

Karen Holman Illustrates A New Hampshire Tale

By Sarah M. Earle
Concord Monitor staff

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Karen Busch Holman talks as though success just floated down in front of her like the little brown mouse who hangs suspended by a cluster of bright balloons in her latest watercolor.

The facts tell otherwise. Holman was a pedigreed New York architect who gave up her dual offices and auspicious career to pursue her love of art. She supported herself doing specialty wall painting – including a wall in the World Trade Center – and learned desktop publishing to make herself more marketable. That skill landed her a gig at the University of New Hampshire, which in turn opened the door for a small book about conserving the family farm.

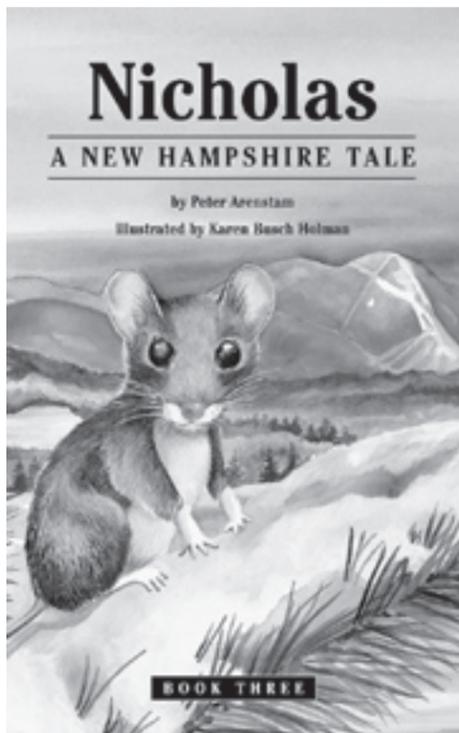
A woman just happened to have that book in her purse when she went to lunch with children's writer Marie Harris, who had just finished writing *G is for Granite* and was having trouble finding an acceptable illustrator for her publisher. Harris's friend pulled out Holman's book and suggested she get in touch with her.

"It's so funny how you just fall into these things," said Holman, whose latest book, *Nicholas: A New Hampshire Tale*, recently hit bookstores. Sitting in her sunflower-yellow studio in Andover, the painting for the next Nicholas book jacket on the table in front of her, Holman talked of a life and career that, no matter the talent and ambition involved, seems to continuously delight and surprise her. The sounds of a hammer punctuated her sentences as the contractor who's renovating her enormous old farmhouse worked in a nearby room. A cat mewed somewhere in the distance. Pencil sketches of Holsteins and tubes of paint lay scattered about Holman's work table, and a bouquet of balloons floated overhead, tethered to her desk lamp.

"I can't draw from my head," Holman said, gesturing toward the balloons. "I have to have something to look at ... if I'm drawing a peanut butter sandwich, I'll go make a peanut butter sandwich and take a bite out of it."

Not every illustration is as close at hand as a loaf of bread and a jar of peanut butter. Holman, 49, spends much of her time traveling the countryside taking photos of animals, people and scenery – which, for her latest set of books requires a lot of crouching on the ground to get the right angle. "I always have to take pictures from a mouse's point of view," she explained.

The photos are crammed by the hundreds onto Holman's desktop computer in a sort of organized madness that mirrors her life. Rather than trying to keep her work and home existence separate, Holman enthusiastically integrates the two. When her sons, ages 10 [Tyler] and



8 [Todd], are home from school, they often hang out with her in her studio, drawing their own mouse pictures or practicing on the electronic keyboard that sits in one corner. In turn, the people and animals she knows best tend to pop up in her books.

Her horse, Betty, a retired racehorse she boards up the road and rides every day, has an important role in Nicholas's New Hampshire adventure, helping the mouse get from the seacoast to the White Mountains. The book, published by Mitten Press, is crammed with New Hampshire locales and events – as well as rodents.

Holman was not a fan of mice when she got the contract to illustrate her first mouse book, *Mitt, the Michigan Mouse*, in 2005. A writer she had met at a book signing for *G is for Granite* had told her about Mitten Press, a new company spun off of a larger publishing house. She e-mailed the company offering samples of her work, and when one of the editors responded, telling her they were launching a new mouse series, she stayed up for two days straight completing the promised samples.

Holman told her kids that if she got the deal, she'd get some pet mice to use as models. She was soon sharing her studio with two rather odorous little mice (who have since been tenderly laid to rest). "I'm so attached to mice now," said Holman. "I get so nervous for them while I'm reading the manuscript."

Holman, who has since illustrated six other mouse books and two more of Harris's books, as well as created the art for the popular New Hampshire heirloom birth certificate, didn't expect that talking mice would figure so strongly in her career. She grew up in New Jersey, the daughter of a Danish scientist, in a traditional household where the family gathered for a formal dinner every evening. She studied art and math at the University of Massachusetts of Amherst, then completed the interior
See Karen on page 32



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