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‘My daughter, the writer’ makes Mom’s dream come true

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As a young mom in Antioch, Barbara Rush would introduce her little girl Lorijo as “my daughter, the writer.”

“I always told her she was going to be a writer,” says Rush, who now lives in Barrington. “As a child she wrote so many cute things. She was like Ogden Nash.”

But as a 45-year-old adult, married with two kids, and an employment history that ranged from a sales job with Motorola to a gig teaching theater, Lorijo (pronounced Lori Jo) Metz’s writing highlight was her annual family Christmas letter that drew fan mail from friends and relatives.

“My mom still introduced me as, ‘My daughter, the writer.’ It was so embarrassing,” acknowledges Metz. “But at least now she can say that.”

Metz’s first published work — a highly touted children’s picture book titled “Floridius Bloom and the Planet of Gloom” — debuts April 5.

The story was the result of a 2004 contest at the College of Lake County seeking stories around the theme of “A Circle of Light.” Metz, who lives in Gurnee and had taken writing courses at the college, says an idea came to her in the most suburban way possible.

“I dropped my grandma off and was stuck in traffic when I visualized this planet,” Metz says. “I basically wrote the story there in my head.”

She typed it up, mailed it in.

“I didn’t win,” she says.

But she liked the story so much, she rewrote it, cut it, polished it and sent it off to publishers. An editor with Dial Books for Young Readers e-mailed her back a month later, asking if the story was still available.

Metz didn’t respond until the next day “because I didn’t want to misspell anything,” she says. “I wrote back, ‘Yes, it is.’æ”

Inspired in part by the world after Sept. 11, 2001, Metz envisioned a bright star falling into the yard of Floridius Bloom on the planet of Gloom. He builds a brick wall around it to hoard the light for himself. But a small creature named Zrill taps a hole through the wall, and opens up a new (and happier) world to Floridius, who tears down the wall and spreads the light to everyone. For details, visit www.lorijometz.com.

"I like the theme of friendship and the need for community," says Matt Phelan, a 36-year-old artist from Philadelphia who illustrated Metz's book. "The value of friendship is a great theme for kids — and adults, too."

To draw Metz's characters in a dark world, Phelan found inspiration in angler fish, which have lights dangling from their heads as they swim in the dark depths of oceans, from creatures with big ears to hear in the dark, and from old "Flash Gordon" comics.

"She didn't specifically say what they looked like, which is great for an illustrator," says Phelan, who also illustrated the 2007 Newbery Medal-winning book "The Higher Power of Lucky."

Metz grew up in an artistic and musical family. As a teenager, she starred in plays at Antioch High School, where her father, Joseph Rush, was the longtime band director. He later ran the local newspaper and now owns his own photo studio. One of Metz's grandfathers "literally ran away to join the circus," she says.

Metz received a degree in acting and directing from Illinois State University, but she longed to be a novelist. A huge "Star Wars" fan, she has written science fiction, including an epic novel, that hasn't sold — yet.

"I've got lots of fantastic rejections," Metz says.

But her children's book already has been performed as a play at Aspen Elementary School in Vernon Hills. A member of The Society of Children's Book Writers & Illustrators, Metz will lead a Reader's Theater of her book at 11 a.m. April 7 during a book-signing at Under The Sycamore Tree bookshop, 970 Harris Road in Grayslake.

She's writing a sequel called "Lu and the Wandering Wigglyfluffs." Metz is the writer her parents knew she would be.

Appropriately, her first book is dedicated: "To Barbara Rush, for believing in me, and Joseph Rush — you were right, there is nothing in the world like persistence!"

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