

The Book Journey for RENATO AND THE LION
By Barbara DiLorenzo

The idea for my debut book, *RENATO AND THE LION* (Viking, 2017) began over a decade ago, on a family trip in 2006. We were visiting Italian family in Treviso, and decided to take a detour to Florence. Our 3-year old son was not amused by my constant push to visit the Florentine museums. However, when we visited the Bargello, a museum containing mostly sculptures, something magical happened. Near the courtyard where two white lions stand guard by a doorway, my little son wholeheartedly believed that one of them was alive. I watched through the lens of my camera as he reacted to the statue. He was scared, but his father encouraged him to approach the lion. His face showed concern as he stepped closer to the lion. After a few minutes, he bravely walked all the way up to the lion, and gave it a hug. (I know touching the sculptures is not a good practice, but in this case, a brief hug seemed magical). This interaction haunted me for some time, and I began to draw a boy character with a stone lion, come to life.

However, try as I might, I could not force a plot on these two. The characters were sweet, but I sensed a darkness to the story that would have to bring the lion to life to give hope to the boy. But I couldn't quite get the story to work. I even tried to write a novel, but after 80,000 words, I decided the plot had gotten way out of hand. I needed to return to the essence of a boy and his lion. Around this time, I came across a documentary, called *THE RAPE OF EUROPA*, about the protection of artworks in World War II Europe. Normally when I work, I listen to documentaries more than watch them. But thankfully at just the right moment, I looked up to see the photo of Michelangelo's *DAVID* encased in bricks—and the image haunted me. I wondered how despite the fear of being bombed, Italian citizens worked together to thoroughly protect their artistic treasures. And suddenly I had my plot!

Though I knew the story for Renato and his lion, I now had to grapple with the World War II aspect. How could I make this a picture book for young readers? I thought maybe it would be a better graphic novel, and attempted that angle. None of my ideas were committed to paper until I decided to enter the 2014 Bologna Book Fair Silent Book Contest. The parameters allowed for any age audience, and up to 50 pages. Without constrictions of 32-pages or a young audience, I drew my book. It took a solid month, but I was so proud of the results. The funny thing is that the first version was written without much research at all—and is not that different from the final version which benefitted from a year of additional research (including another trip to Florence—paid for from my book advance).

While in the creative throes of making the book for Bologna, I had an email

exchange with Denise Cronin, an art director at Viking. We had met at a NJ SCBWI event at Princeton in the fall, and I thought she would be a great speaker for the Children's Book Illustrators Group. She declined, but remembered meeting me, and offered that I could email her a sample of what I was working on. I took a photo of my wall, with 50 pages of my book in development. I'm not sure she could see much detail, but she could tell something was happening. I was excited when she asked me to send the pdf to her when it was done. So I sent one to Bologna, and one to Denise. While it didn't win anything in the Bologna contest, it did strike a chord with Denise. She responded saying she liked it, and wanted to show it to the editor, Tracy Gates. I celebrated this moment, certain it was a small win before a fall. But the next email was positive. She said that the editor enjoyed the dummy, but had just left for vacation. I again celebrated this win before what I was certain would be a fall. After this point, there was a lot of back and forth, a meeting with the Viking team, a few other publishers in the mix after my agent submitted it, and my hopes started to soar. However, it was another 5 months before RENATO AND THE LION was acquired by Viking. I was sure that it would be passed over, until I got the call in August of 2014 from my agent. I couldn't believe that I had sold my first book! I was ready to start work immediately.

But one thing that may or may not be normal for big publishers, we ended up delaying everything by a year. I kept offering to send sketches to meet my March 2015 deadline, but everyone told me to hold off. By August, when the final art should have been due, I lost heart when I felt we had made no progress at all. I thought they had second thoughts on the book, and would let me go. In reality, I'm sure that there is so much I don't know about their timetable and book lists, and the delay probably had nothing at all to do with me. I decided to regroup, and travel to Florence for research purposes, using the first part of my book advance. I stayed in Florence for ten days, and learned more about the history than in all of my research stateside. I had been frequenting the Princeton University libraries, and was proud of what I had uncovered. But there is no substitute for walking down a street and meeting a bookseller that was the same age in 1944 as the protagonist. I hired a translator to help me interview him, and it was phenomenal. I sketched the statues, and walked through the center of the city until I knew it cold. That amount of research helped me feel confident about where my characters were placed in the illustrations. For example, when the lion steps off his pedestal, I wanted him to circle around the Palazzo Vecchio before jumping up to the roof of the Vasari corridor. The reason? I just kind of wanted him to walk down the Via dei Leoni, where the lions used to walk in the 13th century in Florence. Those details were fun for me to add.

After I did my research, and returned home, life got in the way for a few months. My personal life was in upheaval, and I felt a bit untethered to everything familiar. At the moment when I had the hardest time finding my bearings, my editor, Tracy,

popped up on my radar ready to begin work on our book. Suddenly, RENATO AND THE LION was in full swing, which kept me focused on art and less overwhelmed by the changes in my life. The deadline was tough for the final art, but in retrospect, if I was given a year to make final art, the illustrations would have been so overworked and stiff. I know not every angle is perfect in the book, but to me, there is a freshness to the way I was working that makes the story feel like it's in motion. Still, I could keep working on this book forever. I'm certain there is still more research out there to be uncovered, or illustrations to refine. I wonder if other authors and illustrators ever feel like they are truly finished with their work.

Now that the book is out there in the wider world, I hope readers can enjoy the story first and foremost—and if hungry for more information, visit www.renatoandthelion.com for additional commentary on the history and Easter Eggs that I placed throughout the pages.