



# Home in the Woods

Eight siblings, a one-room shack and 87 years of memories

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By **Zac Farber**

For more than a quarter century, Lowry Hill East resident Eliza Wheeler has been thinking and writing about her grandmother Marvel's life as a young girl during the Great Depression.

"Her father died and there were eight children in the family," Wheeler wrote in a fourth-grade school assignment. "They lived in a tar paper shack in the woods. There was no electricity or running water. They picked lots of berries in the summer."

Wheeler spent her own youth roaming the tangled forests and vast fields outside Solon Springs, Wisconsin, just 10 miles from where the shack once stood. And over the decades, Marvel's vivid stories of life in that isolated one-room cottage have continued to animate her granddaughter's fertile imagination.

This October, Wheeler is celebrating the publication of *Home in the Woods*, the second picture book she's both written and illustrated.

Set between 1932 and 1937, the story is narrated in the present tense by 6-year-old Marvel. Marvel tells how she, her seven siblings and her widowed mother, Clara, survive the Depression largely on their own initiative — hunting for rabbit and squirrel, fishing for trout, pulling carrots and canning about 40 quarts of blueberries per year.

"Drawing the trees and the landscape in this book, I felt like I was drawing my childhood as well," Wheeler said. "I know what it is like to live in this place and discover what each season has in terms of challenges and also in terms of joys."

Wheeler's first book, *Miss Maple's Seeds* — about a tiny kindly lady who lives in a tree, rides a bluebird and reads flower tales to seeds by firefly light — debuted on the New York Times bestseller list when it was published in 2013 and has since sold over 1 million copies. That book's success allowed Wheeler to quit her job as a graphic designer and launched her career as a children's book illustrator.

While she's now illustrated 20 books in all, she is less sure of her talent for writing. She was able to write *Miss Maple's Seeds* in under a week, but with *Home in the Woods*, she said, "it was the complete opposite experience." It took her seven years and 25 drafts to get right.

"The thing that makes picture book writing look easy is it's few words," she said. "But that's actually what's hard about it: You have to take a story and distill it down into something that is simple but sort of deep, something that has a rhythm to it."

She completed the mock-up for *Home in the Woods* in 2017 during a monthlong retreat at Maurice Sendak's farm in upstate New York; her studio was equipped with the desk on which Sendak wrote *Where the Wild Things Are*. "I just laid on it," she said. "Let me just soak up the vibes of this table."

**“**  
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— *Eliza Wheeler*

Painting highly detailed watercolor scenes using a vibrant palette, Wheeler said that all of her work is "fueled by seasons" and that she strives to cultivate a strong sense of place. She remembers her reaction when her grandma Marvel read her *Winnie-the-Pooh* as a young girl: "I wanted to live in that tree and use the little shelf and the honeypots."

Her goal for her books is to create environments as fully immersive as those she lost herself in as a child.

"I'm making picture books for my 5-year-old self," she said. "I get to go back into my childhood brain and try to reignite the imagination I had then, but now I have the skill to physically envision the worlds I would have wanted to be in."

### A rigorous process

Wheeler is allergic to shortcuts and half-measures.

Each page you see in one of her picture books is the culmination of a long process involving mood boards, freeplay, collaging, character sketches, thumbnail storyboards and full-size pencil drawings.

She is relentless about research. For John Ronald's *Dragons*, a picture book she illustrated about the life of J.R.R. Tolkien, she traveled to England on her own dime, studying the facade of the Eagle and Child pub in Oxford, where Tolkien dined with C.S. Lewis and Charles Williams. In Birmingham, Wheeler noticed that the two towers believed to have inspired the second volume of *The Lord of the Rings* were visible from outside the rowhouse where a pre-teen Tolkien moved after his mother's death. She incorporated the ominously slim towers into her illustration of the scene.

For *Home in the Woods*, Wheeler read Depression-era books on log cabins, on immigrant architecture and on the history of Douglas County, Wisconsin. She spent a

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The Lowry Hill East children's book author Eliza Wheeler says her illustration process "happens almost entirely through sketches." Before painting the above page in her new book *Home in the Woods*, Wheeler sketched her great-grandmother Clara dozens of times in different poses and from different angles.



Wheeler stands in her light-filled studio inside the ivy-covered walk-up apartment she shares with her husband, Adam. Pinned to the wall behind her are the storyboards, character sketches, page mock-ups and inspirational photographs she referenced as she finished illustrating her book *Home in the Woods*. Photo by Zac Farber

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week hiking in the Brule River State Forest, sketching and photographing the local flora and fauna. As a result, her book is richly populated with descriptions and depictions of northern Wisconsin’s birch, poplar, pine, sugar maple, wood violet, dwarf iris, pitcher plant and pink lady’s slipper.

During the storyboarding process, she thinks deeply about how to balance illustrations with text: “You don’t want the illustrations to directly repeat what the words are saying because it’s just redundant. Coming up with the illustration that matches the words is all about tapping into other senses: What is the light like? What is the weather like? How do I make the surroundings come alive?”

She also obsesses about pacing: “There’s a very important rhythm between what’s being read on the page and where the page-turn happens. What scenes might be able to work with each other and what scenes need their own big moment?”

Her painstaking process means her output is smaller than illustrators with backgrounds in animation. To finish *Home in the Woods*, she cleared her calendar for a whole year, spending a month working on a single two-page spread.

“I knew the artwork would be lush in a way that needed a lot of time,” she said. “I felt a big sense of responsibility to get the spirit of the whole thing while also making this a universal story that other people will relate to.”

**‘A pretty picture’**

“This is my family,” reads the text on the first page of *Home in the Woods*.

Wheeler’s great-grandmother Clara and her eight children pose on the page, their expressions fixed as if gazing into a camera, their pans, kettle and kerosene lamp at their feet and the misty green forest receding



The four surviving Banks siblings depicted in *Home in the Woods* met on May 5 to read a printer’s proof of the book. Above: Rich, 97, and Marvel, 93. Below: Lowell, 91, and Eva, 87. Submitted photos

behind them. All are apple-cheeked and almond-eyed, and Clara’s face is framed by a stylishly swept Roaring Twenties haircut that Wheeler cribbed from an old family photo.

Nearly nine decades later, four of the eight Banks siblings are still alive. Eva, a 3-month-old baby in Wheeler’s watercolor, is now 87. Lowell is 91; Marvel, 93; and Rich, 97.

On May 5, all four siblings met at Rich and Lowell’s retirement home in Superior, Wisconsin, and flipped through a printer’s proof of *Home in the Woods*.

“It’s dedicated to the Banks family, my grandma Marvel, her brothers and sisters and their mum,” Marvel read to her brother Rich, who is now in the later stages of Alzheimer’s but can still recall the brand of the stove his mother used to bake loaves of bread in the shack.

“Ain’t that a pretty picture,” Rich said, looking at his great-niece’s family portrait.

A few minutes later, Marvel looked up from a page where the children feast on wild turkey stew and asked her younger brother a teasing question: “How come you ate so much, Lowell?”

Across the table, Eva gave her two cents on Wheeler’s portrayal of the feast: “She changed the animals from rabbits and deer to turkeys to make it not so violent because it’s a kids’ book.”

When the four Banks siblings finished reading the story, Lowell shared his thoughts. “The whole thing is an honor to us,” he said. “We’re enjoying our history again. It gets us all together thinking about old times.”

While researching the book, Wheeler took a trip into the forest to see the site where, long before she was born, her family had passed the seasons.

“It’s really thick woods, and there are huge trees growing up where the shack once stood,” she said. “The only trace that’s still there is a deep depression in the ground where the root cellar was.”

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