

Book Links

BOOKS AND AUTHORS:
TALKING WITH RAND BURKERT
AND NANCY EKHOLM BURKERT
BY CYNDI GIORGIS

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Talking with
**Nancy Eckholm Burkert
and Rand Burkert**



First-time author Rand Burkert wisely chose his award-winning artist mother, Nancy Eckholm Burkert, to illustrate his retelling of a well-loved Aesop fable, *Mouse & Lion*. This spirited tale, set in the Aha Hills (between Botswana and Namibia), begins when Mouse bumbles willy-nilly into snoozing Lion, who traps and threatens to eat the small rodent. Lion is amused when Mouse proclaims, “You might need me someday, in a pinch,” and allows him to go free, not realizing that the prophecy will come true. Illustrations using compelling color, meticulous brushstrokes, and dramatic detail invite the reader in for an engaging story about compassion and kindness. Recently, I had the pleasure of interviewing both son and mother about the process of collaboration that resulted in *Mouse & Lion*.

BKL: *How did this book come about?*

R. BURKERT: I certainly wanted to collaborate with my mom, who is a great artist and an illustrator of books for children.

N. BURKERT: I was delighted to have the opportunity to work with Rand. Plus, I really love this Aesop story and Rand’s retelling of it. I hadn’t done a book for quite awhile, so it was good to be back at the drawing board.

BKL: *Rand, where did your interest in Aesop originate?*

R. BURKERT: I read Aesop as a child. There are many editions and versions of the stories, and it’s hard to distinguish the original tales of Aesop. But probably one of the most archetypal tales is “The Lion and the Mouse.” I wanted to do a book with my mother, and I thought that these stories about animals would be an obvious and natural way to collaborate. She ran with it and started studying the creatures in Africa that would appear in the book.

N. BURKERT: Also, part of your interest in Aesop was writing songs about the fables and performing them. It was a dual interest for you, not only with the tales themselves but also song adaptations.

R. BURKERT: I was interested in the animals as characters. There’s no character development in Aesop. These are brief parables. I thought I could develop these creatures—give them voices. So that had me thinking, Why not songs based on Aesop’s stories?

BKL: *So you have created both a book and a CD containing Aesop’s fables?*

R. BURKERT: It was a twin project born around the same time. The songs are folk and country blues. We’ve packaged the CD with a reference to the fables, along with the lyrics to the songs. The title song, “Mouse and Lion,” doesn’t really tell the story, but it provides insight into the psychology of the lion as he goes through changes.

BKL: *Do you consider Mouse & Lion a retelling of the fable rather than an adaptation or revision?*

R. BURKERT: It’s a basic story of the encounter between a figure of power—the lion—and a humble subject and the importance of the contribution of such a small animal to the kingdom. If it’s a retelling, it’s that I wanted to flesh out the emotions of that kind of encounter.

BKL: *In your author’s note, you question why Lion’s name often appears first in the title when “Mouse clearly performs the lion’s share of the work.” Also, the book’s title is not The Mouse and the Lion; it’s just Mouse & Lion. What thought process did you go through in determining the title?*

N. BURKERT: Using Mouse and Lion as the characters’ proper

Versions and Variants of Aesop’s Fables

- **Aesop’s Fables.** By Beverley Naidoo. Illus. by Piet Grobler. 2011. 48p. Frances Lincoln, \$18.95 (9781847800077). 823.914. K–Gr. 4.
- **Aesop’s Fables.** By Brad Sneed. Illus. by the author. 2003. 40p. Dial, \$16.99 (9780803727519). 398.2. K–Gr. 4.
- **Aesop’s Fables.** By Jerry Pinkney. Illus. by the author. 2000. 96p. Chronicle, \$19.99 (9781587170003). 398.2. Gr. 1–5.
- **Aesop’s Fables.** By Lisbeth Zwerger. Illus. by the author. 2006. 32p. NorthSouth, \$16.95 (9780735820685). 823.92. Gr. 1–5.
- **The Fabled Fourth Graders of Aesop Elementary School.** By Candace Fleming. 2007. 192p. Yearling, paper, \$6.50 (9780440422297); Random/Schwartz & Wade, lib. ed., \$18.99 (9780375936722). Gr. 3–5.
- **Fox Tails: Four Fables from Aesop.** By Amy Lowry. Illus. by the author. 2012. 32p. Holiday, \$16.95 (9780823424009). 398.24. K–Gr. 2.
- **The Lion & the Mouse.** By Jerry Pinkney. Illus. by the author. 2009. 40p. Little, Brown, \$16.99 (9780316013567). 813.54. K–Gr. 4.
- **The McElderry Book of Aesop’s Fables.** By Michael Morpurgo. Illus. by Emma Chichester Clark. 2005. 96p. Simon & Schuster/Margaret K. McElderry, \$24.99 (9781416902904). 398.2. K–Gr. 5.
- **Mouse & Lion.** By Rand Burkert. Illus. by Nancy Eckholm Burkert. 2011. 32p. Scholastic/Michael di Capua, \$17.95 (9780545101479). K–Gr. 5.

