
AUTHOR SPOTLIGHT



Lisa Papp on *Madeline Finn and the Therapy Dog*

ABOUT THE BOOK

Madeline Finn and Star are off to Walker Oaks, a retirement community where Star will take his tests to become a therapy dog. Accompanied by Mom, Mrs. Dimple, and Bonnie, Madeline Finn and Star make their way through a variety of challenges and meet several new friends. But she can't stop thinking about an elderly man in a wheelchair who never smiles. Is there something she and Star can do to help?

Q: *What inspired you to write Madeline Finn and the Therapy Dog? What, or who, inspired Madeline Finn's character?*

A: I've been inspired by therapy dogs since I first met them at my local library. I've always loved animals, and seeing these special dogs interact with the children and seeing the positive changes just warmed my heart. Madeline Finn, I suppose, is an offshoot of me in some ways. Besides loving animals, I also never liked to read, especially out loud. We definitely also share the same unruly hair.

Q: *How was creating Madeline Finn and the Therapy Dog different from working on the first two books in the collection?*

A: That's a good question. In this book, Madeline Finn has already learned so much. While still a bit shy—or perhaps thoughtful is a better word—she's gained a good deal of confidence and is really starting to believe in herself. This book comes full circle in that it gives Madeline Finn a chance to give back in the same way that others have helped her—she just has to figure out how to do it. She has to learn how to spark that “special something” in someone else. It's sort of a quiet thing. Thankfully, she has Bonnie and Star to lead the way.

Illustration-wise, I enjoyed the interaction between Madeline Finn and Mr. Humphrey. It was fun to express her eagerness and innocence alongside his vast well of experiences, which I get a kick out of creating. For the dogs, well, there wasn't as much room to include all my favorite therapy dogs from my library. I've so enjoyed honoring the real therapy dogs in my books, but alas, this time around I just couldn't fit them all. My therapy dog friends will just have to understand.

Q: *What sort of research did you do before writing a story about therapy dogs?*

A: Probably the most fun research I've ever done! I am fortunate that my local library has a wonderful Read-to-Dogs program. That's where it all began—watching therapy dogs do their work. Really watching. The initial interaction, that little bit of trust, the eventual smile, and then the following week seeing the same friend again, the smile comes sooner. It just goes on and on, and it's an honor to witness.

For *Madeline Finn and the Shelter Dog*, I was privileged to visit Mount Vernon, Ohio where a wonderful teacher, Trudy Debolt, takes her students to read to the shelter animals every Saturday. I accompanied them on one of their trips and, what can I say, my heart was just so filled up. Both from the students who gave their time and compassion to these dogs and for the dogs who just soaked up the attention. Many of the kids told me the changes they saw in the dogs from visit to visit: “Max is so friendly now. When

I first came, he was afraid to come to the front of the cage.” And when I asked a young girl why she likes to read to the shelter dogs, she said, “Because they know they’re loved. If no one came, they might forget.” I was so moved by her answer. This program not only helps the shelter animals find their Forever Homes sooner, it gives the kids a real experience of making a difference—a powerful tool for life.

For my third book, when my friend asked if I’d like to accompany him to a nursing home where his dog, Beauregard, was getting certified, I jumped at the chance. It was wonderful watching these dogs work with the elderly men and women, drawing out smiles and laughter. It was like meeting their younger selves. That’s what sparked *Madeline Finn and the Therapy Dog*. I not only learned about the certification process myself, I thought it was the perfect next step for Madeline Finn.

Q: Your Madeline Finn books have all been inspired by your own experience witnessing or learning about various programs that involved therapy dogs or reading to dogs. Since the publication of Madeline Finn and the Library Dog, what kind of response have you seen or heard from people involved in therapy-dog or reading-to-dogs programs?

A: I’ve received so many kind emails and letters for which I am so thankful! People who have therapy dogs write to tell me they are grateful to see the work they do highlighted in a book. I have loads of images of people and their therapy dogs doing what they do. It’s very inspirational. I also hear from teachers and kids who share their experience of having a therapy dog visit their classroom. And sometimes I receive some really cool artwork from kids, which I absolutely love! The therapy dog world is a close-knit group. They are serious about their work, and their dedication is admirable. At the same time, they are extremely generous with their time and information. Everyone’s goal is the same: to make the world a better place—for kids, for patients, or whomever. I feel very blessed for the way they have welcomed me into their “family.”

Another aspect I am quite proud of is the way the Madeline Finn books have helped raise money and awareness for some of these therapy dog groups and for animal shelters. Along with some amazing independent bookstores, we’ve done fundraisers, donation drives, and adoption events, and in the process, we’ve really gotten the kids involved. Kids never think a problem is too big to handle—that’s a grownup mistake. Their willingness

to just dive in is so refreshing. Again, they’re learning first hand they CAN make a difference.

Q: What do you like most about writing and illustrating for children?

