

Couples Who Collaborate

Candace Fleming and Eric Rohmann

JENNIFER GIBSON



Photos courtesy of Candace Fleming and Eric Rohmann.

We continue our Couples Who Collaborate series with an award-winning duo who, for many *CAL* readers, need no introduction. Many titles by Candace Fleming and Eric Rohmann—a married couple from Illinois—most likely already grace the shelves of your library.

As an author, Candace has published books for children ranging from picture books to young adult titles and has been recognized with two Boston Globe Horn Book Awards (*The Family Romanov: Murder, Rebellion, and the Fall of Imperial Russia* and *The Lincolns*), the Golden Kite Award (*Amelia Lost: The Life and Disappearance of Amelia Earhart*), and the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize for Young Adult Literature (*The Family Romanov: Murder, Rebellion, and the Fall of Imperial Russia*), as well as others.

As an illustrator, Eric has won the Caldecott Medal in 2003 for *My Friend Rabbit*, a 1995 Caldecott Honor for *Time Flies*, a 2017 Sibert Honor for *Giant Squid*, and, like Candace, he has worked with a range of styles and genres, including wordless books, and has even authored his own illustrated stories.

The couple met while each had established careers in children's publishing, but they have honed their craft together on wide-ranging topics, from giant squids to an upcoming account of Hollywood's first canine movie star, *Strongheart: Wonder Dog of the Silver Screen* (Schwartz & Wade, 2018). Not only have their careers taken similar paths (both award-winning, both collaborating), but their initial stages in approaching a book share parallels as well. Though Candace works with words and Eric, pictures, their research processes are

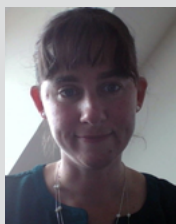
not all that different—perhaps because, after all, they both have the same aim: excellence in storytelling.

How do two such creators, successful in their own right, work together on their own terms? Candace and Eric took the time to share their creative process.

How did you two meet?

Eric: I saved her from a pouncing leopard, never once considering my own safety. Well . . . can you tell I long for a more interesting origin story? We met at a book event in Chicago and, because it's a relatively small world, we saw one another over time. Things moved forward as they sometimes do.

Candace: We'd both been invited to speak on a panel about picture books. I knew his work, of course, but hadn't met him. We discovered we shared a lot of opinions about children's books. Since we both lived in the Chicago area, we started talking and meeting for lunch. One thing led to another. Oh, and he was pretty cute too.



Illustrator **Jennifer Gibson** is the Information and Archives Specialist at Keuka College in Keuka Park, New York.

You have worked together on several books. Do you have a favorite collaboration?

Eric: *Giant Squid*—because it began with a storyboard before there was any text. We made it somewhat in reverse, and it was a challenge all along the way. We fought hard to make a book that not only told about the squid but immersed the reader in the squid's world. In the end, we realized that the point of the book was to incite curiosity through what is known (not much) and not known about the creatures.

Candace: My favorite is one we recently completed, an illustrated novel coming out in February 2018 called *Strongheart: Wonder Dog of the Silver Screen*. While it's fiction, it's based on the true story of Hollywood's first canine movie star—a German shepherd named Strongheart. I think I'm especially attached to it because the dog in the book is modeled on our own beloved Oxford. No, Oxford is not a shepherd. He's an eighty-pound mixed breed. Still, his naughtiness and expressiveness was inspiration for much of what we created. It's sort of a love poem to dogs and their owners everywhere.

You both have worked with other writers and illustrators. How is it different when your collaborator is a spouse?

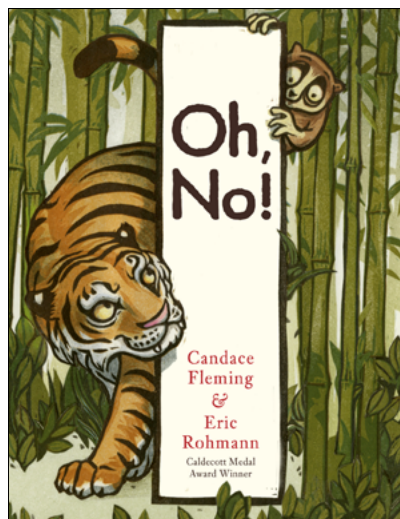
Eric: Candy treats me the same way she does all other illustrators with whom she collaborates. She knows the form—how to write a story that will have a visual/narrative component—and so when you get one of her manuscripts, the stories are clear, but with lots of room for the illustrator to add their own voice. So, for us, I don't think there is much difference just because we live in the same house.

