

Couples Who Collaborate

Matthew Cordell and Julie Halpern

JENNIFER GIBSON

Considering the busy year this couple has had, *Children and Libraries* is lucky to have had the chance to interview current Caldecott Medal-winning author/illustrator Matthew Cordell and acclaimed YA author (and librarian!) Julie Halpern. The couple live in the Chicago area.

Cordell's 2018 Caldecott Medal for *Wolf in the Snow* (Feiwel & Friends, 2017), a near-wordless new take on the classic tale of a little girl in red and a wolf, tops an already prolific illustration career. He has illustrated, and at times written and illustrated, nineteen books, including the *New York Times* Notable Picturebook *Hello! Hello!* (Disney-Hyperion, 2012), *Dream* (Disney-Hyperion, 2017), *Wish* (Disney-Hyperion, 2015), and *Another Brother* (Feiwel & Friends, 2012). His crisp line and soft watercolor washes, such as in the recent *Rock and Roll Soul* (Abrams, 2018), written by Susan Verde, depict an energy and joy that are contagious.

Halpern's career as a novelist started off with a heartfelt and poignantly funny debut, *Have a Nice Day*, based on her personal experiences with mental health. Awards soon followed, including a Kirkus Best Teen Book of 2012, the Bank Street Best Children's Book of the Year, and YALSA 2013 Best Fiction for Young Adults. She has since penned seven novels on topics ranging from Dungeons and Dragons enthusiasts in *Into the Wild Nerd Yonder* (Feiwel & Friends, 2009), an ALA Best Book for Young Adults, to a cancer-ridden girl's bucket list in *The F-It List* (Feiwel & Friends, 2013), to predetermined soul mates in *Meant to Be* (Feiwel & Friends, 2017), all while keeping a fresh, funny, and relatable narrative voice for young adult readers.



We learned how the couple's love story is as unique as their respective creative works. Before meeting in person, Matthew actually knew Julie's work in zines and began writing to her when recruiting creators for his own zine release party. After a few initial emails, a zine party, and a sweet collaboration on a picturebook, their relationship and family has grown, as has both of their respective publishing journeys. The world of children's literature is all the better for it, and we can't wait for their next chapter.

On her website, Julie outlines how zines brought you both together. Do you really owe it all to zines?

Matt: We really do! I had just put together this zine with some friends, and we were having a release party in the loft I was living in at the time. So I thought I would reach out to some other Chicago zinesters that I hadn't met but whose zines I'd found and loved. (Chicago has an amazing comics and zines store called Quimby's.)

About a month before the party, I emailed Julie and her friend Liz, who co-wrote one of my favorites called *Cul-de-Sac*. The intention was simply to invite them, but Julie and I really



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

clicked over our email exchanges. By the time the party came and we met face-to-face, the connection was inevitable, and we made our first date the week after. It was on Valentine's Day at a neighborhood café called Earwax.

Julie: I like to refer to our romance as “Hipsters: A Love Story.” I still have copies of *Cul-de-Sac*, but I don't think they're sharable. My writing from my twenties isn't exactly appropriate for a magazine with “children” in the title. I do, however, showcase the *Cul-de-Sac* covers when I present at libraries. Publishing zines was a great jumping-off point for my publishing career and, you know, the rest of my life.

You have collaborated on one title together, the sweet picture-book *Toby and the Snowflakes* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2004). Tell us about that process.

Matt: Way back when, children's books were not on my radar at all. I was working as a graphic designer and also drawing and painting and showing work in Chicago art galleries. But Julie saw an opportunity. She was a writer and a school librarian, and I was a visual artist, and she had the great idea that we could try and make a picturebook together and get it published . . . only it wasn't much of a great idea to me at first. I didn't know or remember much about picturebooks, and it didn't sound terribly cool to me—until Julie showed me many of her childhood picturebooks and brought home even more from the school library where she was at the time. At which point, I was hooked.

