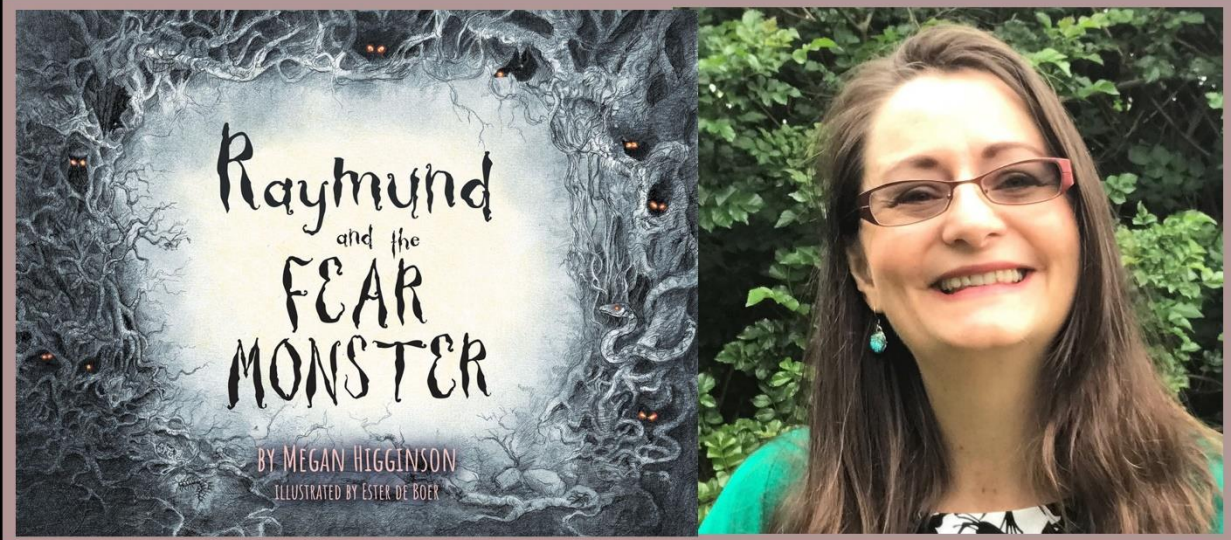




Author Spotlight — Megan Higginson



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Megan, you have dedicated *Raymund and the Fear Monster* to the children and workers of the Spirit and Life Mission House in Cabugao, Philippines, stating that they inspired the story. Can you please tell us a little more about the children and workers and how they inspired you?

In 2013 I went on a mission trip to the Philippines. Sitting and listening to the workers and the children, I came to realise that many fears are universal. Monsters under the bed or in the wardrobe, afraid of the dark, or not being liked by others. For many of the children though, they had other fears like, would their family come and take them to live with them, only to dump them back at the orphanage again? Sometimes, the children would be left at the orphanage for years and with limited contact with their families, so they didn't know them very well. Some had alcoholic parents (my dad was a violent alcoholic). For the teenage girls, they were afraid of what they might have to do to earn money to send to their families once they were too old to be at the orphanage.

I've lived with fear my whole life. I could relate to these kids in a lot of ways. When I returned six months after the first trip, I wanted to do something special for them and so I sat down and wrote *Raymund and the Fear Monster*. They were my audience. I wrote it for them originally.

Is there a little part of the story that is based upon their lives?

Just the setting, the Philippines. And the name, Raymund (yes, that is the correct spelling) is after one of the kids in the orphanage.

Why did you feel it important to write about *Raymund and the Fear Monster*?

I've lived with fear my whole life. I have a pretty good understanding of it. About seven years ago, I made some big life choices and faced some major fears. It was a tough time. Since facing those fears, and many others, I have come to understand fear more. I understand what it's like to have fear rob you of the joys of life. And I also came to understand that fear in small amounts is important. I've

met many people of all ages living in fear, bound up and unable to really live. I wanted to create a story which would give them hope that there is a different way to experience life.

How did you feel when you wrote the story?

I felt so excited as I was fairly new to creating stories. Writing stories is not something I've done since childhood. Writing the actual story for a particular audience in mind about what it felt like facing fears, was exhilarating. And seeing them read the first edition, which I also illustrated (rather badly), was a thrill.

How do you hope readers will feel?