Candace: Believe it or not, collaboration with Eric isn't much different than, say, collaboration with Brian Karas. I write the manuscript, then send it upstairs to Eric's studio, where he gets to work on the illustration. For the most part, I don't put in my two cents regarding his work. I completely trust his creative impulses. In truth, I think he'd like me to be more hands-on when it comes to those pictures. And certainly, I'll give suggestions or make comments if he asks. But the pictures are his sphere. I try not to get in the way. After the pictures are done, we'll sit down together and look at the book as a whole.

That, I think, is where the true collaboration comes in. For example, once the words and pictures for *Giant Squid* were complete, we looked at the whole and realized that the title

page couldn't possibly be at the front of the book, as is traditional.

What we'd tried to create through words and pictures was a feeling in the reader of being immersed in the deep ocean. But if we inserted a title page—with all its copyright and dedication clutter—it yanked the reader right out of the story. So we adjusted and did something a bit out of the ordinary. We put the title page on page ten of the book. Unusual, yes, but completely necessary for the story's telling.



Both writing and illustrating require research. Candace, as a writer, and Eric, as an illustrator, do you both find there are similarities when doing research for these two roles (writer and illustrator)? How are your research processes different?

Eric: Looking for the facts is very much the same. How does a squid reproduce? Where do they live? We both need to get the science correct. Where our research diverges is where we find our information. I do read what is out there about the creatures, but [I] also look at photos, video, artwork made by both scientists and people who have imagined giant squids in fiction.

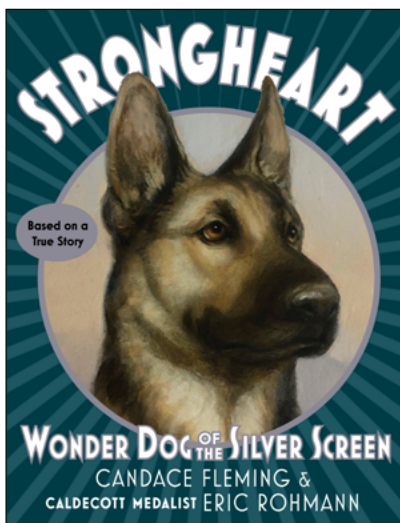
Candace: I think our research processes are similar in that we're both seeking fascinating, awe-inspiring, and up-to-date information about a particular subject. Any differences spring from our purposes. Eric, obviously, is searching for visual references: What does a giant squid tentacle look like when stretching into the ocean's darkness? What expression does a German shepherd wear just before it steals a doughnut off the kitchen table? My focus is on real-life dialogue and anecdotes that can be turned into a true story. I'm looking for written and verbal information. Utmost in both our searches, however, is accuracy.

Eric, you have also authored picture books. How is the bookmaking process different when the story you are illustrating is your own?

Eric: If it's my own story, I can change anything, anytime. Collaboration with another means you are working within their thoughts and decisions. If the writer

is skilled and has left plenty of space for the visual, the process can be very liberating.

Both of you exhibit a versatile range within your craft, whether varying illustration styles or writing for multiple age groups. Do you find that variety suits both of you, or do



you have a preference for a certain type of book, style, or story?

Eric: Readers are told (and want to be told!) different stories, perhaps a love story one day, a science-fiction adventure the next. Candy and I think about many kinds of stories, and each one of those stories should be told in an art medium or voice or book form that best aids in the telling. I think we both try a number of ways to tell that story. Those choices often differ from the stories we have told in the past.

Candace: I really enjoy the variety, the challenge of trying new things, and thinking out of my comfort box. I can't say I have a favorite genre or audience. What I can say is that often when I'm embroiled in a lengthy piece of YA nonfiction, I'll long to write a picture book. Or, while writing a picture book, I'll long to turn my creative impulses to a middle-grade novel. The grass is always greener, right?