I was particularly inspired by the loose line drawings and watercolor of William Steig, Quentin Blake, Bernard Waber, and the like. The sketchy expression in their work was not too unlike the work I was doing at the time. So I settled on using those materials for the illustration samples that would accompany our proposal. We submitted to nineteen publishers.

Julie: There was a lot of waiting, until we received eighteen rejection letters and one “maybe.” One year and many revisions later (I couldn't believe how many revisions a thirty-two page story required!), we signed our first book deal. From there, Matt sent out a lot of work to various publishers and built his illustration career. I eventually began writing novels, a better fit for me than picturebooks. I enjoy the freedom of voice, story, and length of novels. I would love to work on something together again someday. We have toyed around with other ideas, but nothing has come to completion. Yet!

You may not both be currently working on the same projects, but how does having a partner in the same field, being two professional creators for children's literature, influence your work?

Matt: It definitely helps to be married to someone who can understand the peaks and valleys of publishing—someone who can really understand and relate and help celebrate when great things happen and help comfort when the not-so-great things happen too. And it helps to be married to the very creative, funny, talented writer and soul that is Julie.

I've always been inspired by the humor and razor-sharp wit in her writing. We are both very much go-getters in our own particular ways. And I think that that work ethic and passion for creating inspires and drives us both to strive for bigger and better things within our two different circles of children's books.

Julie: Our lives completely revolve around creating things and books. I have an MLIS and have worked in libraries for years, so even when I'm not technically working on a writing project, I am surrounded by books and bring them home every day that I work. Our house is a mess, but a lot of that mess is stacks of books. We also have art supplies in every room, and our kids are constantly inspired to read or create their own works. Even when we travel, we are always looking for new ways to be inspired at museums, rest stops, and weird tourist spots.

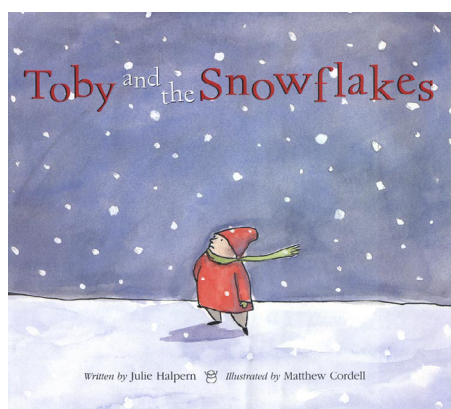
We both have totally weird schedules that revolve around our kids, deadlines, travel, and an occasional TV show. Since we both are at home a lot, and our home is pretty small, it's nice for me to have a part-time job out of the home and for

Matt to travel to give everyone some space. It works pretty well for us.

Julie, do you feel your school librarian experience fueled your next step into writing your own stories, or did you balance writing while working as a librarian as well?

Julie: I originally wrote *Toby and the Snowflakes* so that Matt and I could have a project together. It made sense to me. My young adult novels were inspired by the need to share my stories (in particular my first novel, based on my own experience with being hospitalized for depression). I was working in a grade school and really loved working with the middle schoolers the most, so I was reading a lot of young adult books. I thought my story fit in with that, and I wanted to tell it in a funny way. So much of the YA I was reading at the time (2000) was very dark.

Before kids, I wrote during my commutes on train rides back and forth. I also wrote during the summertime. Now, with two kids, I write when I can grab time. When both kids are in school full time, my writing life may get easier. Or the pressure to write may topple me! Time will tell.



Matthew, how did you study or get into illustration, and who were/are your influences?

Matt: I went to school for fine art and graphic design and never took a single illustration class. I never took a class in pen and ink or watercolor painting either (my chosen modes of illustration). It wasn't until I met Julie that I ever considered working as an illustrator. But once I lucked into it, I loved everything about it. I loved making the art that went into books. I loved making art for children. And I loved collaborating with the kind and talented folks at these publishers.

