

Couples Who Collaborate

Erin and Philip Stead

MARY-KATE SABLESKI



Photo courtesy of Penguin Random House

Husband and wife Philip and Erin Stead are well-known as the team behind the Caldecott Award-winning *A Sick Day for Amos McGee* (2010), as well as several other titles that are a memorable part of any library collection.

Erin illustrated *A Sick Day for Amos McGee*, which, according to National Public Radio, was the first debut picturebook to win the award. Since that debut, Erin has illustrated five more books, with her sixth illustrated book, *Music for Mister Moon*, coming in 2019 (written by Philip). In addition to collaborating with Philip, Erin has illustrated two books written by her longtime friend Julie Fogliano.

Philip is author and/or illustrator of many highly acclaimed picturebooks. As an author, Philip has written three books, and has both written and illustrated fourteen books. The couple has collaborated on three books.

Both grew up in Farmington Hills, MI, and met in high school art class. They married in 2005, and moved to New York City. After moving back to Ann Arbor, they began writing and illustrating books together. They currently live in Ann Arbor with their toddler daughter.

The couple is often asked how they can possibly spend so much time together, in their personal and professional lives. They say they cannot imagine it any other way and shared more about their process, the arrival of their first child, and their thoughts on creating books for children.

Q: How has the arrival of your first child influenced your work?

E: It has re-ignited my drive for how important I think reading to your child is. I am not surprised, but I am surprised at how strongly I feel all over again. It's like I found picturebooks all over again. I always thought it was important, and always thought my job was one of the greatest jobs in the world, but to see it in action is really fun every day. She's a great reader!

P: I think we'd always been making the case that children tend to be better readers than adults give them credit for. We shouldn't assume that they don't have capabilities, but even I was surprised at how good a reader can be at one year old. I think before having a child, we were imagining our audience as the three and up crowd, but more and more I'm realizing that our audience can be even younger.

Q: Will your work shift now that you can imagine it reaching a younger audience?



Mary-Kate Sableski is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Teacher Education at the University of Dayton. She teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in children's literature and literacy instructional methods. Her primary area of research interest is diversity in children's literature.

P: I think I am the more likely candidate to start moving down the age range. Obviously, we've been reading a lot of Eric Carle lately. I've always liked Eric Carle, and I'd like to try a book like that. I don't think I had really thought of that until now.

E: And many of the people we knew who were our favorites, it has just reinforced for us how envious we are of their careers.

Q: Have you read any of your books to your daughter?

E: *Amos McGee* came out as a board book recently, so she was read *Amos* early on.

P: It was the only thing I could recite out loud as we were walking to calm her down. It is the only book I know all the way through because I've read it hundreds of times.

E: I struggle because I want her to love reading, but I don't want her to love reading because it's what her parents do.

P: I had experience with that growing up, because my parents were both musicians. As a child it felt important to me to have my own independence, so we want to be really careful about forcing our world on her.

Q: How are your processes different when you work alone or together?

E: I think what we would normally tell you is that we never really work separate, but this year has been different.

P: Yes, this year has been an outlier, but I think we will probably return to normal, once she is a little bit older. The old answer to this question was basically that we don't work alone and that the finished products might look different from one another, but behind the scenes they are completely integrated processes. I am often helping with the design of Erin's books. Erin is one of the only people I trust with revisions as I'm working. We both are very tight lipped as we're working. We don't share things with our editor, and we don't share things with our agent, and it's not until the book is done basically until we put it out there. So that means that until that time we only have each other to kick things back and forth with and decide if good decisions are being made.

E: We have good colleagues, but within the studio, it's always just the two of us. It is unfortunate for the editors or the agents, because it's always just two against one. We do need help solving problems, but most of the time, it cycles between the two of us in the studio.

Q: How is it different to collaborate with other illustrators?

E: Julie Fogliano and I have known each other for over fifteen years. She also used to write in secret, like I used to draw. The list she has been able to work with is pretty impressive. She has been a great resource for me because she has three



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children. Working with Julie has been really fun because she is my friend, and she was also really trusting, so once I got her manuscripts, I was able to kind of hide and work in the same way. Phil really helped me with parsing that book out.

