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Woolbur
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Q&A with Lee Harper, illustrator of *Woolbur*

1. Your illustrations brought so much life to Woolbur's character throughout the book. What inspired you while working on *Woolbur*? And how did you personalize this lovable character into being?

One of the reasons illustrating *Woolbur* was a special experience for me was because while I was in the process of putting form to the fictional character Woolbur, I was living out my own version of *Woolbur* in real life.

My real-life son, Dan, was exhibiting a lot of Woolburesque characteristics, and just like Maa and Paa, I did a lot of worrying about it. As much as we tried to get him to follow the herd, it seemed he was always wandering off doing his own thing.

As I was painting one of the scenes where Maa and Paa are worrying and pulling their wool, I was laughing to myself about how silly they were behaving. And then it occurred to me that I was acting just like Maa and Paa, worrying about Dan for the same reasons Maa and Paa were worrying about Woolbur. It's something we parents do because we love our children so much. But all it really accomplishes is we get our wool all knotted up. So thanks to *Woolbur*, I tweaked my parenting approach and concentrated more on celebrating Dan's unique characteristics, instead of trying to force him to be like the flock. We're both happier as a result. I hope someone else who reads this book will have the same experience we had, because I think we should celebrate the Woolburs of the world—without them it would be a much less interesting place.

2. What research did you do for your *Woolbur* illustrations?

The process of gathering stuff for *Woolbur* began at the Doylestown library. I checked out piles of books, no matter how vaguely related to the story. Some of the subjects included: knitting, weaving, dyeing, sheep farming, sheep anatomy, spinning, sheepdog training, sheep shearing, animals in motion, barns, etc. One book in particular from which I gained much useful information was *The Alden Amos Big Book of Handspinning*. I also subscribed to *FiberArts* magazine to get up to date on trends in the world of textile art.

The Internet was also a great source for reference material. I created a Woolbur photo reference folder on my computer full of downloaded sheep-related imagery. I found most of this material by Googling. I Googled sheep. I Googled farm. I Googled sheep farm.

I printed out my favorite images and pinned them up on the corkboard I keep near my drawing table. Sometimes I pin up images that strike me without really knowing why. For example: An advertisement for Ambien that caught my eye ended up influencing the lighting I used in the "Woolbur's sleepless night" scene on page 25.

3. Beyond basic sheep anatomy, how did you match the different personalities of sheep in your illustrations? Did you previously live on a sheep farm?

Once I felt like I knew what a sheep looks like and sort of understood the process of turning sheep wool into a sweater, I started thinking about the sheep personality. I asked myself, What kind of personality traits does a sheep have that make it unique? What kind of traits do they have that might be incorporated into the characters of *Woolbur* to help bring the story to life? To find out, I needed to get to know some real sheep. I contacted a sheep farmer in New Hope and asked if I could observe her sheep. She very graciously allowed me to hang around and draw. This wasn't any ordinary sheep farm, either. This was once the sheep farm of Daniel Garber, the famous Pennsylvania impressionist painter. If I was to get inspiration for a sheep book, this must surely be the place.

I sat on a log and started watching sheep. They watched me back. I stared at them. They huddled together and stared at me. After one hour of this, a rooster jumped on the back of a sheep and did some sort of wool-kneading dance routine. Guess he couldn't take it anymore. I appreciated the break in the staring contest I was having with sheep, and so I promised him I'd talk to my bosses about getting him a cameo appearance in *Woolbur*.

The rooster was great fun, but I didn't feel like I was getting much good material to build a sheep character with. But then again, maybe I was. I very quickly learned that what sheep like most is other sheep. That's why there is so much of the sheep motif in Maa and Paa's home decor and why I always clumped all the sheep together in the illustrations. I was also exposed to a lot of great textures while at the Garber Farm, which had a big influence on how I painted the scenery in *Woolbur*.

4. That herd sounds pretty passive, but Woolbur definitely has more personality. How did you know how to illustrate a sheep that doesn't just follow the herd?

Later I knocked on the door of another sheep farm. There was no one there, so I left a note explaining my project. I got a call from Deb Rendon the next day. She and her husband Roberto would be happy to have me come do research for my book at their farm. Deb told me to come early because that's when all the action takes place. I arrived early the next morning at the Rendons' farm and definitely got a little more Woolburesque sheep personality this time—I arrived just in time for a lamb jailbreak. The lambs had just escaped from their corral and were running amok! Although lacking in sheep-wrangling experience, I was immediately recruited to help round them up. I caught one and held it in my arms. It was the cutest thing I'd ever seen. After it calmed down, Deb let me bottle-feed it. I started to ponder the zoning laws of Doylestown—wondering if my yard was big enough for a small sheep farm. Besides sheep, the Rendons also had a pack of sheepdogs that helped me with the 'half-wild dogs' of *Woolbur*. The Rendons were some of the nicest people I ever met. They

welcomed me and my two boys to their farm, calling me when their colt was born and when it was shearing time for the sheep. I kept a photo I took of the lamb jailbreak on my drawing board the whole time I worked on *Woolbur* for inspiration.

5. Okay, we can see you clearly did your research on the real thing, but other than live sheep-watching, how else did you prepare to illustrate *Woolbur*?

After running out of ways to procrastinate, I started drawing and painting sheep. I looked at how other artists painted sheep. Some of the most beautifully painted sheep I discovered were the sheep in a children's book by George Ella Lyon, illustrated by Stephanie Anderson, entitled *Weaving the Rainbow*. Also inspirational was the sheep in a painting called *Our English Coasts*, by William Holman Hunt.