

Thanks for joining us today on The Lerner Podcast. I'm here with Hannah Batsel, author and illustrator of *A Is for Another Rabbit*. Welcome, Hannah.

Thank you. Thanks for having me on.

What is it that draws you to make books instead of murals or hats or pastries or anything else?

I think that there's something just so special about not only the codex form of books, which is the kind of book that you're used to looking at in the local bookstore, on your bookshelf, that kind of opens and has pages, but any kind of book. Books can be all kinds of forms. There can be pop up books, or you can have books with holes in them, books with mirrors in them. There are certain types of accordion books that kind of compress and expand like an accordion might. I think that there's a book out there for every conceivable human idea. They're kind of like vessels that can hold any story. And as someone who's really interested in storytelling, they've really always been a natural draw for me.

What was your favorite book when you were a kid?

When I was a little, little kid, my favorite were always the Richard Scarry books, especially the Busy Town books. And I think you can see that in a lot of my current work, because first of all, they're super busy. I have lots of lots of little details. But also, I've always been a huge fan of animals, as you might guess, from my very rabbit based book. And Richard Scarry has who knows how many books about rabbits. And then as I grew up, and got, I guess, a little edgier, I really found two Roald Dahl books, especially the ones with Quentin Blake illustrations. I think that having a little bit of darkness or spookiness in a kid's book is always a great thing to do. Not that there's a whole lot of dark spooky rabbits in my book. But I think that it adds like a little bit of scary mystery. And I really like that.

I like all the counter culture rabbits that that are showcased in there.

Yeah, there's a lot of hidden musicians and other real life people in there.

What advice would you give to someone who wanted to try writing or illustrating their own book?

I think the most important thing is to just do it over and over. I know that it can be really scary as a writer or an artist to actually take your idea from being inside your head to something that's a physical object, because so often your skill level might not catch up to your imagination for quite some time, especially if you're a kid. So I think that my number one piece of advice is even if the thing that you're making doesn't really match what you had in your head, keep making it. Even if you make it over and over, if you have a story that you really want to get out into the world and the first time you create it, it doesn't really live up to what you would hope--it's okay to make that again, a year later, or five years later, 10 years later, or even right away. There's nothing wrong with recreating a story, or bringing the first draft into a more finished version. So I would say just do it even if it's a little disappointing at first. And also do it physically. Make a physical version, so maybe don't just type it out on your laptop. If you are a writer that likes to use a

computer, print it out and staple it into a little book. I think that there's something very rewarding about being able to hold something that you made, being able to actually feel it and see it in the real world. And it can feel like more accomplishment and more of an encouragement to keep trying if you do that.

Rabbits are generally seen as gentle, docile and quick to scare. Why are the rabbits in your book so rebellious and mischievous?

Um, yeah, rabbits kind of have a reputation as being flighty and scared nervous animals, which can be true, but I think if you get a rabbit comfortable enough if you make friends with it, especially a pet rabbit, they're actually very mischievous and naughty. A lot of the rabbits in my books are inspired by real life rabbits that I have or that I've had, and including my old rabbit, Pip and my current rabbit Pigeon, who just loves to get into trouble. When rabbits get really excited, they do this thing called "binkying", which is kind of like a quick popcorn leap into the air where they twist their hips around and they wiggle their head back and forth really quick and do kind of an excited leap. And my rabbit Pigeon does it most often when he gets caught doing something he's not supposed to. So he's not supposed to go in the living room, but if you see him doing it and chase him out, he gets super excited and loves being chased. I think that rabbits are they're kind of a little bit more mischievous or naughty than they have any right to be, being like a kind of defenseless prey animal. You know, you wouldn't think they had such attitude but they've really got a lot of rich inner personality if you get to know them.

I just googled rabbit "binkying" and everyone listening to this podcast needs to go do that right now. Because it is adorable.

It is very cute and very puzzling. If you see it happen for the first time, you kind of wonder, oh my gosh, there's something wrong! Like what? What are you doing? Right?

I want to watch this in slow motion.

Yeah, it's just that they're so excited. They can't contain it all in that little tiny body.

What was your inspiration for this book in particular?

This book actually came from a phone conversation with my mom, in which I was talking about my love of abecedarians, which is kind of a long word for alphabet books. And I expressed my interest in wanting to write an alphabet book someday but my favorite ones being animal alphabet books, I admitted that I would have a hard time doing any animal besides rabbits, but I thought that rabbits should really only be at our page. And my mom said, Well, why don't you do A is for a rabbit. B is for bunny rabbit. C is for can you believe how many rabbits there are on the stage? And it started off as a joke where we were kind of going back and forth, saying, you know, Oh, G is for good lord, what's with all these rabbits and by the end of the conversation, I kind of thought yeah, why not? And that conversation turned into the first manuscript for *A Is for Another Rabbit*. There were some changes, but honestly, a lot of those original phone conversation ideas did make it into the final book. So I guess thanks to my mom for that whole idea.

