

STORY BEHIND THE STORY

LION LION

Miriam Busch Illustrated by **Larry Day**

Larry Day and I were introduced during an SCBWI conference (he was accepting a Golden Kite Award for his picture book *Not Afraid of Dogs*). At a casual lunch, a friend and I argued—apparently heatedly—about the original wording of “Hickory Dickory Dock.” Larry said later that it was because of this that he spent the rest of lunch plotting how to get my contact info.

Shortly after the conference, Larry emailed me with a story idea about a kid-king named Rusty. Would I consider collaborating?

Larry’s reverence for story, determined striving for excellence, and humor radiated through every email. Something happened—some inexplicable sparky magic. I wrote and rewrote. He drew and redrew. Still, after 863 revisions and a couple of years, Rusty simply didn’t work.



Months after we scrapped Rusty, I sideways-doodled a what-if idea on a diner napkin. Remembering my African travels and beloved folktales, I borrowed from Rusty the first two lines and a lion, but set it on Kenya’s Lake Naivasha. I wrote this kid as just a clever boy—one who happens to outwit a hungry lion in order to rescue a friend. And to do it in a way that totally surprises the reader.

Sparky magic again!

While aiming both for a tongue-in-cheek surprise and entirely interdependent words and pictures, we drummed out upwards of 18 (*really*) variations of textual-visual rhythm. We were finally ready to send it out.

A couple of encouraging nibbles, but no real bites. So we put it away again, this time for about a year. I began my MFA studies.



During my second semester, while Larry was between agents (I had never had one), we squinted at *Lion, Lion* once more, just to see if we still believed in the story. We did.

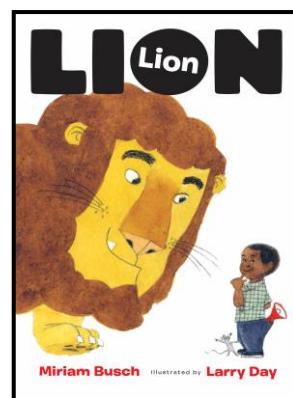
Agent Amy Rennert was immediately enthusiastic. A friend-of-a-friend thought editor Alessandra Balzer might love it—and happily, she did! When she suggested an urban setting, we thought, *Let's try it*.

While I am all about words, Larry is a purely visual storyteller. His deep connection to his characters and irrepressible delight in drawing fairly pounce off the pages!

Two months after the final text was accepted, while Larry was completing the art and I was finishing my critical thesis, we got married.

And yes, he asked me in just one drawing.

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