

Couples Who Collaborate

Picture Book Authors Miranda and Baptiste Paul

JENNIFER GIBSON

As in many fields, the myth of the lone creative genius simply does not hold true for those creating children's books.

While in traditional publishing, the writer and the illustrator of picture books are normally not in contact, both must work collaboratively with their editors and art directors on book projects and often rely on feedback from critique groups of their peers to enrich their creative work.

Yet what happens when your partner in life is also a writer or illustrator? *Children and Libraries* introduces a new series, *Couples Who Collaborate*, looking at the dynamic duos in children's publishing. We begin our series with Wisconsin-based husband-and-wife team Baptiste and Miranda Paul.

When Miranda, who grew up in Wisconsin, and Baptiste, who grew up in the Caribbean island of St. Lucia, began sharing their poems while dating in college, they never would have dreamed they would go on to become published authors.

Miranda attests, "Sixteen years ago, neither of us had an inkling that we would become authors or coauthors. Our family are trailblazers in that we come from families who have no background in writing. Navigating the industry has not been easy."

It may not have been easy, but their career paths have indeed blazed a trail—one not only of beating the odds, but of championing voices often excluded from publishing. Their upcoming book *I am Farmer* (scheduled for 2019 by Lerner/Millbrook), the story of Farmer Tantoh Nforba Dieudonne of Cameroon,



Baptiste and Miranda Paul, photo courtesy of the authors.

took years of research, including visiting the West African nation. Successful in both their individual projects and as collaborating coauthors, the Pauls have also paid it forward along the way through initiatives such as We Need Diverse Books.

You both have lived in different cultures. Miranda, you lived and worked as a teacher in Gambia. Baptiste, you were raised in St. Lucia and attended college abroad. How has this impacted your writing?

Miranda: Living in different places has given us an appreciation for what we know we don't know. We know there is always something more to learn about a culture or experience. In Cameroon, for example, there were so many things we could



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only have learned by being there. Not knowing puts you in a place of humility, and that has informed what we do with our diverse books.

We know that no matter how much research you do, an outsider will never be able to have done *all* of the research.

In nonfiction there are rigorous standards, and what you find is that if [a topic] doesn't have a lot of sources, people say they can't write about it. But they are kept alive in oral history. It also feeds our curiosity; we will never run out of things to write about. We always have ideas.

Baptiste: The last time we were in St. Lucia, given that Creole is more of an oral language, I took some time and talked to many elderly people in the community. The older people are dying, and the young people are not as eager to listen to or share these stories.

When I grew up, during wakes or weddings or other events in the community, elderly people would come and be surrounded by kids, and just tell stories and everyone would sit and listen. I want to go back in time and just relive those moments.

What books or individuals influenced you both growing up?

Baptiste: Through my elementary years, I read the Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew. When I was a little younger, I learned that the classics—*Beauty and the Beast* and the *Three Little Pigs*—could be strong and powerful.

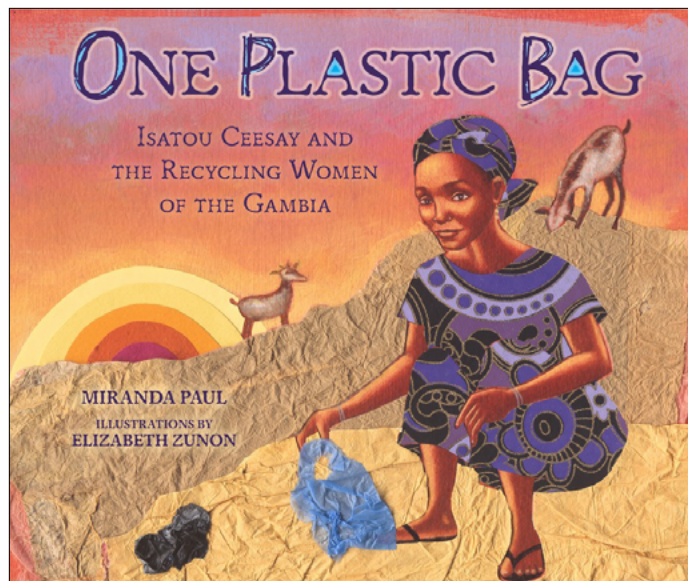
Miranda: I was an early reader; I was reading before I started school. I had teachers who recognized that . . . so they challenged me. I am really grateful for that kind of encouragement.

My favorite book was *The BFG* by Roald Dahl. Then [Lois Lowry's] *The Giver* came out, and I hear people now talk about that book and not liking it, but for me it was special because the child had a better moral compass than the adults . . . thinking that something is wrong, and then being able to call it out or act differently and change a cycle. Also, I feel very privileged to have found characters that looked like me or thought like me.

Baptiste: You saw yourself in books. I *never* saw myself in books growing up. Right now, my goal is to write for kids who are diverse. We are a mixed family, and we want to see all kids represented in books. We don't want kids to be left out; we want to offer material to which they can relate.

Baptiste, has bilingualism impacted the language in your writing?

