

# Couples Who Collaborate

Kevin Henkes and Laura Dronzek

MARY-KATE SABLESKI

**K**evin Henkes and Laura Dronzek are the creative couple behind several picture books, including their most recent collaborations about the four seasons. Their newest title, *Winter Is Here*, came out in Fall 2018, and their final book in the series, with a focus on the season of summer, is slated for a 2020 publication date, just in time for summer storytimes.

Laura is a painter whose work has been exhibited nationally. In addition to her collaborations with Kevin, Laura has illustrated books by George Shannon, Helen V. Griffith, and Phyllis Rowand. Her first collaboration with Kevin was in 1999 with the book *Oh!* and has continued with *Birds* (2009), *When Spring Comes* (2016), *In the Middle of Fall* (2017), and *Winter Is Here* (2018).

Kevin is an award-winning author and illustrator who has created more than fifty books for children since 1981. He won the Caldecott Medal for *Kitten's First Full Moon* (2004), and Caldecott Honors for *Waiting* (2015) and *Owen* (1993). He also won Newbery Honors for *Olive's Ocean* (2003) and *The Year of Billy Miller* (2013). *Waiting* and *Penny and Her Marble* (2013) also won Geisel Honors. He is widely known for his "mouse books," including *Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse* (1996). His acclaimed picture books for young children include *Egg* (2017) and *A Parade of Elephants* (2018).

The married couple, who have two grown children, create books together, and separately, from their home in Madison, WI. Their home—and the surrounding cul-de-sac, park, and row of neighboring houses—is the inspiration for much of their work. Despite the widespread appeal and global fame their books have received, Kevin and Laura live a quiet life, focused on creating beautiful works of art and literature. It



Laura Dronzek and Kevin Henkes with their forthcoming collaboration, *Summer Song*.

was a pleasure to talk with them over the phone about their work, their process, and what projects we might look forward to next.

**Q: Tell us about your newest book together, *Winter Is Here*. How did that book come about?**

**K:** This book is our fifth collaboration. I gave the text to Laura as a birthday gift. I wrote it with her in mind. We've collaborated on a spring book and a fall book, so this seemed natural. When I'm writing for Laura, I feel a sense of freedom. When I'm writing for myself, I tend to self-edit and not include something that I might not want to draw or paint. But I don't think about that when I write for Laura. I include things she might like to paint. That's always in the back of my mind.

Because this book is part of a series, it has to be similar to the other books. But with each one I tried to do something a little bit different. For example, with *In the Middle of Fall*, I tried hard to write it as one sentence, but I couldn't do it. It's two sentences. And in the winter book, I was thinking about opposites, so I mention soft versus hard, inside versus



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outside, quiet versus loud. And, of course, I want the words to have rhythm and to be nice to read aloud.

**Q: Laura, what was it like for you to create this series of books with Kevin?**

L: It has been wonderful! Kevin is such a great writer. The thing that has been interesting for me is that in each book the text is very open to interpretation, so it has been a challenge to figure out how I'm going to weave a story into the book. For example, in *Winter Is Here*, the first line is "Winter is here. It's everywhere." The text on the next page is "It's falling from the sky." Those lines are completely open-ended. There is no mention of a child or an animal. I came up with a narrative based loosely on my childhood experiences and our current neighborhood. We have a park nearby that has a little ice rink in the winter.

So, I set the first page in a park in winter where I could show some of the more fun aspects of winter. On the next page, I did a closer view of two friends (who show up throughout the book) watching the snow "falling from the sky." I try to create a narrative in the illustrations that is not necessarily in the text, to add another dimension to the book. Because the season books are a series, I try to tie the design of each book to the previous books so they are all of a piece. For example, in the earlier books about seasons there are pages with four vignettes, or a circle at the beginning and end of the book. I think about this as I work on the design of each book and try to tie them together visually.

K: It's exciting for me to do something that is highly interpretive. I love seeing what kind of subtext Laura adds. I had no idea the setting was going to be our neighborhood, that the park was going to be the focal point. The park is there at the beginning, the end, and is woven throughout. All of this is something that I had nothing to do with. I love to see how it all works out and what Laura does with it.

**Q: Tell us about your collaborative process.**

L: We have studios on the third floor of our home, and there is a little hallway in between them. No matter what we are each working on, we tend to go back and forth throughout the day. When we collaborate on a book, I illustrate the text in the way that I envision it. I divide the text into pages and do sketches, and then I'll show it to Kevin. There has only been one instance where Kevin had a set idea about what he envisioned for the illustration. In *Birds*, Kevin wanted the page with the text "and they were gone" to simply have a black wire going across it. I totally agreed. Other than that, it is usually me saying, "What do you think about this?" However, Kevin really hands over the illustration of the book to me.

K: It's freeing for me to hand the words over to Laura. I love coming to her studio and seeing how she is building the book. I think of what I give her as a skeletal system, and she builds

a whole body around it, builds a house around it. It's nice for me to witness.

L: Yes, it has been very easy for us to collaborate. Some people say they could never work with their spouse, but luckily it has always been very easy for us.

K: It's been a joy for me because I absolutely adore them (the books), love the finished product.

L: I'm working on the illustrations for *Summer Song*, and I'm sad that it is the last book in the series. Doing books about the seasons has been so much fun for me, because one of my favorite subjects to paint is nature.

**Q: How is the process different than when you collaborate with a different author/ different illustrator?**

L: It is different because I don't really collaborate with other authors when I illustrate their books. Most illustrators don't usually communicate with the author, so it's nice when I can walk down the hall if I have a question about an illustration. Also, when I'm illustrating other authors' books, I'm always hoping that the final vision I have for the illustrations is something they'll be happy with.

