

# Couples Who Collaborate

## James Ransome and Lesa Cline-Ransome

JENNIFER GIBSON

**M**arried couple James Ransome and Lesa Cline-Ransome are a truly prolific pair. They have created a great number of award-winning picture-books together—titles like *Satchel Paige*, *Young Pele*, *Quilt Alphabet*, *Before There Was Mozart*, *Words Set Me Free: The Story of Young Frederick Douglass*, *My Story, My Dance*, and *Light in Darkness*.

While many of their books are biographies of iconic historical figures, the Ransomes have also highlighted untold stories in history, taking care to imagine the lives of individuals with undocumented stories. Their works have received much recognition, with awards ranging from The Bank Street Best Book for the texts *My Story, My Dance* (Simon and Schuster, 2015) and *Just a Lucky So and So* (Holiday House, 2017) to the Coretta Scott King award for illustration in *The Creation* (Holiday House, 1995), and a Coretta Scott King Honor for illustration for *Uncle Jed's Barbershop* (Simon and Schuster, 1994) and, most recently, for *Before She Was Harriet* (Holiday House, 2017).

This latest collaboration, *Before She Was Harriet*, a cyclical biography of Harriet Tubman in verse, illustrated with lavish watercolors, also received four-starred reviews from top industry publications. According to Lesa, the book was a “true collaboration” throughout. Additionally, writer Lesa and illustrator James work on individual projects, such as James’ recent title *Be a King: Martin Luther King Jr.’s Dream and You*, written by Carole Boston Weatherford. With their children’s book careers moving at warp speed, James and Lisa took the time to talk about their creative processes, the impact of their books, and what they like to do for downtime.



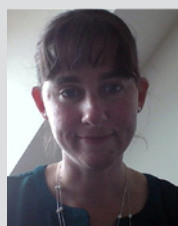
Photos courtesy of James Ransome and Lesa Cline-Ransome.

### How did you two meet?

Lesa: James and I met while we were both students at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York. We were at a Purple Rain party, featuring all Prince music, and he asked me to dance.

### You have collaborated on many books. Do you have a favorite collaboration project?

Lesa: Each book is special in its own way, but our most recent project, *Before She Was Harriet*, is particularly special because it was one of the few projects where it was a true collaboration. Typically, our collaboration begins and ends with the brainstorming phase. We come up with an idea we’d like to work on together, then I begin the research, start writing, work with the editor, and one to three years later, James begins illustrating. But with *Harriet*, James came up with the idea, we discussed it in depth, we both did research, and together we discussed the writing and the artwork. I even selected the cover piece.



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

**You both have also collaborated on book projects with other writers and illustrators. How is it different when your collaborator is a spouse?**

Lesa: For me, the best part about having a spouse as a collaborator is having someone to bounce ideas off of. I read multiple drafts of my manuscript to James to get feedback, so by the time he begins illustrating, he has a very good sense of the characters and plot. In addition, as he is illustrating, he will ask for my input as well.

James: What's great about working with Lesa is I get to hear the story years before I begin illustrating the text. This gives me time to toss around ideas, which usually means a better book. And if I'm really lucky, I can convince her to include a line for an image I want to illustrate. Here is something I never share with Lesa—one small thing that brings me lots of joy is finding books, online articles, or any small item that will aid Lesa in her writing. Sometimes it's just ordering books for her research that makes me feel like I'm a part of her process.

**Where has your book research taken you? (literally and/or figuratively)**

Lesa: One of the most interesting things I have found about writing is that whatever you think you are going to write about, the research almost always takes your writing to a different place if you let it. I have begun a project planning to write a biography about one person and end up writing about an entirely different person. More often what happens is that I find a nugget of information that sends me off in another direction and becomes the inspiration for another project.

**James, your watercolor work is breathtaking—tell us a little about your methods. Do you work with live models or photographs?**

James: Thanks for the comments on my watercolors. Yes, I do work from photos. What I enjoy most about watercolors is the rich colors that you can get, especially when you glaze one thin layer over another. I also use the white of the paper to help make the colors richer. But no matter what the medium is, I think it's my compositions that make the pictures interesting.

**James, you have spoken on the importance of mentorship and about how wonderful Jerry Pinkney has been as a mentor to you. What are some of the biggest lessons you have learned from him as applied to your own work?**

James: I can't say enough about Jerry Pinkney as a man and an artist. The time he gave me is invaluable. There were so many lessons I gathered from the years of visiting his studio. Some

of the most important lessons I learned were how to study and learn from reference photos, the importance of drawing, and how to use color.

**James, you've done fine art and mural projects as well as illustration. How do you approach these projects differently? Is there really a division between fine art and illustration?**

James: My approach to my studio arts work is very different from my illustration practice. With my studio arts work, I often start without knowing where I'm going. I will place colors on the canvas and look at them over a long period of time—weeks or months before I add the next layer. My illustrations are planned out and they work best when I can envision what the final will look like.