I have many influences, but the art that tends to make an impression on me is very free and scratchy and spontaneous in nature. I do gravitate a lot toward cartoonists and folks who dabble in pen and ink. Quentin Blake is certainly one of my art heroes. I also really love the work of John Burningham. One contemporary influence is David Ezra Stein. I love art and artists that jump around in style and tools and approach. I find that to be very brave and curious and inspiring.

Matthew, congratulations on winning this year's Caldecott Medal for the wordless picturebook *Wolf in the Snow* (Feiwel & Friends, 2017). You outline your research process with the Yellowstone Wolf Project on your blog. Can you tell us more about how the plot of your book evolved with their help?

Matt: Thanks so much! I still find myself in states of disbelief and utter happiness about it all. I was very fortunate to connect with a biologist from the Yellowstone Wolf Project, Kira Cassidy, as I was fine-tuning and fact-checking my story. I wanted things to be as real and respectful as possible, in terms of the behavior and biology of the wolves in the book. And there were some questions I had that were so specific that I wouldn't be able to easily find the information in books or films about wolves.

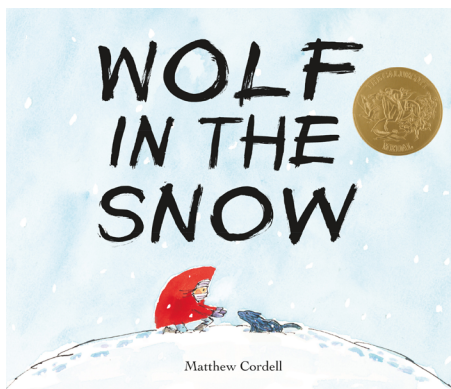
For instance, I wanted to know at what age a pack of wolves would first travel at long distances with a pup so I could accurately portray the size and physical appearance of the pup in the book. (Thickness of fur, proportions, etc.) I also wanted to confirm that it was reasonable to believe that a pup could get separated from its pack at a time like this, in the case of a blizzard.

There were many more questions and concerns I had, and Kira was an invaluable resource to me at this time. I'll be visiting Bozeman, Montana, for the Children's Festival of the Book in the fall, and also visiting Yellowstone. During this visit, I'm hoping to meet the team that looks after and studies the wolves of Yellowstone!

Matthew, you have mentioned that you now have the bug and are working on a new wordless book. Tell us a little more about what it requires to make wordless books.

Matt: In a wordless book, the pictures are doing all of the lifting in regards to the storytelling. Therefore, the pictures need to be as clear as possible to captivate and help guide the reader through the story. As the creator of the story and the pictures, I have to constantly question my choices for what goes into the pictures, page turns, and layouts.

Fine details like body language and expression are incredibly important in crafting a wordless book. I realize that no matter how clear the pictures are, there will still be some variance in individual interpretations of what is happening in the story. If there are no words to specify the events of the story and the feelings of the characters, the reader must use her or his best judgment to determine what's going on. And one person's interpretation may be slightly different than another's.



But I rather like that about wordless books. Living and learning need not always be limited to finite explanation. There is a lot to be said about a storytelling experience that can allow a child to infuse a little of herself—her imagination—into the reading and to look closely at the pictures to determine and judge and decide what is going on.

Julie, *Get Well Soon* (Square Fish, 2009) is a hilarious take on hospitalization and mental health. Tell us about the impact this book has had.

Julie: The book, my first, has been out for almost ten years now, and it is still the title of mine that draws the most mail from readers. I hear from a lot of other people who have dealt with or are dealing with depression, either their own or the depression of someone close to them, and the book helps normalize what it is like to live with it. It feels odd to say, but I have received my share of letters from readers telling me I have saved their lives. It's rather incredible, having such an experience as a teenager, one I did not choose, turn into a novel that helps others. It has also helped me immensely in not feeling as alone in my ongoing battle with depression.

