

Press Kit

Barbara Gregorich

Waltur Paints Himself into a Corner and Other Stories

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**About *Waltur Paints Himself into a Corner
and Other Stories***

Waltur Paints Himself into a Corner and Other Stories, by Barbara Gregorich, illustrations by Kristin Sorra, published by Houghton Mifflin (October, 2007) is the second humorous early reader featuring Waltur, an impetuous bear who doesn't quite grasp the meaning of English language idioms.

In the first story Waltur is absolutely convinced that his honey cake will win first prize at the Summer Fair. In a rush, he puts a cart in front of a horse, satisfied that this order of things will help him reach the fair faster.

In the second story Waltur sets out to paint his floor. He tries hard not to paint himself into a corner . . . or two, or four. And he succeeds . . . sort of.

The final story sees Waltur disregard the age-old advice to let sleeping dogs lie. With the best of intentions, the bear wakes a sleeping dog — at which point it's too late to explain any intentions.

As in the first book, *Waltur Buys a Pig in a Poke and Other Stories*, the stories in *Waltur Paints Himself into a Corner* help young readers identify with characters, follow a sequence of events, and discover the meaning of proverbs which have been part of the English language for hundreds of years.

About the Author

Barbara Gregorich's most recent title, *Waltur Paints Himself into a Corner and Other Stories*, is an early reader published by Houghton Mifflin. The book is a sequel to last year's *Waltur Buys a Pig in a Poke and Other Stories*. Gregorich has written children's activity books, filmstrips, posters, puzzles, and games. She has authored such popular School Zone titles as *The Gum on the Drum*, *Sue Likes Blue*, and *Jog, Frog, Jog*, and has written for numerous educational publishers, including Scott Foresman and Encyclopedia Britannica Educational Corporation. *She's on First*, her first novel for adults, received excellent reviews, and her nonfiction adult title, *Women at Play: The Story of Women in Baseball*, was granted the SABR-MacMillan Baseball Research Award.

Gregorich studied at Kent State University, the University of Wisconsin, and Harvard. After teaching at Kent State University and Cuyahoga Community College, she worked as a typesetter and a letter carrier before becoming a full-time writer. A member of the Author's Guild, the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators, the Mystery Writers of America, and the Society for American Baseball Research, she lives in Chicago. Her web site is www.barbaragregorich.com

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About Idioms

Idioms are phrases whose meaning can't be determined by the individual words. A person who "eats like a bird" doesn't actually hop about on the ground pecking for grains and grubs: rather, she simply eats very little. The phrase means something other than what the literal words say.

One type of idiom is the proverb — a short saying (usually hundreds of years old) that expresses common wisdom. "Don't count your chickens before they're hatched" is an example. This proverb entered English through the older literary source of *Aesop's Fables*. But even original English proverbial idioms such as "let sleeping dogs lie" have been around for many hundreds of years. The three idioms in *Waltur Paints Himself into a Corner and Other Stories* are also proverbs.

Learning idioms is an enriching experience for children. Idioms are living examples of the fun that people throughout the ages have had with language: just as we use playful expressions today, so, too, did people of the past. By learning specific cultural expressions, young readers can comprehend situations and feelings and communicate about them. The three stories in *Waltur Paints Himself into a Corner* are a humorous introduction to folk wit and wisdom.

In addition to parents who buy this early reader for their children, elementary-grade teachers will find *Waltur Paints Himself into a Corner* useful, as will parents who home school. Last but not least, teachers of English as a Second Language will find the stories helpful.

About the Author and Idioms

Barbara Gregorich first thought about idioms at the age of thirteen, when taking Beginning French. “I translated *il a jeté un coup d’oeil hors de la fenêtre* as *he threw his eye out the window*,” she says. “The laughter that greeted my translation made me realize that I had erred in a big way: the teacher explained that *jeté un coup d’oeil* was an idiom and thus did not mean exactly what it said (threw the eye), but meant something else: glanced.”

The second time that she thought about idioms was a few years later, while visiting with friends who had a young son. The author recalls that “one of the adults present said, ‘I can’t do that, I’m all tied up,’ and without missing a beat, the four-year-old retorted, ‘I don’t see any ropes.’ It was at this point,” says Gregorich, “that I realized I wanted to write about the humor of taking idioms literally. My desire to write such stories — to introduce children to idiomatic expressions, and perhaps even to amuse adults — came to fruition with the creation of Waltur and his friends Matilda and Darwin.”

Reviews of the first Waltur Book

What reviewers said about *Waltur Buys a Pig in a Poke and Other Stories*, by Barbara Gregorich, illustrations by Kristin Sorra:

The Brookeshelf — Idioms have been played up for humor in children’s literature (*Amelia Bedelia*) but never with such sprightliness as they have in this book. Waltur is a somewhat bumbling but lovable bear who goes about buying a pet, earning money for honey, and digging holes for fun while his long-suffering friend Matilda gives advice like “don’t buy a pig in a poke,” or “don’t count your chickens before they hatch.” Waltur follows her advice literally, which leads to hilarious dialogue reminiscent of old Abbot and Costello routines.

Publishers Weekly (Starred Review) — Despite Waltur’s missteps, things do work out for him, sending an upbeat message to youngsters that at times one only learns by trial and error. Gregorich’s prose tickles nascent readers while building their confidence (Waltur to the horse: “I can make you drink water.” Horse to Waltur: “I think not.”) Sorra’s chipper spot watercolors add just the right touch of comic visual stimuli.

Kirkus Reviews — Gregorich both shows and explains what each saying means, and supplies glimpses of their history at the end to boot. An amusing way to introduce the idea of metaphor — or wordplay in general.

School Library Journal — Gregorich has fun with idioms in this easy reader featuring a single-minded bear. . . . The author makes excellent use of repetition, sight words, and engaging dialogue to create a manageable and entertaining read. Sorra’s cartoon-style watercolors are perfectly suited to the lively text and help round out the characters’ personalities with added emotional details.

Cooperative Children’s Book Center — A final note titled “Funny English Sayings” explains more about the origin of these three idioms. The author packs a humorous punch into carefully structured short sentences on well-designed pages scattered with colorful illustrations.

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."

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,

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!"