Candace, many of your picture book texts incorporate novel plays on repetition that allow young readers to anticipate what will happen after a page turn (such as in *Oh No!*, *Imogene's Last Stand*, and *Boxes for Katje*). How important are page turns in the making of a successful picture book, and how you create such winning moments?

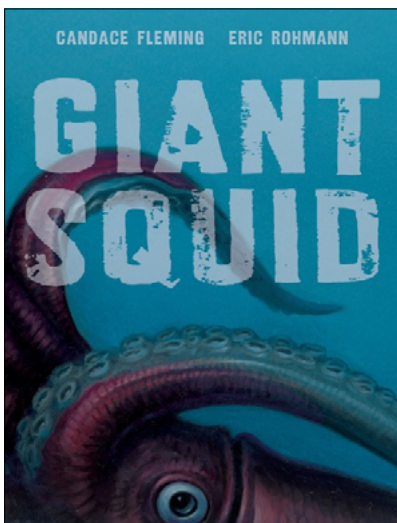
Candace: Ah, page turns. Using them to one's best advantage is essential when writing picture books. After all, they serve a critical narrative function that is unique to the genre. Decisions about them affect the tempo and pace of the book. Each page turn brings a fresh start, a new mood, thought, or scene. It accentuates the drama and adds surprise.

People sometimes mistakenly think that because I write the words, I have no control over those page turns—that the illustrator will decide what text will go on what page. And that's partly true. I can't dictate to either the illustrator or the art director about these things. But I can write the text in such a way that there's no mistake where the text needs to be slowed, or where a new scene begins.

I understand that the page turn actually affects the way my story sounds when it's read aloud. After all, the turning page adds an extra beat to the musicality of the text. It's that pause between pages, the shhh of paper turning. I love that sound. And I use it to my advantage when writing. Believe it or not, I've never had an illustrator break my page in places I hadn't expected. I guess that means I've done my job—written a text that is obviously a picture book and not, say, a short story.

Eric, as an illustrator, what do you also need to consider concerning page turns (especially, for example, for wordless books)?

Eric: The single most distinctive characteristic of picture books is the page turn. The page turn allows the reader's imagination to enter the book and participate in the telling. It's the confluence of anticipation and surprise. When I'm making a book, the page turn is always on my mind, always being considered. The difficult part, of course, is saying enough to tell the story without giving everything away. It would be a shame to rob the reader of any participation and engagement with the story.



Does winning awards impact your work?

Eric: Awards get the book seen and, in turn, in the hands of more readers. Being recognized always feels great and makes your day. It means someone out there recognizes what you are trying to do and say. For me, winning the Caldecott didn't have a whole lot of influence on the books that followed because one was already completed (*Pumpkinhead*) and two others that looked nothing like *My Friend Rabbit* were in development (*Clara and Asha* and *A Kitten Tale*). You tend to concentrate on what you are working on, not what you've done in the past.

Candace: I don't think winning awards directly affects how I approach a story or what I choose to write. They do, however, affect future projects. Editors are more likely to let me try new things and tackle new genres. Awards provide me a bit of creative capital.

In addition to *Strongheart*, what new projects can we look forward to seeing from both of you?

Candace: We have a companion to *Giant Squid* coming in 2019 called *Honeybee* (science nonfiction) with Neal Porter at Holiday House. Separate from Eric, but still a collaboration, is a YA historical fiction publishing in 2018 from Schwartz & Wade about the six wives of Henry VIII, called *Fatal Throne*. It's unique in that it's seven voices (one for each wife, plus Henry) and seven authors. My co-collaborators? Stephanie Hemphill, Lisa Sandell, Jennifer Donnelly, Linda Sue Park, Deborah Hopkinson, and M. T. Anderson.

I also have a glorious picture book illustrated by Gerard Dubois called *The Amazing Collection of Joey Cornell*, also publishing in 2018 from Schwartz & Wade. And, of course, there's my new middle-grade series, History Pals, with the funny and talented Mark Fearing. Part graphic novel, part first-person storytelling, the first one appeared just this past September and is titled *Ben Franklin Is in My Bathroom*. The second—*Eleanor Roosevelt Is in My Garage*—is out next September. And I'm currently working on a new YA nonfiction about Charles Lindbergh and America First. Phew, that's it! 🐙