Julie, the narrative voice in your YA novels is so spot-on for the age group. How do you channel that voice?

Julie: A lot of people say that reading my books is like listening to me talk. So maybe I talk like a teenager? I am a pretty straightforward, sincere person, and I try to write in that manner.

My characters always have a lot more hope as teenagers than I do as an adult, which I think is one of the main factors that sets us apart; they haven't experienced the crud which comes

with aging that makes adults so jaded. I also try to stay away from modern slang and pop culture references. Instead, I use older, nerdy fandoms and make up words. I've tried writing books for younger kids, but I don't find the voice as easy to bring forth as teen voices. Maybe because my life is All Kids, All of the Time, I need a little break.

Tell us about inspiration from your children in your work—in Matthew's works *Wish and Dream*, and perhaps in Julie's *Maternity Leave*.

Matt: Most of my success as a writer comes from observing the things around me and in my life. I've gotten so many of my book ideas from observing the fun, funny, and sometimes weird things that go on with kids and parenting. For instance, my book, *Hello! Hello!* (Disney/Hyperion, 2012), was directly inspired by an interaction I had with my daughter (who was two-years-old at the time) when she asked me to "stop checking email and play" with her.

My new picturebook, *King Alice* (Feiweil & Friends, 2018), was inspired by a day when my daughter and I decided to draw and write a book together. And sometimes, I've tackled more personal and heavy topics inspired by our struggles, like *Wish*, which depicts a couple who wants to start a family, but things do not go as they'd hoped. My family is the greatest blessing in my life, so I'm glad I can combine my love for family with my love of making and sharing books and art.

Julie: *Maternity Leave*, while not directly based on my experience with my son as a baby, sprang from my Facebook posts about the struggle I had as a mom in my son's early days. My publisher, Jean Feiweil, had seen the posts and thought I would make the perfect writer for a book about a not-so-great maternity leave. I will admit I am not a baby person. I find it really difficult: the lack of sleep, the constant boob troubles, and no ability to communicate. They do smell nice, though.

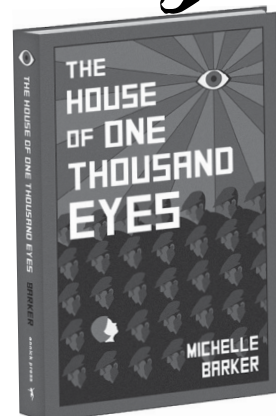
What's a future dream project for you both?

Matt: I someday hope to bring to life a graphic novel of sorts. The amount of drawing that goes into graphic novels is extremely intimidating, so I'm not sure I will ever pull it off. We'll see. In the meantime, I'll continue to dream about it!

Julie: I would love to write a graphic novel and see how someone else illustrates it. I have a story in mind, another "based on my own experience" tale, that I think would be great. Currently I'm working on a collaboration with Len Vlahos, trading chapters back and forth, and I'm really enjoying the process. Having seven novels under my belt, I'm ready to experiment a little more with format and collaborations.

And I would not say no to a TV show or a movie deal! It would be incredible to see my work interpreted and brought to life. 🐾

Annick's Fall Stars



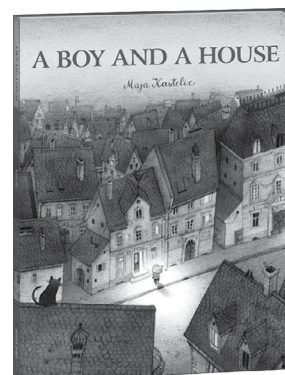
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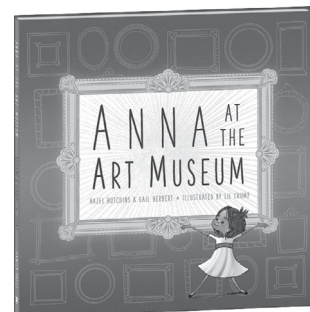
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