P: I think that the work we do with others, still tends to be the work we do...

E: Together. I have been able to work with some great authors, but the most fun I've had is working with you, Phil, although it is the hardest.

P: Well, what's nice working with your partner is that when you have an idea you can talk about it and then execute it immediately. And when you don't work with your partner, it might be someone hundreds of miles away or maybe you don't even know them, you don't have that immediacy, and sometimes the excitement about the idea can wane.

E: Or sometimes it's a matter of trying an idea, and five minutes later we realize it's a failure. And, through an email to the editor, the agent, the author and back around and sometimes



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by that time you've played telephone and it's not quite what you had in mind. So I think a lot of experimentation and failure occurs without anyone even knowing.

Q: What is most difficult about working together?

E: We want to impress each other.

P: While we are working in the studio, we are not very sentimental about the work being made. So one of us can walk into the studio and can recognize that a person is not doing something well or is just down a wrong track, it can just be said.

E: The problem is, you're at work, and you know what you're working on is not good enough, and the person comes in and says, that's not good enough, and it's that realization that, I know...and I think that can bring a little frustration. It's an immediacy of emotion without any time to temper it. Do you think so?

P: Yeah. I've come to rely on it though.

E: Oh yeah, I would be lost without it; it's just that it took us a little while to separate some of the little kid emotions to relying on each other.

Q: We would love to hear about your newest book, *Music for Mister Moon*.

P: That book is the book that Erin worked on towards the end of her pregnancy; [the book] didn't get done on time. The early stages were really kind of a blur.

E: I laid the book out before the baby was born and I got a lot of the artwork done, and I decided right before she was born that it wasn't good enough and I had to start over. And I think at that point you had a heart attack, Phil. I knew what I wanted the book to look like and it was all laid out, so it was just a matter of executing it. I was lucky because she was so small at the time that I was able to draw with her, most of the time. Towards the end of the book, Phil ended up taking her out. I really enjoyed having an infant, and I wasn't really willing to compromise either life that I had, so since she was so small, she stayed with me. The book has a lot of meaning for us. It is about loving something that maybe not everyone in your life fully understands. The protagonist loves playing the cello but doesn't really want to do it in front of a crowd of people. So that spurs an adventure that kind of is in her imagination.

P: It is a book about an introvert, and it is a book for introverts. Introverts are often put in positions where they have to defend their introvertedness. I think that we're often feeling as though the thing we are doing has value even if we're doing it alone. And I think that is an especially important thing to think about because it's almost impossible to be alone right now.

Q: What is it like to share your books with children?

E: I feel like this is one of those questions where I am going to have a better answer. With *Amos* we have had so many different experiences reading it all over the world.

P: Yeah, I didn't know *Amos* was funny until reading it in front of children. A lot of things that adults point out in the book are that it is sweet or kind or has a tinge of melancholy. Those are the things that we thought made it, but it turns out that when you turn the page and there is an elephant playing chess with an old man, that is really funny to five- and six-year-olds. I think I learned more about the things that we made after having seen them in their intended context, which has been pretty cool. We avoided speaking in front of large groups of just children for a long time in part because it is unpredictable. When you get into a school, you don't know what it's going to be like. But, I have come to enjoy it because while those situations can be unpredictable you get nothing but realness and honesty from those children.

E: Which is why we got into this in the first place. Making children's books as an art form is, I think, the most honest audience you are going to get, and I think that is the best part for me.



The Steads working in their home studio. Photo courtesy of Penguin Random House.

P: I actually started reaching out this year, actively seeking more library and school visits, because I feel like I really need the presence of children because the whole world has become so toxic. I just want to be around kids, because grown-ups have just made a complete mess of everything, so I am more and more trying to get myself in front of kids. Because while they might exhaust me, I feel later on rejuvenated in a way that I wouldn't if I was just speaking in front of grown-ups.

Q: What are your thoughts on the #we need diverse books movement, and how does your work fit into that landscape?