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names gives them an individuality that is not quite as broad as the Lion and the Mouse representing all lions and all mice.

R. BURKERT: We realized that Mouse is the most active character in the story. He is the one who decides to perform the action of saving the lion. The lion has an action, too, and that's when he releases the mouse and realizes that he can be merciful. In this version, especially in images, this comes to the forefront, and you see Mouse performing various actions that are depicted in blue. That's when we realized he's really the protagonist.

BKL: Nancy, you use the color blue not only with the actions of the mouse but also in other details throughout the book. What role does blue play in the illustrations?

N. BURKERT: I've always like the concept of showing a continuity of action—past, present, and future. Rand's text states, "Mouse spun slowly as he dangled. He dangled as he spun." I wanted to show that continuum, so I did it in blue. The action that takes place almost simultaneously is when the lion has been freed. The little studies that were made in blue were not in the "now" time but in the continuum of time that the action took place. In my art, I have often used blue as a kind of metaphor for intensity or ambiguity.

BKL: In your illustrator's note, you indicated that you wanted this book to be set in a region of Africa where a mouse, a baobab tree, and a lion would be located. What research did you do for the illustrations?

N. BURKERT: We knew that we wanted to set it in Africa. In my research, I discovered this four-striped African grass mouse that exists in Tanzania and Zimbabwe. Estelle Oosthuysen, a researcher in Namibia, suggested that this mouse, as well as the baobabs and the lions, might be present in an area called the Aha Hills. There is a little colony of this striped mouse at the Bronx Zoo that I was able to observe. It is charming in all of its habits.

BKL: Did you have a physical model for the lion as well?

N. BURKERT: I looked at lions in the zoo, but I didn't have the same access for that particular lion. That's why I give credit in my notes to the photographic sources.

BKL: Your use of line moves the reader's eye across the page. Can you talk about your technique?

N. BURKERT: Line is one of the most abstract things. It doesn't exist in nature—we create it. I work in a very linear way with a small brush and watercolors. I had a professor who taught the art of the Old Master techniques of drawing, and one of them was crosshatching.

R. BURKERT: If you look closely at the lion or any of the images, you will see these tiny little crosshatches, little brushstrokes, and they feel like an energy pattern.

BKL: There is a point in the story where the lion tells the mouse to show his bravery. It doesn't state in the text that the mouse attacks a blade of grass, but that is what is shown in the illustration. Is this something that the two of you decided?

R. BURKERT: That wasn't in my original version, but it seemed necessary to do some sort of theatrical display of Mouse's talents. That particular moment turns out to be rather comical. The movement of the mouse scampering over that blade of grass and then it collapsing and him landing on his head was one of my mom's inspirations. Those drawings are less complicated than the others, but they have such movement.

N. BURKERT: I looked at photographs of plants from the Aha Hills region. There is a plant whose common name was spear grass, so that was a good plant for him to attack.

BKL: At one point in the story, the lion is going toward the tree and there is a change in color. When he is caught in the net, there is another dramatic color change. How does color assist in telling this story?

N. BURKERT: I've always liked specificity, and I tried to extend that to the passage of time in the illustrations, so you see the late afternoon with the dust in the air, and the color of the sun is red as it is descending. The next morning, there is a glow of yellow behind the lion that signifies dawn. I'm trying to think of the time of day, so when the lion is on the mountain at the conclusion of the story, the sun is setting again in the distance.

