern California with her family and all birds that flock to her feeder.

You can find her through her website lorimortensen.com, and at FB, Instagram, X (Twitter), Pinterest, and YouTube.

SHARON BLUMBERG: What led to your first publication? How did you set yourself up to become a career author? Did you plan this, initially, or did your writing career evolve over time?

LORI MORTENSEN: Interestingly, I wasn't someone who was born with ink in my veins. However, one of my favorite memories is when my third-grade teacher, Miss Hall, read to us after lunch recess—one chapter a day. Books like *Ellen Tebbits*, *Charlotte's Web*, and *A Wrinkle in Time*. I couldn't wait to find out what happened next. I fell in love with books and became

an avid reader. However, I didn't start writing until I began reading to my own children and wondered, *What could I write?*

I began my writing journey by taking writing courses at my local community college, graduated from The Institute of Children's Literature's (ICL) correspondence course, and eventually became a member of The Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI). After selling my final ICL assignment, I set my sights on selling 100 manuscripts to children's magazines, such as *Highlights*, *Cricheet*, *Ladybug*, etc. It

was a great goal to chase, and in time, I reached my goal. With each sale, my confidence grew and I had more credits I could include in my cover letters. When I discovered school and library work-for-hire publishers, I began writing and submitting to them, and began writing my own "trade" picture book manuscripts that I submitted to large publishers in New York. My first publication was a nonfiction magazine article about my four-year-old daughter that I'd written for *The Friend's* "Trying to be Like Jesus" section. I still have that very first SASE stamped with bold red letters on the front saying "Contract Enclosed."

Unbelievable!

SB: You write across many age ranges and genres. Do your ideas sway you toward a particular genre, including fiction or nonfiction? Do you purposely alternate between different kinds of works? Is there a particular genre you favor most?

LM: Yes, one of the great things about being a freelance children's writer is following wherever that spark of an idea may lead. Sometimes it becomes fiction, sometimes nonfiction. I don't purposely alternate, but switching from one to the other can be refreshing since each genre has its own challenges.



Lori Mortensen...continued

There's no real process. Rather, it all depends on whatever idea pops into my mind that I want to work on. Once I get an idea, I focus on that until I'm satisfied with the manuscript, and then I move on. Although some people work on multiple projects at once, I focus my attention on one manuscript at a time to stay in the groove of that particular voice, information, etc.

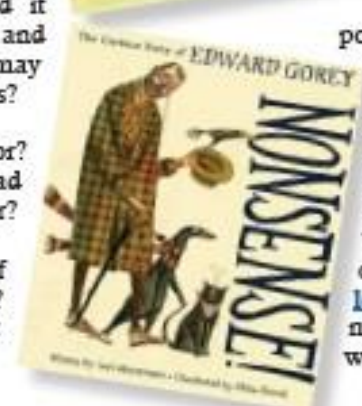
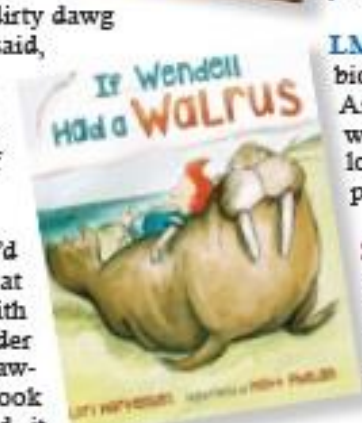
SB: Many of your books have animal and nature-related themes, which children love. What influenced you to come up with these?

LM: Each title has its own fun backstory. For example, the inspiration for my rootin' tootin' readaloud *Cowpoke Clyde* and *Dirty Dawg* was how my neighbors' dogs used to escape from their backyard and race down the street. Of course, it wouldn't be long before my neighbors were chasing after the two escape artists. This real-life situation turned into a story about a cowpoke chasing his dirty dawg for a bath. A starred *Kirkus* review said, "This is a story that begs to be read aloud . . . Plumb funny, fer sure." I was thrilled when it was dubbed "One of Amazon's Best Picture Books of 2013."

When I wrote *Arlø Draws an Octopus*, I'd harkened back to the days when I sat at the kitchen table and drew pictures with my sister. Since she was slightly older than me, it always seemed like her drawings were better than mine. Ack! I took that relatable frustration and turned it into a hopeful story of self-discovery and how sometimes we're better than we may think. And who doesn't love octopuses?

SB: How have you evolved as an author? Are there things you wish someone had told you at the beginning of your career?

LM: Oh, yes! At first, I was full of questions and doubts. Could I do this? Where do you get ideas, anyway? It seemed like I was already late to the party and everyone knew the won-



derful secret to writing success—except me! Yet, as I regularly showed up at the computer, and tap, tap, tapped away at the keyboard, I learned to trust the process—writers can grow, better ideas emerge, and critique groups are invaluable. You not only get their feedback, but regularly reading manuscripts cold hones your editor's eye and you begin to understand what works, what doesn't work, and what you can apply to your own manuscript. And most importantly, that persistence is key. Below is one of my favorite quotes:

"Nothing in this world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not; the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent."—Calvin Coolidge

SB: What can we look forward to from you in the near future?

LM: I'm thrilled with a new picture book biography that will be coming out with Astra Publishing in 2025. Mum's the word on the subject right now. But I'm looking forward to revealing more as the publication date draws closer.

SB: Finally, you have some helpful tools and services on your website. Please tell us about those.

LM: For teachers, I'm delighted to share the fun and informative activity guides that I've created for my most popular titles that can be found at my page lorimortensen.com/activities.

For writers, I offer detailed professional picture book critiques. A kind, but critical look at a manuscript from a fresh pair of eyes can be the difference between a good manuscript and a great one. Rejection and publication. Visit lorimortensen.com/critiques, for testimonials, information about submitting, word counts, costs, and more.