Baptiste: With [my first] book *The Field*, I wrote in both languages [English and Creole]. Everyone in my country speaks Creole and English. It is a bilingual book and has a nice glossary as well to learn how to pronounce words for librarians and schools. It is important; some kids need an introduction



to another language. By doing that, I am creating curiosity in kids' minds.

And kids need to see themselves in books. I am the only one from my village who has written a book to be published. It will bring joy to the kids' faces. I am showing them that "Hey, you can do this too."

Tell us about your collaboration process for *I Am Farmer*.

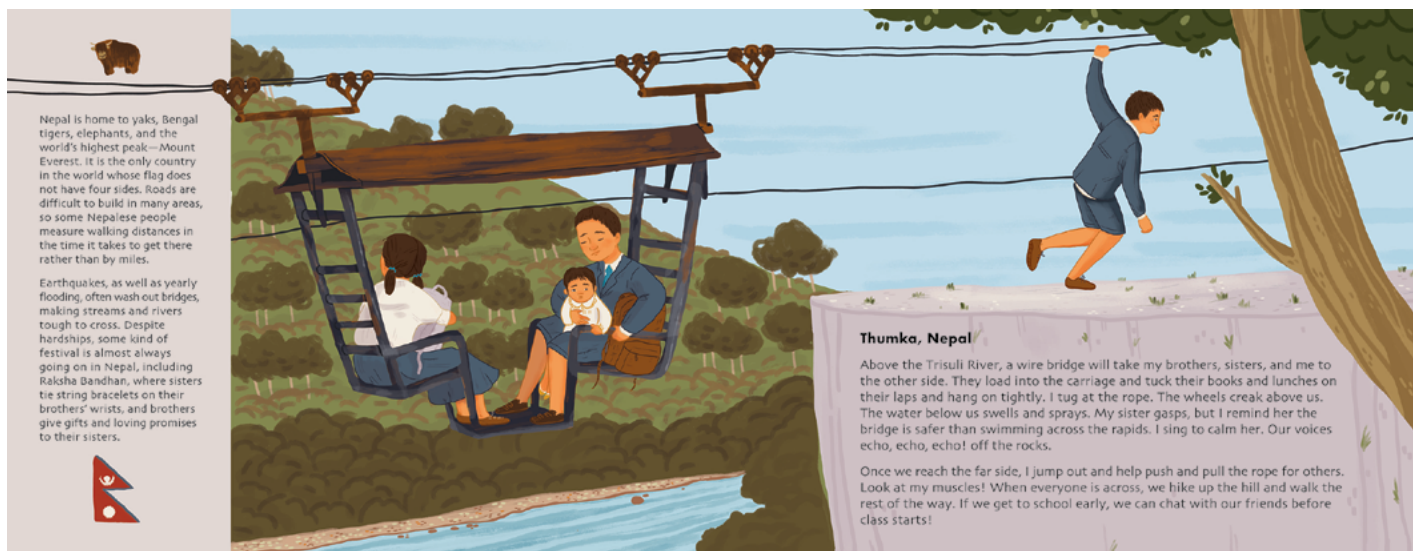
Miranda: We met environmentalist Tantoh Nforba Dieudonne eight years ago. That is how long we have been back and forth and communicating with him and watching his work and what he has been doing. When we say nonfiction takes longer, we mean years.

Interviewing him via email, prior to our trip to Cameroon, we discussed how . . . we feel strongly about appropriate cultural representation, so we wanted to work on it together, to have multiple eyes on the manuscript, and to work directly with Farmer himself.

This primary research would be very difficult to do individually. *One Plastic Bag* [Lerner/Millbrook, 2015] for example was a story twelve years in the planning. It was very important to collaborate because of the level of primary research.

Baptiste: It is certainly important that we met Farmer's family and teacher—the people in the book. Also, we didn't stay in a hotel, but at his house. We ate the same food, etc., so as to be as true as possible to the culture.

Miranda: I don't think it is right to just write stories without understanding a culture from some sort of inside lens. We lived with Tantoh, we shared in daily activities with his family and kids, and we tried to be as authentic as we could representing him and his people.



Nepal is home to yaks, Bengal tigers, elephants, and the world's highest peak—Mount Everest. It is the only country in the world whose flag does not have four sides. Roads are difficult to build in many areas, so some Nepalese people measure walking distances in the time it takes to get there rather than by miles.

Earthquakes, as well as yearly flooding, often wash out bridges, making streams and rivers tough to cross. Despite hardships, some kind of festival is almost always going on in Nepal, including Raksha Bandhan, where sisters tie string bracelets on their brothers' wrists, and brothers give gifts and loving promises to their sisters.



Thumka, Nepal

Above the Trisuli River, a wire bridge will take my brothers, sisters, and me to the other side. They load into the carriage and tuck their books and lunches on their laps and hang on tightly. I tug at the rope. The wheels creak above us. The water below us swells and sprays. My sister gasps, but I remind her the bridge is safer than swimming across the rapids. I sing to calm her. Our voices echo, echo, echo! off the rocks.

