

TROLL HUNTER

Local author publishes otherworldly teen mystery series

By day, he's a teacher at Thurston High School in Springfield — a "giant nerd" in his own words.

But after work, Will Ritter inhabits a world where solving mysteries requires intimate knowledge of dragons, trolls, ghosts and fairies.

Ritter is the author of the *New York Times*-bestselling Jackaby series of teen mystery novels. The novels chronicle the adventures of the able Abigail Rook, the heroine who is the real focus of the books, as she assists the title character, Det. R.F. Jackaby, in his explorations into the supernatural realm.

The fourth and final book in the series, *The Dire King*, was released Aug. 22, and Ritter took some time before the start of school and a September appearance at Portland's Rose City Comicon to talk about his books.

Rook was not originally a female character, Ritter tells *Eugene Weekly*. The first draft of *Jackaby* was written with Rook as an invisible narrator. "In my head it was brilliant," Ritter remembers. He named the character, a sort of Watson to Jackaby's Sherlock Holmes, John Rook. It was a purposefully dull name, and "he was even more boring than myself."

The goal was to let the reader see through Rook's eyes, but what Ritter found was that "when you intentionally write somebody with no character, they are not interesting."

The Jackaby books, set in the 19th century fictional East Coast town of New Fiddleham, have been compared to Harry Potter in their mixing of the everyday human realm with the supernatural. Ritter draws on his background in English and folklore from the University of Oregon for his mythology as well as on contemporary people and issues to

give the books more depth than a straightforward mystery.

In the third book, *Ghostly Echoes*, Lydia Lee is transgender, and Hatun — who appears throughout the series — is modeled on Hatoon Victoria Adkins, a mentally ill homeless woman who used to spend time around the UO bookstore and library before she was hit by a car and killed in 2005.

Hatun is the only Jackaby character based fairly directly on a real, local person, Ritter says. He was working at the UO library the year the real Hatoon died. "She was always looking out for people, always trying to protect them," Ritter says, and the book's character shares that spirit.

Meanwhile in book two, *Beastly Bones*, the brave reporter Nellie Fuller is based on famed journalist Nellie Bly.

Nellie, like Lydia Lee, is one of the strong role models that Ritter gives Rook, who has only recently left her parents' home, to look up to in each book.

"I love getting into a series that has an arc," Ritter says, and for Jackaby, that arc is Rook's coming-of-age story. And, the author says, as a teacher and an adoptive father who is raising his two sons to be feminists, "I write the kinds of lessons I'd want my students to see."

Over the course of the books, Abigail Rook learns about being yourself, "all the parts of yourself," and about helping others to become themselves. In *The Dire King*, Rook learns that "you can respect someone while still not liking them, respect while you disagree, and learn to forgive and trust even when they don't deserve it."

Ritter's students keep his feet on the earth even if his writing takes him to other realms in his imagination. He remembers coming back from a big convention that featured



a signing line for his autograph and feeling like a rock star, then coming back to the classroom only to realize, he says self-deprecatingly, that his students would "rather use the bathroom pass and get out of class."

Ritter teaches creative writing and mythology, and he uses his own work in the classroom to teach. He knows it's nerve-racking to share your writing, he says. And he uses feedback from his own agent and editors — with comments in red ink coating the page and notes in the margins — to show that editing is "part of the process of writing."

The Dire King by Will Ritter. Algonquin Young Readers. \$17.95. Available in local bookstores and online.

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