

DREGS

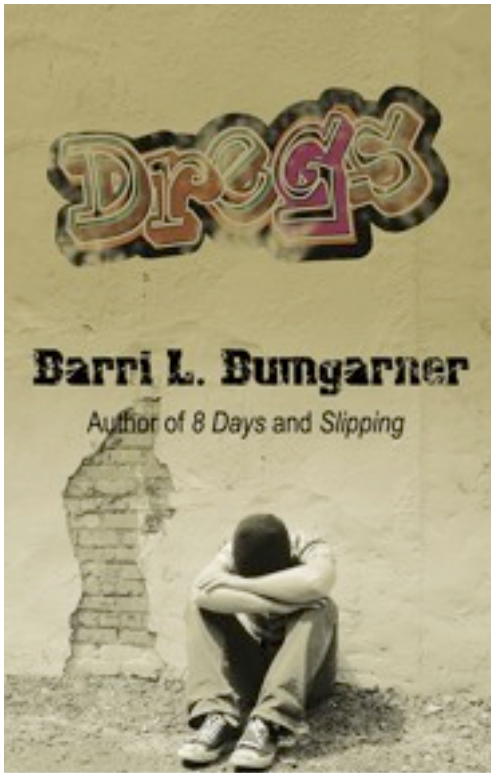
Benson's Journal

Monday, September 15th

If I could rank my life on a scale of 1-10, I'd have to resort to negative numbers. Mrs. Mattingly, you requiring us to keep this journal for publications isn't such a bad thing, because today SUCKED. That freshman jerk-off Steve Ralston shoved Ryan into a locker, asserting his manhood to everybody at Westwood Junior High by pushing seventh graders around. It's proof that jocks are stupid. We were late to P.E. because of it, and Coach Berman just laughed when I tried to explain. Yes, if you're wondering, he would fall under that previous "jock" comment. After he quit laughing, he gave us a tardy, then proceeded to tell the entire class that I didn't seem to take after my older brother. Most of the seventh graders didn't think it was funny – they've known me long enough to understand my dilemma – but the few freshmen retards in our class almost hurt themselves laughing. Wanted to tell them they were losers for having to take general P.E. What moron can't get into freshman athletics or weightlifting?

Considering having Coach Berman assassinated, but I'm not sure I have enough in my piggy bank. Could swipe some from Colin's hidden stash; that would be fitting. My god-like sixteen-year-old brother's funds help off the man who got his star career started. I think I like it. Going to hunt for cash now.

Chapter 1



Where's a fireplace poker when you need one?

“Get OFF me, Colin, God!” Benson flailed, trying to escape his older brother straddling him. Running his hand along the floor, Benson grasped a tennis shoe and chucked it at Colin’s head. The Adidas flew wide and hit the fireplace mantel, knocking a family photo to the floor with a *thunk*. Before he could find more ammunition, his brother – new driver, new RX-7, new ego to go with it – pinned Benson’s much-scrawnier arms over his head.

“Wah, you little turd, give it another big wah!” Colin laughed,

rubbing his free fist hard in Benson’s hair in a brutal noogie.

Benson knew he had to look like a demented angel and stopped resisting. *What’s the fricking point?* Wishing he hadn’t come downstairs after doing his journal entry, he pushed to see if he could let a fart. Maybe that would diffuse his brother’s joy at torturing him.

“Uncle, say uncle. C’mon, little twerp, you can do it!” Colin commenced a ruthless battery of Indian torture on Benson’s chest.

“Stop it, Colin. I mean it, or I’m tellin’ Mom!” *God, why do I say crap like that?*

“You’re such a whiner, Bennie Brat. When *I* was in seventh grade, I don’t remember being such a weenie.” Colin gave Benson two more knuckle raps, settling his dead weight on the younger boy’s stomach. It was all the thirteen-year-old could do to breathe.

I HATE YOU! Benson wanted to scream it, but he couldn't, and it wouldn't do any good anyway.

Without a weapon, he was no match. Colin outweighed him, out-muscled him, out-everythinged him. Benson could never measure up, so he had long since stopped trying. Other than soccer, he had no unique skills of his own. It all tied back to something his mother, father, or brother did first – and better. So he ditched sports on principle. Even soccer.

Screw them. I don't have to play stupid games to be somebody.

“Oh, wait. I was a star running back in seventh grade...for the freshman squad. And all-city point guard all through junior high. What're you, Bennie? Star chess player? All-city math wimp? First string faggot?” With each declaration, Colin gave his brother a wet willy, laughing so hard he lost his grip on Benson's hands.

“I HOPE YOU THROW TWENTY INTERCEPTIONS FRIDAY NIGHT!” Benson screamed, then broke free and kicked Colin off, hitting back much harder than the play slaps Colin delivered. He didn't know why he couldn't step up against his brother. His best friend Ryan possessed a more callous disregard for put-downs and had lots more practice at it, given his runt stature. But Benson could hold his own with everyone except his brother.

