

Interview with Barbara Gregorich, author of
Waltur Paints Himself into a Corner and Other Stories

Q: *What made you write a second book about a bear who interprets idioms and proverbs literally?*

A: There are at least two reasons that I wrote a sequel to *Waltur Buys a Pig in a Poke and Other Stories* (Houghton, 2006). The first is that the characters of Waltur and his friends Matilda and Darwin stayed with me: it's as if they were hanging around, eager to appear in other stories. At the same time hundreds of English-language idioms were floating around my brain, perhaps eager to be taken literally by a brash bear. And the first book received very good reviews, so I wanted to see if I could write at least as well as I had the first time.

Q: *What's it like writing a sequel?*

A: For me it was both easier and harder than the first time around — easier in that the characters were established, harder in that idioms don't become easier to write about. In some ways, the proverbs that I'm attracted to become more difficult to develop within a story because the plot must carry both the literal and figurative meaning of each, and not just any proverb works that way. The three that worked for me this time around became the three stories in the book: "Waltur Puts the Cart Before the Horse," "Waltur Paints Himself into a Corner," and "Waltur Won't Let Sleeping Dogs Lie."

many adults mention Lobel's Frog and Toad books and Cynthia Rylant's Henry and Mudge series.

Early readers of the type *Waltur* fits into have been around for several decades, but only in 2006 did the American Library Association, which bestows the Caldecott and Newbery Medals, begin an annual award for them, the Theodor Seuss Geisel Award. Children love early readers of this type — they love the characters and the incidents in the characters' lives, and they start reading the entire series.

Q: *What else does your book offer the early reader?*

A: *Waltur Paints Himself into a Corner and Other Stories* offers three stories centered around a colorful, proverb-based idiom. There's conflict and resolution, humor, problem solving, the dawning of the light, and there's a great friendship between the three characters — Waltur, Matilda, and Darwin. I've noticed that these stories offer an opportunity for children to bond with their grandparents — because it's sometimes the grandparents who are more familiar with proverbs than are the parents. But I've also noticed bonding with parents, as when a parent is reading the book with a child and the parent exclaims, "So *that's* what that saying means!"

Q: *What exactly is an idiom?*

A: An idiom is an expression that doesn't mean exactly what it says. Idioms exist in every known language, and they make learning a foreign language frustrating and funny at the same time. For example, if you say that "Josh landed on his feet," a nonnative speaker might be perplexed, wondering if Josh had just jumped from a height. But a native speaker has learned through assimilation that "landing on your feet" really means to get yourself out of trouble without damage.

Once children and parents catch on to what the *Waltur* stories are about, they'll be laughing at many idioms they encounter in their everyday speech.

Q: *Early readers occupy a short time in a young reader's life — what made you go there, instead of to picture books or chapter books?*

A: In a word: rhythm. I love the rhythm of a well-written early reader, such as Arnold Lobel's Frog and Toad books, and especially James Marshall's George and Martha books. There's an attractive sparseness in such writing. And I've always admired how the illustrations in the best early readers work to further tell the story. I love how Kristin Sorra, illustrator of both *Waltur Buys a Pig in a Poke* and *Waltur Paints Himself into a Corner*, increases both the warmth and the humor in these stories.

I also love the challenge of telling a complete story in the small number of words that most early readers have. And, while it's true that early readers are bridges between beginning readers on the one side and chapter books on the other, their importance to children shouldn't be underestimated. When asked which children's books influenced them most,