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Lisa Wheeler: A New Voice in Children's Books

BY ELIZABETH BOBER FLEMING

Last year, Oakland University hosted 11 gifted contributors to children's literature during the annual Author's and Illustrator's Art and Craft workshop, which is where I met and interviewed Michigan author Lisa Wheeler.

Wheeler has only been writing for 10 years and already she has published 13 picture books. More are on the way. They seem to pour out of her like she's some enchanted faucet. Her editor at Simon and Schuster is Richard Jackson, widely regarded as one of the best in the business. She also happens to be funny, friendly, and modest.

Lisa spoke at the workshop on June 30. The best speakers are honest and unassuming; Lisa was just that. She discussed the process of emotional growth she had to undertake before she could seriously commit to writing. She was candid in her opinions. I couldn't wait to follow up with questions of my own. After her speech, Lisa Wheeler and I headed out for a leisurely lunch. We ate, shared anecdotes, relaxed, and then I put the microphone on the table.

EF: When you sold your first manuscript and started working with editors, were you intimidated?

LW: Yes, initially. I think I felt in awe of them ... I thought they were like God. So whenever they wanted something changed, I didn't question it too much, I just did what was asked of me. And since then, I've realized that they're people, and I can argue a little bit for what I want.

EF: How did Richard Jackson become one of your editors?

LW: I went to the Children's Literature conference in February 2000 at Kent State University in Ohio and he was speaking. My agent, Steven Malk, said, "You gotta go hear Dick speak." Steve was enamored with him, and they were friends. So I said okay, and I sat in on Dick's talk and I fell in love—he was so wonderful ... I said, "Doggone it, I don't write novels ... I should write novels so he can be my editor!" A month later, I had written *Sailor Moo* (2002), and I sent it to Steven. He said, "What do you say we show this to Dick Jackson?" and I said, "but he doesn't do picture books and he doesn't do rhyme!" and Steven said, "He does do picture books, and he has a sense of humor." So I said okay, but I was terrified. What if he didn't like it? I would just crawl under my bed and cry forever ... but then Dick bought it. He was a wonderful editor. Everyone always says all these good things about him, and it's so true.

EF: You learned you could argue with editors a little bit—what sort of things have you argued for?

LW: Well, with Dick, when we were working on *Wool Gathering* (2001), there were a lot of poems written that didn't make the book. Dick cut a lot of them out. One of the ones he wanted to cut was "Old Ramses," which is in the book. He said, "I don't know about this one," and I said, "C'mon, it's one of my favorites!" So I bargained with him. I said, "I'll tell you what. I'll give you this poem and this poem if you let me keep "Old Ramses." He said, "Okay, done deal." After the book came out, "Old Ramses" turned out to be his favorite poems in the book.

Elizabeth Bober Fleming is completing an elementary education teaching certificate at Oakland University.

EF: You mentioned in your talk today that there are a lot of poor quality children's books out there. On the flipside, what do you think makes for a great children's book?

LW: I'm so glad you asked that! I thought you were going to ask me to name the bad ones! First of all, a good story, great characters, and it must have appeal. Not only for the child, but also for the adult who has to read it over and over again. If you read a book to a kid, and they love you, and you love the book, they will fall in love with the book even if it's not that kid-friendly. But I think they will love reading even more if both of you are excited about the book. It's hard to say what makes a good children's book. Are you familiar with the book *Bark, George* (Feiffer, 1999)?

EF: Yes.

LW: Okay, I think that's one of the most perfect picture books ever. I can't say why. It's not in rhyme ... it's just a great story, and the pictures really do tell the story.

EF: Do you think books are being marketed more aggressively than in the past?

LW: No. I think that certain books are being marketed more aggressively than in the past. I think celebrity books are being marketed more aggressively. I think that books that could have a Harry Potter tie-in are being marketed more aggressively ... But on the whole, good books that are not automatic—obvious blockbuster hits—nobody hears about them. It's sad, because I know that if I wasn't in this business and I didn't know the good books coming out, I would miss them. Because they're gone so fast. It's sad to say, but publishers are in it for the money. Nowadays it seems that a lot of publishers have been bought out by big corporations, and it's all about the bottom line. It's a tight market, and it's a shame.

EF: Is there a reason why the majority of your main characters are animals?

LW: Yes! I actually gave a talk on anthropomorphism [for the Society of Children's Book Writers & Illustrators—SCBWI]. I like using animals for several reasons. One of the reasons is that animals are universal. If you're a kid, and you see *Porcupining* (2002) in a store, you don't know whether the porcupine on the cover is a boy or girl, you don't know what race it is, you don't know what country it's from, you don't know its financial background—you know nothing except how adorable it is. And all of a sudden, it's every child. If you take the same book and put a little girl on the cover who looks like I did when I was 6, how many boys are going to pick up that book? How many African-American girls?

Another reason [to use animals] is that you can get animals into more trouble than you can people. Kids are more likely to forgive animals. If Cushion were a boy instead of a porcupine, girls would be irate because a boy was going around insulting girls. If the character is an animal, all of a sudden you're freer. It frees me.

EF: Do you see yourself in any of your characters?

LW: Oh yeah, I am both Fitch and Chip (*New Pig in Town*, 2003; *When Pigs Fly*, 2003; *Who's Afraid of Granny Wolf?*, 2004; *Invasion of the Pig Sisters*, 2005). There's a part of me that's very insecure and afraid of everything in the world, and then there's a part of me that's a big ham and way out there. Sailor Moo is who I wish I could be. I always wanted to be more adventurous, but I'm afraid of things. So she's who I aspire to be. Of course, the bossy cow in *Farmer Dale's Red Pick-up Truck* (2004) is totally me; I'm the bossiest person in the world.

EF: You wrote stories and songs for your children when they were little. Have you ever considered developing them for publication?

LW: Most of them aren't good enough. They were written at a time when I was writing for fun and not for work, and they would have to be fleshed out a lot. But there's one—when my kids were babies—I used to sing this little song to them: *I love you once, I love you twice, I love you more than beans and rice*. After I was a professional writer, I sat down to write and out came that poem—and it turned into *Te Amo, Bebe, Little One* (2004). I can't read that book out loud because I cry.

EF: How did it develop into *Te Amo, Bebe, Little One*? Where did the Spanish influence come from?

LW: There wasn't any Spanish in the original text. I sent it to one of my critique partners, Hope Vestergaard, who is really good with languages. She said, "Why didn't you use any Spanish words in your Spanish book?" I said, "It's not a Spanish book!" She said, "Oh yes, it is." And I said, "I don't speak Spanish!" And she said, "I can help you with that." I also called my high-school friend Alicia Gomez Terrel who is Mexican-American, and I told her about the book. She helped me a lot [because] she is really good with botany. I needed to know what grows where and at what time of the year because it's about the seasons in the first year of a baby's life. Alicia told me that a baby's first birthday in her culture is huge! I didn't know that, and it all fit together really well—like serendipity. But I was nervous because I'm not Hispanic, so [Little Brown] hired an artist from Mexico City to do the art. I dedicated the book to Hope and Alicia for all the help they gave me.

EF: Thank you so much for taking the extra time to talk with me.

LW: You're welcome!

For more information about Lisa Wheeler, please visit her Web site: <http://www.lisawheelerbooks.com/> If you would like more details about Oakland University's Author's and Illustrator's Art and Craft, including a sneak preview of the 2006 lineup, please visit <http://rla.oakland.edu/~childlit/>

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