A: I really enjoy getting into a character’s head. I can really resonate with Madeline Finn; I can feel her words before I even write them. I know how she’s going to stand or the expression on her face when she says something. That’s fun for me. I understand her fears, her dreams. And I love to imagine the scenes with her and the animals. I guess because animals have always been some of my dearest friends, I enjoy illustrating and or expressing those ideas on a page. Kids seem to pick up on that. They don’t need everything explained to them—they get it. That’s one of the things I like about writing and illustrating for kids. I get to respect them.

Q: Do you tend to develop a story and the illustrations simultaneously or separately?

A: It’s hard for me to write and not see an image, so they usually go hand in hand. As I’m working out the words to a story, I always have a pencil and sketch paper beside me. I’ll go from one to the other. Some things are better said in words, some things in pictures.

Q: What is your writing process like? How does this process change depending on the story you’re creating?

A: I’m not very good at working out a whole story ahead of time. While other writers are brilliant at it, I find that if I try to do that, it gets really boring, like I’m trying to shove something down the reader’s throat. Instead, I like to just sit down and write and see where it goes. I get a lot more interesting stuff that way. For picture books, you’re limited by word count, so you just can’t go into everything. Sure, I’d love to know more about Mrs. Dimple, but there’s just no room! Often, I will write more than I need because, well, I need it. But the reader doesn’t. Once I understand where I’m going, I can say it in a lot fewer words. For novels, you can really dive deep. And I love that. I love getting into a character’s heart and soul, and with novels there are fewer pictures, if any, and so you get to say it all in words.

Q: When did you decide to start writing and illustrating children’s books?

A: My husband, Robert, is also an illustrator. When we first started out, we were doing all kinds of illustration work, anything we could get our hands on—from scissors that could cut a Thanksgiving turkey one day and cut your hair the next to sleeves that you could slip over your arms if you suddenly found yourself in chilly weather. We did some really crazy jobs. I was also a fashion illustrator for some time. Eventually, we got an agent, and one afternoon he called to tell me that I got the “Rudolph job.” I didn’t even know I was up for it. *Rudolph Shines Again* was the first picture book I illustrated. That started me on the path. Mostly I was just interested in illustration—how I could best tell the story with pictures. But eventually I realized I had my own stories to tell. That’s when I remembered how much I loved to write. I had forgotten that for a long time. Picture books were the perfect match. But I must say I am also deeply in love with the freedom of writing novels—although I do find myself imagining an illustration or two amongst the pages.

Q: *Where do you get inspiration for your illustrations?*

A: Lucky for me, they’re all around me. Most of the dogs you see in the books are the real therapy dogs at my local library. A friend of mine has two gorgeous Great Pyrenees who were kind enough to model for Bonnie. You can’t help but be inspired when you see these animals with the kids.

Q: *Where do you most like to write and illustrate?*

A: I’m most comfortable on the couch with my laptop for writing. And for sketching, I use my dining room table—it’s big enough to hold a lot of paper and three sprawling cats.

Q: *What is your favorite animal to illustrate?*

A: Hmm, I guess I should say dogs. Or maybe even cats. But it may be the koala bear.

Q: *What do you hope readers take away from the Madeline Finn books? From Madeline Finn and the Therapy Dog specifically?*

A: I think I have two answers. For adults, I hope they’ll open to the idea that animals have so much to give; they have so much to offer. And they know how to do it if you’ll just step aside for a small moment and allow it. For kids, who already know how great animals are,

I hope they’ll come away with a sense of wonder for who they are. I hope they’ll know they’re loved. (That may be a tall order, but the dogs know how to do it!)

In *Madeline Finn and the Therapy Dog*, Madeline Finn is compelled to help Mr. Humphrey, but she doesn’t know how. When she remembers how Bonnie accepted her exactly how she was, she begins to understand what therapy dogs (and all animals for that matter) know instinctively: the magic of unconditional love.

For all three books, I hope readers walk away with a sense of how wonderful they are, a sense of how they can make a difference for others. I hope they feel empowered.

Q: *What can we expect in the future from Madeline Finn and her canine companions?*

A: That is a magnificent question to which I have a zillion answers. I want to do what’s best for Madeline Finn. I know I’ve got another story she wants to tell. Beyond that...I’ll have to wait and see.

Q: *What’s next for you?*

A: My very next project is a middle grade novel in which the main character is a cat, not a dog, not even a little girl. Traveling alongside that is Madeline Finn’s next adventure, which I have scenes for but not the words for...yet. I’ve enjoyed a little break from illustrating, and writing a novel is so encompassing, and fun, and dreamy, and magical, and hard sometimes, but mostly magical. I suppose by the end of it, I’ll be ready to dive back into illustration.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lisa Papp grew up telling stories. With a notebook full of sketches, her early tales featured her cat, stuffed animals, and other nature-y things. Today, Lisa is still making up stories and painting pictures, only now, they fill the pages of children’s books. She has received awards for both her writing and illustration, including a 2011 NAPPA Honor Award, 2012 Storytelling Award, and the 2013 PA Keystone to Reading Award. Lisa lives in Pennsylvania with her husband, Robert, also an artist, and three wildly creative cats—to whom she does read.

lisapapp.com