

• Meet the Author •

Lisa Wheeler

Interview conducted by Toni Buzzeo, career media specialist and author (visit www.tonibuzzeo.com).

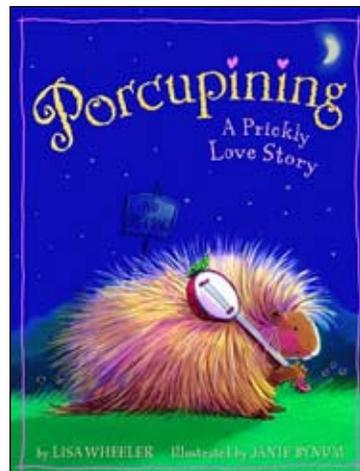


Photo from www.lisawheelerbooks.com

Lisa Wheeler is passionate about children's books. "I love everything about them, including the smell!" To date, Lisa has twenty-eight titles on library shelves, with more to follow over the next few years. She's written picture books in prose and rhyme, an easy reader series, two books of poems, and creative nonfiction for the very young. Her newest titles are *Dino-Baseball* (CarolRhoda Books), the third book in her popular Dino-Sport series, and *Ugly Pie* (Harcourt) a folksy tale about Ol'Bear who has a hankerin' for his favorite pie and journeys out to find it.

Hokey Pokey: Another Prickly Love Story is actually the second book about Cushion and Barb. Please tell us more about the first story, *Porcupining: A Prickly Love Story* and how these two characters came to you.

LW: The story began with wordplay. I noticed a sad-looking pine tree and commented that it looked like it was "pining". That eventually became *Porcupining*, a story about a sad porcupine looking for love. The problem was, Cushion the porcupine was clueless when it came to sweet-talking the ladies. He tried serenading them but his songs always turned out wrong. One by one, he insulted each of the gals in the petting zoo where he lives. This went on until Barb, an adorable



sweet-voiced hedgehog, heard Cushion singing and fell in love with his voice. The story ends on a happy note as the two make beautiful music together.

Did you always know there would be a sequel? If not, how did the sequel come to be? Either way, it must have been great fun to come up with three "animal" related dances that would shape your story. Tell us about the creation process for this book.

LW: I never anticipated a sequel (or as I like to say, sequill). My editor asked me if I could come up with another story about Cushion and Barb. I decided that since I love to dance, it would be fun to see Cushion try some dance moves. There were many animal related dances to choose from (like The Monkey, The Pony, The Chicken Dance) but I had to choose only three. I thought that it would make sense to stick with animals one might find in a petting zoo, and also dances that were very different from one another. The fox trot is old-fashioned, the bunny-hop is a party classic, and the funky chicken is a fun-to-say dance that dates back to when I was a kid.

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Hokey Pokey: Another Prickly Love Story employs a Pattern of Three organization in which Cushion tries and fails, tries and fails, tries and fails, and then finally succeeds. Teachers and librarians who work in schools employing the 6-Trait writing model will be anxious to hear more about your decision to use this story structure. Is it one that you often use? Can you give us examples of other of your titles that use this story structure too?

LW: This pattern is often referred to as “the rule of threes” in children’s books. It is a classic pattern that works well in any story. I employ it often in books like *Old Cricket*, *Turk And Runt*, and *Porcupining*. Here is why it works: If a character tries once and succeeds, it is barely a story before it is over. There is no tension and it’s hard to root for someone who succeeds without failure. If the same character tries twice and then succeeds, the reader is still feeling like, perhaps it was just a bit too easy. Perhaps this character has everything handed to him and doesn’t have to work as hard as other folks. But when a character fails three times, we feel so sorry for him. We want the character to succeed; we are on the edge of our seat rooting for him. The reader, who knows what it feels like to try so hard with no immediate success, wants this character to make it. And then—ta-da! The character succeeds! Oh joy, rapture! We, as readers, are giddy with glee

that this character that we stuck by through all the misery has finally reached his goal. That is the beauty of the rule-of-threes.

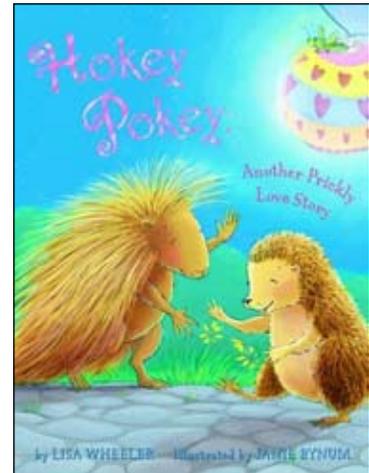
You have written and published so very many picture books in the past decade. What is it that draws you to the picture book format? What is the most challenging aspect of picture book writing?

LW: I love picture books for so many reasons. I love the art. I love the brevity. I love the cleverness of wordplay and the marriage of art and text. Besides, where else can a problem be solved in only 500 words?

I think the most challenging part is exactly that: solving a problem in so few words. There is an art to getting in and out of a book cleanly. It takes years of practice and lots of revisions. My job is to make it all look easy-peasy.

Are Cushion and Barb likely to have a third story? If so, what might that one be about? If not, which of your forthcoming picture books are you most excited about?

LW: Sadly, I don’t think we will be seeing any more of Cushion and Barb. I love them both, but they have gone into retirement. I am very excited about *Ugly Pie* and *Dino-Baseball*. I am also very eager for a new book that is coming out in the spring of 2011 called *Spinster Goose: Twisted Rhymes for Naughty Children*. It is being illustrated by Sophie Blackall and is published by Simon & Schuster. It is a parody of



Mother Goose. I’ve collected Mother Goose books for years and always wanted to write one. The premise for this one began with a question: What happens to the naughty children in Mother Gooseland? I realized that Mother Goose is far too kind to punish or reprimand, so she sends these children to her horrible sister, who runs a school for naughty children. All the poems mirror Mother Goose poems, with a twist. Therefore, Mary, who had a little lamb, is quite the fibber. Jack Sprat and his wife serve up the kiddies lunchtime gruel, and Little Jack Horner has a terrible thumb-sucking habit.

How can readers learn more about you and your books?

LW: Go to

www.lisawheelerbooks.com.

You can even find out strange and interesting facts about me and my thumbs.

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Toni Buzzeo, MA, MLIS, is an author as well as a career library media specialist. She is the author of twelve picture books, most recently *Adventure Annie Goes to Kindergarten* (Dial, 2010) and many professional books and articles. Visit www.tonibuzzeo.com or e-mail Toni at tonibuzzeo@tonibuzzeo.com.