I know that once my story is out in the world, I must let it go. My story becomes the reader's story. Everyone will take away something different from it. Maybe, if they struggle with fear like Raymund, they will find a sense of purpose and of hope that life can change, and that if they can learn to face their fear, they will find out what it means to have courage. I hope that it will bring an understanding that you can still do things afraid and that is what it means to have true courage. And that, in itself, can be life changing.

How would you like teachers to present Raymund and the Fear Monster to children?

Even though there is a serious side to *Raymund*, there is also a sense of fun and playfulness to it too. So, I'd like to see teachers enjoy themselves as they present *Raymund* to the class.

What is the most important message you would like them to discuss?

Mostly, I'd like them to discuss how fear isn't always what you think it is. Fear feeds on fear. However, there are strategies to be able face your fears and learn what it means to have courage. And when you have courage, you end up able to do things you never thought you could. For example, talk in front of people.

Do you like the way Ester de Boer has illustrated the story?

I remember the day Ester invited me over to her place as she'd just started work on the opening page with the monster looking down on the village. I walked in and she had the page up on her easel. Underneath but covered by plastic was this huge piece she'd been working on for years, a bit at a time in her natural style. I just stared at the opening illustration. It was beautiful.

'It's not what we discussed. It's closer to my natural style. I can change it if you don't think it will work,' Ester said.

I just stared at her. 'You haven't had a chance to illustrate a picture book in your natural style. Here's your chance. I say, go for it.'

And that was that. A year and a half later, and I am over the moon at how beautiful and monstrously fun the book turned out.

What do you like best about her illustrations?

Goodness. There's so much. She can draw figures and imaginary characters brilliantly. Her imagination is out of this world. And her attention to the tiniest details is amazing. She researched heaps for this book and has a gazillion reference photos on her laptop of the Philippine jungle plants, animals, terrain, houses etc. I know readers of all ages will spend hours poring over her illustrations trying to see how many animals and plants they can spot.

Megan, let's talk about your writing process now. When did you know you wanted to be a writer?

I have dyslexia. I was about seven or eight when I learned to read and then I always had my head in a book. However, I believed I was stupid and an idiot. So, even though I would often have characters chat to me, and I'd daydream, and we'd go on adventures, it never occurred to me to write the stories in my head down on paper. Not until I had my own kids and I started making up stories when my kids didn't like the ending of certain books. I then started making up my own stories and telling them to them.

I entered some of my stories in local writing competitions and placed 1st, 2nd, or 3rd. One year I even placed 1st and 3rd. But I still didn't think of myself as a writer. It was about 2012 when I made some major life changes and started discovering who I am. In 2013 I went on a mission trip to the Philippines. There I met some children at an orphanage. After I came home, I wrote original stories, retellings, cartoons, and sent them by snail mail to them every week for nearly six months. It unlocked the writer within me. When we were about to return six months later, I wrote *Raymund and the Fear Monster* for them.

After that I decided that writing stories was what I loved to do. I started taking classes and learning all I could. And of course, writing heaps of stories.

Where do you write? Do you like to be by yourself in the quiet, or do you like to write in a noisy space?

Mostly I write in the quiet by myself in my office as I'm easily distracted. I have a home studio which I share with Ester. Sometimes I will work on my laptop in there so we can bounce ideas off each other. Occasionally I feel like I want to listen to instrumental music while writing. However, the music has to be playing quietly in the background.

Where do your ideas come from?

Ideas for stories are everywhere. Some stories have been inspired by my dreams. Other stories come when I ask questions such as, 'what if?' and try to follow that thought as far as it will take me. I might take inspirations from snippets of stories I see on the news and change it up, or even snippets of overheard conversation. And then there are my own experiences and the experiences of people around me. Or it could even be inspired by an image I've seen, a photo or video of an amazing place.

Do you have any advice for children as writers?

You have an amazing imagination. Don't try to get your story perfect on the first draft. No one can do that, not even famous authors. Have fun and explore the world and characters you are creating. It's your story. And make sure it makes sense. Read it out loud to yourself, your dog, your cat, or your lizard. Make sure the words on the page are really what you wanted to say. You can always go back and change it. And most of all, enjoy yourself.

You can find out more about Megan Higginson on her website: [Megan Higginson.com](http://MeganHigginson.com)