Once we reach the far side, I jump out and help push and pull the rope for others. Look at my muscles! When everyone is across, we hike up the hill and walk the rest of the way. If we get to school early, we can chat with our friends before class starts!



Western El Salvador

I wake up early. The air is cool, but the kitchen is warm. I hear oil sizzling and smell fried corn. Yummy pupusas! I kiss Mamá and wrap my pupusa in foil. Once I'm dressed and ready, my father leads the horse out front. I brush the horse's mane before we mount him.

Papa and I clip-clop down a deserted path and cross a river in the valley. Once we reach the highway, I still must wait for a bus. My father hands me money for the return trip and waves goodbye. Through the window, I watch him lead our horse back home. My journey is long, but I'm determined. A good education will help me and my family in the future.

More than six million people live in El Salvador, the smallest country in Central America. Since 2001, Salvadorans have been officially using the US dollar to buy goods.

School starts in February and continues well into the year. Almost all Salvadoran students speak Spanish in the classroom. One game that some children enjoy is *arranca cebolla*, where a strong child—the "onion"—holds on to a tree while players link arms and try to pull the onion off.



These two spreads are from the upcoming *Adventures to School* by Baptiste and Miranda Paul, published by little bee books. Photos courtesy of and used with permission of little bee books.

How do your creative work and initiatives impact young readers?

Miranda: Not long ago, I got a letter from children who won a recycling challenge involving pounds of plastic bags turned into a bench. I have had kids meet with their local city council to discuss banning them. Kids are going and participating in their local government about trash issues and recycle issues. This is encouraging—they are taking on leadership roles. That is what my book *One Plastic Bag* is about. Everyone is a leader. You see something too big to ignore, you do something. The kids are inspiring the adults, making change. As children's authors, we know kids are smart and can change the world, but as a society we don't always honor and recognize how intelligent and passionate young people are.

Tell me about your diversity initiatives in publishing like We Need Diverse Books. Do you feel that the children's publishing industry is becoming more inclusive?

Miranda: I think that for a long time it has been an intention of many people to really change things. Stats don't reflect intentions, though.

In 2014, some colleagues and I did a social media campaign. Now, We Need Diverse Books is a nonprofit organization. But we are not the first people to take action—we are standing on the shoulders of many in the industry and have been keeping the conversation alive and turning that into action. I run the mentorship program for WNDB, but there are many other wonderful programs that are shifting parts of the industry or keeping conversation alive.

On a personal level, when you read books to your own kids at night, you want your kids to feel represented. Interracial and biracial children are the fastest growing groups; you would think that would be represented in the new books coming out, but we still have to improve.

What can librarians and others working with children do to support “being the change” and the social and environmental justice ethos behind so many of your projects?

Miranda: Kids gravitate towards certain subjects and things. If the librarian has taken the time to put them in a display, that's important. Displays matter! Also, being inclusive in your collection. We Need Diverse Books has an app [Our Story] where librarians can help patrons find diverse books.

Baptiste: Librarians have a lot of power!

How do you carve out time for creativity?

Miranda: We just make it happen. Baptiste works fifty hours a week. For the early part of my career, I was working as a teacher. The way we work together has looked [different] on every project.

Baptiste: We have worked on four books together, and each of us has different strengths, but we have the same core values and the same overall vision for the work.

Miranda: For us, it is doing the research and coming together. We email each other, sometimes we text each other from separate rooms in the house! Sometimes we are in separate rooms working on the same books. We both enjoy keeping quiet when we are working.

Baptiste: Whether working with a family member or not, we don't have time for egos; we are working parents and just make it happen.

What's next for you both? Any dream creative projects on the horizon?

Miranda: We are always working on multiple things. So *Adventures to School* comes out in June [little bee, 2018]. We are in the final stages for *I Am Farmer*, which will have the same illustrator as *One Plastic Bag* [Elizabeth Zunon]. I am playing around with a number of ideas; I am very interested in word-play, language, and poetry, so I am toying with a poetry anthology book.



Baptiste: Memoirs! Some of my childhood experiences. More stories about me as a kid growing up in St. Lucia, more for younger children. I want to bring as much of my culture to kids in the US. Even though I grew up really poor, life was good. Just because you grow up poor, you still have fun. And I want people to understand that as well.

Miranda: I think that came up a lot with the book *Adventures to School*—our editor came to us with this project and asking us to write about kids, most of [whom] live in remote places. Even though a handful of kids have what many would consider dire situations, we know that kids are fun and having adventures and their stories don't deserve to be down-in-the-dumps sad stories. It may not be normal to who is reading it, but what is normal?

We wanted to show a well-rounded story for each of these kids. Sometimes they have a borderline dangerous way to get to school, but we didn't want to make a judgement over them; rather we wanted to share a sense of adventure that all kids share around the world. 🐝

Watch for the Spring 2018 issue of CAL for another Couples Who Collaborate article featuring Candace Fleming and Eric Rohmann!