I did several books with George Shannon and I met him, which was lovely. Otherwise, I've corresponded with the authors of some of the books I've illustrated after the books were completed, but they didn't have any input into the illustration process.

K: I've written a couple of books that other artists have illustrated. I don't do that very often, and I haven't done that for a very long time. When I'm writing a book that I will illustrate, I suppose the biggest difference is that I'm trying to "see" it from the onset. Also, I'm thinking about how I don't necessarily need certain things in the words because I know the pictures can provide that information.

**Q: Do any of the books come from your own childhood or from your children's growing-up years?**

L: I definitely think about my own childhood. I grew up in suburban Chicago, but there was a field behind our house where I spent a lot of time playing. We sledded and ice skated there in the winter.

I have also been influenced by observing our children growing up in our neighborhood. We have a little park nearby where kids skate and a wooded area that leads to a sledding hill. I've used different aspects of the neighborhood as inspiration for the illustrations.

KH: I suppose I think about what I experienced as a child, and our kids' experiences when I write these books. But then those things fall away, and the concern is, how can I make this book the very best book that it can be? Even if an element of the

book is based on something else, it takes on a life of its own and it becomes what it becomes.

**Q: Did you share your books with your own children?**

L: They weren't particularly interested when they were young. I think they just thought that all parents go up to their studios and work. We read so many books with them, but not usually our books.

K: I think they did take it for granted, and they didn't necessarily see it as a big deal. We read books constantly, so books were a huge part of who they were when they were little. And they're both readers now, which is wonderful.

L: Kevin started reading to our children at breakfast before school when they were little. I would make their lunches and he would read picture books and then novels as they got older. This continued until they were each in eighth grade.

K: We kept a list in the hall of all the novels I read aloud. It's fun to go back and look at it. When I was reading to the kids, Laura was also in the kitchen, so it was an experience shared by all of us. We'd read a novel over the course of a few weeks and it contributed to our daily conversations. It made me realize how books open the door to so many different kinds of discussions. Sometimes you could sense that it was a bit of therapy for them and sometimes it led to us talking about current events or history. It was wonderful.

L: It was nice because the children were exposed to books they wouldn't necessarily have chosen on their own.

**Q: Did any of the novels from that time inspire the work you do now?**

K: Not specifically that I recall. But reading aloud made it very clear how beautiful some of the books were. The rhythm of the words was to be admired. I always read my texts aloud to myself when I am writing. It's a great way to see if things are working.

**Q: Your books are important examples of the universal story, in which the shared human experiences we all have are celebrated. There is a lot of conversation right now about increasing diversity in books; how do you think your books play a role in that conversation?**

K: Every child should be able to see herself or himself reflected in the books they read. I think that helps give one a strong sense of self. And seeing people different from one's self helps one learn empathy. I grew up in the school whose motto was "write what you know," and that is what I try to do as best I can.

**Q: *Egg* (2017) is an example of a book that invites multiple interpretations, inviting many types of readers into the story. It is a good example of the universal story.**

K: When *Egg* came out, I did a small book tour. I was terrified, because I realized I had never before written a picture book that couldn't be understood by the words alone. I was going to be reading this to big groups of kids and there are no traditional sentences, only single words. But they got it! I was relieved. I remember so clearly reading it to a group of kindergarteners. Their reactions were wonderful. They were so enthusiastic and excited. I said to the teacher afterwards, "That was really fun for me to read. I could tell they had never heard it before." She said, "Never heard it before? I probably read it twenty-five times and they still love it!" I would have bet my life that they had never heard it, given their response. They were full of ideas about what happened at the end of the book, too. I was thrilled.

**Q: What is your favorite book that you have done together?**

L: I feel that it often is the one I'm working on. I have loved working on all of our books. I'm working on the art for *Summer Song* right now, so it is my favorite book at the moment.

K: I think I would say the next one. I always want the next one to be perfect and, of course, it never is. But thinking that's possible is one of the things that keeps me going.

**Q: Any hints on your next collaboration?**

L: I am also a painter, so when I'm not working on a book, I am painting. I've mainly been working on books for the last four years. So, if Kevin doesn't come up with something, I will go back to painting, but I really am enjoying illustrating the summer book.

K: I'm thinking. And hoping . . .

**Q: How has it been to take a break from your primary work as a painter, Laura?**

L: I love the whole process of creating a story and a world through illustrating picturebooks. Although they are very different, working as an illustrator and a painter influences each of those art forms. As an artist, I'm mainly a painter and I approach illustration as a painter. I even paint my book dummies. There are aspects about both that can lead to moments of frustration where I think doing the other is easier. But I feel very lucky to be able to do both.

K: I am going through a similar thing right now. I have a novel coming out in March (*Sweeping Up the Heart*, 2019). When I was working on it, I often wished I were working on a picture book. Now, I *am* working on the illustrations for a book, and I just ruined one this morning. I thought, if only I were writing a novel it would be so much easier—I could just go to the coffee shop and sit and have a lovely time. So, there is something about going back and forth between the two of them.

**Q: Do you feel that back-and-forth tension when you are working separately? Do you miss the collaborative process?**

K: I love collaborating with Laura, so I'm always thinking about what I can write for her, but sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. I have a file drawer of failed attempts. It's always in the back of my mind.

L: The nice thing about illustrating versus painting is that you have the guide of the words. But with painting it comes from within. It's much more open-ended.

**Q: What is it about picture books that has drawn both of you to this genre?**

K: I love that picture books can be expansive. They might appear to be simple or small, but when done well they are large—whole worlds between two covers. There is so much going on in Laura's illustrations, so much to look at. There are connections waiting to be made, stories to be discovered that go deeper than my words. That's part of the beauty of picture books. &