“Pussy boy, go ahead, hit me and then whine about it. That's what babies do. WAH!” Colin laid a firm smack on the side of Benson's head, and then swaggered toward the kitchen.

His chest hurt from the Indian torture, his head thumped from yelling, and frustration made him want to cry – not that he would allow Colin the satisfaction. His mom would be home any minute, which meant this round was almost over. And, regardless of the threat, there wouldn't be any point in tattling. How would he fit that into dinner conversation?

Yep, scouts're gonna be watchin' Colin go for the single-season rushing record Friday night, and by the way, he beat me up again today.

Yeah, right.

Colin came out of the kitchen with an apple, talking with his mouth full. "You haven't gone to find your boyfriend yet? There's gotta be a Science Fair to plan for." Colin cackled as he dropped onto the couch and grabbed the remote. Benson rolled over and scrambled backward in anticipation of a sneak attack. When he saw Colin had truly abandoned the game, he shuffled upstairs to his bedroom, a whipped shadow.

Why do I let him do this to me? And how can I murder him in his sleep?

If he had a dollar for every time his brother beat on him during football season, he could buy his own set of pads. At least during basketball, Colin just threw things at him.

Benson lay flopped across his bed with the phone cord wound around his index finger until it turned purple. "Man, I wish you had come over today. At least he cuts me some slack when you're around."

"Sorry. I'm down to a 95% in algebra." Ryan sounded distracted, like he might be working on an equation while they talked.

"Ooooooh, gonna blow that straight A honor roll. What's up with that?" Benson let out a half-hearted laugh. "I swear, Ryan, when I get his size, I'm gonna plow him every chance I get."

He sat up so he could see his reflection in the mirror flexing and inspecting his small ball of bicep.

"Ha! By the time you're his size, Ben, he'll be playin' for the Packers." Ryan snickered, then started babbling about the math assignment. Benson couldn't deal with homework now; he was still pissed. His stud brother had the whole school, town, and especially their parents, completely snowed. They would eat dog poop out of the palm of his hand if he told them it was chocolate pudding. And it riled Benson more than the taunts and daily beatings.

"I'll vent about him in my journal. You get yours done yet?"

"Yeah, but I'm gonna run out of things to say pretty quick. I'm not the writer... you are. More money in math and science."

“Geek,” Benson challenged.

“Loser,” Ryan countered. It was a game that could go on for several minutes until the slurs got too vulgar or one of them ran out.

“Well, I gotta go. Mom’s cookin’ dinner, and I’m thinking I might help her.” Benson sat up and stared at his reflection in the mirror. He finger-combed his hair while studying his new crop of zits. He’d tackle those after dinner.

“Must be cooking something good, huh?”

“Fried chicken.”

“Ah, and you’re going to set the table while you eat a drumstick before Colin gets them all.” Ryan chuckled, and it amazed Benson how well his best friend knew him.

“Exactly. See you tomorrow, and don’t forget to bring your science homework. I might need to look at it.” Benson intended to give it an attempt, but why bother when Ryan’s was as good as the answer key?

“No problem, man, but you owe me. As always.”

Who had time for science when he had murders to plot?

About the Author

BARRI L. BUMGARNER'S second novel, *Slipping*, just received Missouri Writers' Guild Best Fiction Book 2005, runner-up. *Slipping* has received rave reviews from national radio host Jim Bohannon and Tyrone Banks of the Washington Post. Her young adult short story "Retribution" currently appears in *Mysteries of the Ozarks, Vol. II*. Bumgarner's debut novel, *8 Days*, is currently in its second print-run. Barri also freelances for *Crescendo* and *Family* magazines. In 2005, she received Best Technical Article honors for her education articles, awarded by the Missouri Writers' Guild, and in Writer's Digest 72nd Annual Writing Competition honors. *Playing the Line*—a prequel to *8 Days*—will be released in spring 2007.



Her current project is conducting research and interviews for her true crime book *Shades of Gray: The Steven Rios Story*, for which she has conducted hundreds of interviews, including exclusives with Rios, the police officer convicted of killing his gay lover.

Ms. Bumgarner, a former teacher at Oakland Junior High School, is a graduate assistant at the University of Missouri-Columbia while completing her Master's and beginning her doctorate. She is a graduate of Long Ridge Writers' Institute, learning under the tutelage of Edgar Award winning author Carolyn Wheat. Along with nearly thirty poems, Barri has published over fifty articles for statewide magazines and short fiction in *Rock Springs Review*, *Missouri Teachers Write*, and *Well-Versed*. She is the former president of the Columbia Chapter of the Missouri Writers' Guild, and has also served as administrative assistant and website/newsletter editor. Barri is at work on her sixth novel. For more information, visit her website at: www.barrilbumgarner.com.