P: I think the real missing piece in the landscape right now is that for a long time "universal books" were still featuring primarily people with white skin and that was part of what made them universal in people's minds. If you were to feature a person with any other color skin, those books were specific in some way and they weren't universal. We have made some choices to try and push back against that in our work.

E: We did before this became a hashtag, which is not to belittle anything that has happened since.

P: I think in part because we have always been a huge fan of Ezra Jack Keats. I think this was on his mind decades ago. *The*

Snowy Day is a perfect example of a universal story, and it is a book that I pull off the shelf constantly as I am working.

E: Right and I think too that if you are a librarian or a book seller you are constantly around the books that are coming out every year and you are unboxing new books and I think you are just aware. When you are living in a world where you see different people and then you go into a store and you realize it's not very representational of what you are seeing out in the world. I think that it is good if we all do a better job. I think that because we work in very short books, and you can't solve every problem per book. I think that can weigh us down a little bit in trying to correct decades of bad behavior. It is a difficult thing at the moment because there is some nuance to the correction because of the format we are working in. But what I say is that I make stories about human experiences, and there are some experiences I should not make stories about and there are other ones that if I feel like I see a certain child or character in the story and I don't feel like I'm telling a story that I shouldn't tell then I feel pretty free to move forward.

P: One example that I have brought up a few times is that when I was a kid I was a huge baseball fan. I used to absorb so much information about baseball. I would go to the library, check out a million books, memorize statistics, everything.



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When I was around nine years old, I learned for the first time about the Negro Leagues, and I remember feeling incredibly cheated because there was this entirely separate universe of baseball that had all of these other incredibly interesting characters and this whole set of statistics and all these things and I didn't know how to learn about it. There was so little about it in the library and when I would see it, I know this now as a grown up, but when I would see it, it would be Black History Month or other small relevant times throughout the year where it might pop up. But that stinks not just for children of color but also someone like myself who was just interested in baseball. Baseball should be universal and yet we have even found ways to compartmentalize the experience of baseball and I think the more we can push our reins past that and recognize that it is one big human experience it would be better.

E: Well, none of us are in this job because we think well we've nailed it. We have done the best we can do in reading and making books anyway so let's just quit while we are ahead. I

think there is poor representation in board books, speaking of someone who is outnumbered by now and I think we can all do better and we are working on it.

Q: Is there any professional jealousy between the two of you, since Erin won the Caldecott Medal?

E: I mean you have won it a few times . . . [sometimes Phil is mistakenly listed as the winner]

P: There are a number of times *I am* listed as a Caldecott winner. I tend to think of the books we do together as "books we have done together."

E: I definitely don't feel like I won that without Phil. That book was Phil's brainchild with our editor, and I would not have made it without the two of them. Not just because I wouldn't have had anything to illustrate, but I wouldn't have been an illustrator. The other thing is that everything that came with it, our whole life, we got to experience that together and we made a book together so it all makes sense. The only real difference is that I have a different Wikipedia page than you. I couldn't do my job without Phil, I think that he is one of the best picturebook authors out there right now, and I am really picky about my manuscripts. It is a real joy to be able to demand a book out of you whenever I want it.

P: I get to have a Caldecott winner as my default choice to illustrate my stories and not a lot of people can say that.

Q: It sounds like you really are living the dream.

E: Well, I mean, most of that is because of librarians, so thanks to all of you!

Q: Any advice or words of wisdom for librarians that you would like to share?

P: My words of wisdom would just be to be enthusiastic. I think we are living in a time right now that has forgotten the value of enthusiasm and instead has embraced the value of criticism. I think very few things come from criticism and a whole lot of good things come from enthusiasm.

E: I feel like, and I have felt this for a long time, specifically after the Caldecott, that librarians are by nature incredibly generous people. The Caldecott itself is an example of that. I mean you guys go to school forever, spend a lot of time on a panel judging books, and then change somebody's life and you know it, and you don't get anything for it, and I think that is an incredible thing that you do. But that is an example that is separate from the thing you all chose to do every day which is you have a job where you have to be interested and enthusiastic about everybody's interests and that is very, very generous. &