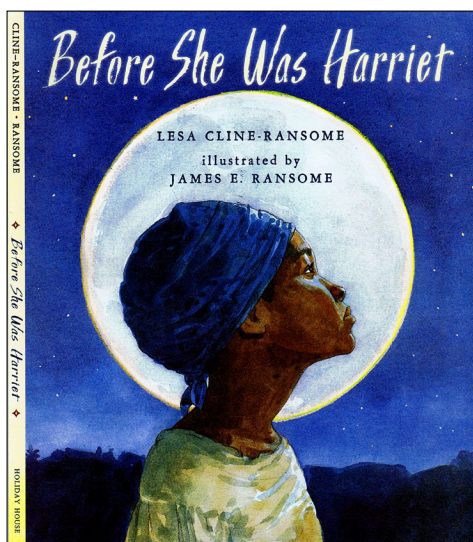
**Lesa, on your blog (<https://lclineransome.wordpress.com/>) you write about the flip-side of fears, of using your fears for a positive outcome, like better writing in the long run. It sounds like something many writers can relate to. Can you tell us more about this technique you have of turning fears into strengths?**

Lesa: I'm not sure that using fear as a positive is the best technique, but for me the constant fear that I will never sell another book makes me work harder. It makes me read a lot, do extra research, take my time with writing, force others to listen to it, and wait for feedback. I would say that some of the best writers I know are fairly humble about their work, always striving to know more, read more, and grow as a writer. I will be more afraid when the fear disappears.

**Lesa, you have written in your blog that "since childhood, Harriet was my hero. Courageous, rebellious, fierce, she was everything the anxiety-ridden, fearful me wanted to be." What was it like to write about Harriet Tubman?**

Lesa: Often in my books, I am looking for a quality in the character or subject that I connect to that allows me to write from a more authentic place. With Harriet, I didn't need to dig too deep to find that connection when I discovered her strong attachment to her parents and how their faith in her fueled her dreams. She was someone whom I had idolized for so long that I almost felt as if I knew her. With other subjects, I was getting to know them as my research began, like the start of a newfound friendship, where you are searching for common connections.

**Lesa, your path through different types of writing careers, such as journalism, has led you to the more creative work of writing for children's literature. What are some**



**considerations in writing for children that you may not have needed to think about when you were writing for adults?**

Lesa: Writing for children is so much more enjoyable than writing for adults. When I am writing for children, obviously I need to keep it brief—which doesn't mean that I get to do less research. It just means that I have to sift through that research much more carefully to pull out only the most intriguing parts. I am also looking for the defining moments in childhood that had an impact on the lives they led as adults. By narrowing my focus, it helps to keep the book concise and makes for a much more interesting story.

**Lesa and James, you have written and illustrated books about many known historical figures, but you also tell the stories of unknown individuals, such as enslaved people who faced enormous challenges to get an education (in *Light in the Darkness* and *Freedom's School*). How did you approach telling their stories?**

Lesa: As a child, I didn't have enough opportunity to read the stories of historical people of color beyond a very select few. According to the history textbooks in my classroom, there were only three or four African-Americans who ever went on to achieve success. My books are an attempt to fill in the gaps, provide context, and to offer a broader picture of the history and contributions of people of color and to show that heroism comes in many forms.

People impact history by leading hundreds out of slavery or leading a civil rights movement, but it can also be quieter acts of resistance like reading, teaching in secret, or walking miles to school to receive an education.

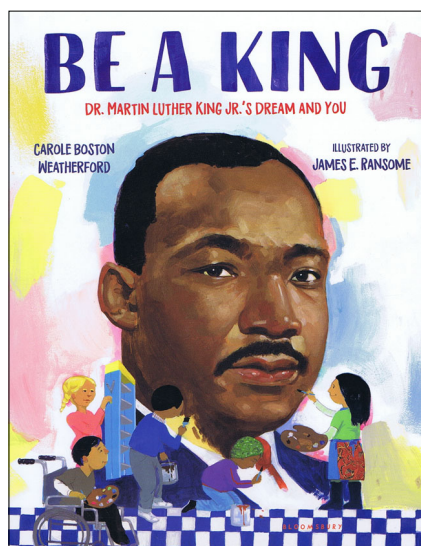
James: The only thing that I might add is that I try to inject dignity and respect into each of my illustrations, and that is

the approach I take with all of my subjects, but especially ones that depict slavery.

**Books can be launching pads for some difficult conversations about historical events such as slavery and oppression.**

**Once a book is published, it is a starting point for more discussion by teachers, librarians, students, and any readers. Have you been part of or witness to these conversations?**

Lesa: I believe each book is the start of a conversation. So whether or not those conversations take place at school, home, or on a playground, books have the power to ignite thought, introspection, reflection, empathy, engagement, action, and most importantly, discussion. I do think it is important as an author to have the opportunity to engage with teachers and librarians around difficult topics so that the conversation can continue with students in a way that is productive and informed.



**You are both very prolific. What do you like to do for downtime when you are not creating award-winning books?**

Lesa: I love football Sundays, long walks, game nights with girlfriends, spending time with my kids and family, my women's political group, book group, the Sunday *New York Times*, and, of course, devouring book after book after book.

James: Well, I'm a big football fan, so during the season you can find me near a TV. I don't have a lot of free downtime. That's why I'm prolific. Time with family is usually how I spend time after dinner. Lesa and I have a few shows we watch, and often when the kids are at home they join us. I also enjoy visiting museums and art galleries. From time to time, I'll listen to a book on tape, and jazz music is playing nonstop while I'm in the studio. And if I have my phone in my hand, I'm playing chess. ♟