

Easter egg - THE LION

The original lion that my three-year old son believed to be real, which sparked the idea for this book, was not the same one I used in the book. The original lion is a no-name lion in the Bargello Museum, a few blocks away. Here is a photo of little Rennie walking up to the lion bravely, worried that he would come to life. Interestingly, Priscilla Mackie Blake, who took me to Florence in 1995, snapped a photo of me interacting with the same lion—only a decade earlier.

I thought long and hard about what lion I wanted to use for the book, and why switch from the original kind-hearted lion in the Bargello. The first thing that came to mind was access. I wanted a public sculpture that any child could have access to without paying a fee. The second factor was how the protection of art would affect the story. In the Bargello Museum, I couldn't find evidence that Rennie's lion was protected or moved, but even so, it was partially protected within the walls of the museum. So for these reasons, I looked elsewhere.

I settled on the lion facing the public square, the Piazza della Signoria. There are two lions guarding the steps to the Loggia Dei Lanzi, an outdoor sculpture park of sorts. This portico is filled with dynamic and beautiful sculptures. Most lions guarding doors or stairways come in identical pairs. But this set is different. The lion on the right is called the Ancient Lion, and is a bit degraded in detail due to his age (created in Roman times). In contrast, the lion on the left, created in 1598 by Flaminio Vacca, is in much better shape, and has an expressive, almost pained face. When visited Florence for research, and sat by the lion sketching every night after dinner, I noted how tourists strongly gravitate toward this lion, and not the other. I think something in his eyes connects with people, whereas the other lion does not.

The photo of me in front of Vacca's lion was taken by Max Lemke.