Can you tell us a little bit about how this book came to be published?

Sure. Um, I am originally a fine press book artist, which means that I print most of my books on an old timey letterpress printing press called a Vandercook which involves putting together usually lead type, you can arrange letters into words and words into sentences and print your own books that way. So I have a number of those books that I've published myself, and one of them was up for an award in Minneapolis. For the MCBA Book Arts prize, so I was flown to Minneapolis for that award ceremony, where I met Harry Lerner who encouraged me to try to do a more a mass market children's book. I had always wanted to write a children's book, but I kind of never really knew the avenue to that, or how one got into doing that. So he very kindly showed me the ropes and yeah, the folks that learner have been really great and guiding a first time author through what is like a very unfamiliar process. I would say it's very satisfying to be able to create an idea and then hand it off to competent people, as opposed to creating an idea and then having to print it and bind it and, you know, glue it together, myself. And yeah, I would love to do more mass market books in the future. I'm kind of a convert.

You hinted at this already earlier that you have a lot of real life rabbits in your illustrations, not just rabbits that you've known, but people as rabbits. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Sure. I do have a lot of references in this book. I think that it's really important for kids books to have a little something for parents to appreciate as well. And for kids to have something to find to look up into learn a little bit outside the scope of the book. And of course, being selfish, all of those things are things that I happen to like as well. So if you, I guess, have time to go do a little I Spy kind of thing in the book. There are a lot of real life musicians. There's a whole musician page that has some of my favorites like Dolly Parton and Freddie Mercury. And there are a little kind of Easter eggs to find in most people. The pages I know and the others a page where the owl is very big and he's kind of Godzilla in a tiny rabbit village. And in that village you can actually see me playing D&D with my friends in rabbit form. You can see my art studio in there with the drafting table where I did this entire book. And there there are all kinds of references for both kids and adults. You can see some kind of old school anime in there. There's stuff from the movie Akira, there's stuff from Evan Galleon. There are on the final page, which is just chock full of rabbits, you can find just about any kind of genre of reference. There's Superman and I won't ruin all of them. But if there's a certain fandom that you're particularly interested in, there's a good chance you'll find it in *A Is for Another Rabbit*.

Just before I got on this call. I was asking my kids what they would like me to ask you. And so, one of our favorite things is to look at the end papers of this book. Can you talk a little bit about the end papers? And I'll put a link in the show notes.

Sure. Yeah, the end sheets were really fun to do. I being a book nerd, I'm a huge fan of end sheets, because it's kind of the first introduction that you have to the book. The first thing you see when you open the front cover. So I wanted my end sheets to be very supplemental to the story. You don't necessarily have to look at them, but I wanted it to be a special treat if you did. So the first end sheet shows our protagonist, Mr. Owl, walking with a cup of tea down his hallway full of animal portraits. There are labeled different animal portraits in this kind of big purple long hallway. And then the final end sheet has fallen asleep on his couch

and a gang of rambunctious rabbits has come in and vandalized his many portraits with some red paint to do a few animal based jokes. And I did the end sheets in mostly just two colors, a light purple and a dark purple, because I do think it's important for end sheets to kind of blend into background and be a little distinct from the rest of the book. But yeah, the kids that I have talked to and seeing reading the book actually intend to focus on the end sheets a lot and like to find their favorite animals and do kind of an I Spy point to your favorite animal. So the end sheets have been successful, I guess.

They're a super fun part of reading the book.

Thanks.

What was the most surprising thing that you discovered while researching the book?

Um, well, the first of all, the most surprising thing was how long it takes to illustrate a kid's book. Oh my gosh. I do all my work, I guess, traditional media, so I don't do any digital work. The entire book is hand painted, which took quite some time. But my favorite part of it was, I think looking up reference images and researching for the different characters. So the main character, the owl is based on a real owl species called the northern white faced owl. They're famous for their sort of shape shifting abilities. If they're scared, they can puff up and get really bad or really wide, if they're trying to be aggressive, rather, but if they're frightened, they can kind of compress themselves into like a little sliver. They can sort of squint their eyes and become really small. They're just extremely expressive species and I thought that they would be perfect for a protagonist of a kids' book. And then just doing research about different rabbit breeds. You know, everybody knows different breeds of dogs but I guess I was a little surprised to see how many breeds of rabbit there are out there. There really are tiny rabbits and huge rabbits and rabbits with spots and little masks on their face like a burglar, and half of them is white and half is black. And there are all kinds of fascinating rabbit breeds out there that I put into the book. Because I really wanted kids who have a pet rabbit maybe to be able to read the book and to find one that looked like their pet in there. And hopefully I represented enough rabbit breeds for that to happen.

What is your least favorite animal?

Oh, I would never tell. I think their fan club would boycott my book.

Thank you so much for joining us today, Hannah. It's been great to talk with you and learn more about your book.

Yeah, thank you so much.

Thank you for joining us here on The Lerner Podcast. Tune in again next time for more author interviews and the stories behind the books.