BKL: The descriptive language and phrasing in the story, such as "rawny boulder" or "bumbles into the lion," exhibit respect for the reader. What role does language play in the story?

R. BURKERT: When I started writing, I wanted to use very simple, accessible language. Then my editor, Michael di Capua, said explicitly that books help to perpetuate language and knowledge of language. He said that children are intelligent and can handle difficult words. Maybe a parent explains the word to them, or maybe their own curiosity keeps it in mind until they hear it again. I wanted to use words that described what I was visualizing. I definitely felt empowered by Michael to keep those descriptive words.

BKL: There's a rhythm to the text. Is your writing influenced by your background in music? Did you read the story aloud as you were writing it to achieve that rhythm or to hear the flow of language?

R. BURKERT: I read it aloud to myself, and my mom read it aloud to herself. Sometimes we exchanged ideas about the text over the phone. I was living in Italy and she was in Cape Cod, so we had some long phone conversations. I feel there should be a musicality to writing, especially in books for children.

Common Core Connections

Implement the Common Core State Standards with these classroom-ready activities that explore Aesop's fables.

In the Classroom: Conduct an illustration walk through *Mouse & Lion*. Point out the use of blue in the illustrations. Pause and discuss the double-page spreads as Lion walks toward the baobab tree and then when he is caught in the net. How does Nancy Burkert depict mood and tone through color?

Common Core Connections:

- **RL.K.7:** With prompting and support, describe the relationship between illustrations and the story in which they appear (e.g., what moment in a story an illustration depicts).
- **RL.1.7:** Use illustrations and details in a story to describe its characters, setting, or events.

In the Classroom: Ask children why they think Aesop used animals, rather than people, in his tales. What human characteristics are displayed by the animals?

Common Core Connections:

- **RL.1.3:** Write narratives in which students recount a well-elaborated

event or short sequence of events; include details to describe actions, thoughts, and feelings; use temporal words to signal event order; and provide a sense of closure.

- **RL.2.2:** Recount stories, including fables and folktales from diverse cultures, and determine their central message, lesson, or moral. Read aloud several Aesop fables.

In the Classroom: Compare and contrast *Mouse & Lion* with other versions of the same fable. What is alike and what is different in the retellings?

Common Core Connections:

- **RL.2.9:** Compare and contrast two or more versions of the same story (e.g., Cinderella stories) by different authors or from different cultures.

In the Classroom: After sharing an Aesop's tale, discuss with children what happens in the story, what the story is about, and what the moral of the story is. How would they apply the moral to their own lives?

Common Core Connections:

- **RL.3.1:** Ask and answer questions to demonstrate understanding of a text, referring explicitly to the text as the basis for the answers.

BKL: The double-page spread where the lion crouches low to look in Mouse's eye and the mouse is resting his paw on top of the lion's shows how much their relationship has changed. The lion's expression displays such kindness. Can you talk about this scene?

N. BURKERT: There are numerous metaphors in this book about where we find ourselves today and where we are in the world at this moment. When the mouse places his paw on the lion's, it is in contrast to the lion's fearful claws that are extended when he's going after something. The claws spring out—it's an amazing mechanism. But when they are closed, his paw is soft.

BKL: At the conclusion of the story, the text reads, "Men are everywhere with traps to snare us, large and small." Is this another of the book's metaphors?

N. BURKERT: There was some question from our editor about the use of the word snare. Do they snare mice?

R. BURKERT: That was the most questioned sentence to the very end. I think it is a great metaphor—the snares could be many things. In the story it's pretty literal. The lion is talking about the dangers of traps and snares, but I think he's also saying, "Look out! There's a lot of snares and dangers in the world." We have our places where we can be free and where we can dream. I'm so happy with the way my mom illustrated that last bit, where they both find their safe lairs. The mouse is with his family, and the lion on his mountain. The last page, with the image of the lion with his eyes closed, dreaming about all these beautiful creatures, illustrates that he has learned a lesson, which is to be happy being surrounded by these little creatures.

BKL: Generally picture-book authors and illustrators don't work together, but this book sounds like it was a true collaboration. What was this experience like for the two of you?

N. BURKERT: Sublime.

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