

Couples Who Collaborate

Shannon and Dean Hale

MARY-KATE SABLESKI

Shannon and Dean Hale are the dynamic team behind the popular *Princess in Black* series. This series currently includes eight books, with more books slated to come. In addition to *Princess in Black*, Shannon and Dean have collaborated on the *Squirrel Girl* novels (2018), *Calamity Jack* (2010), *Rapunzel's Revenge* (2008), and *The Legend of Shadow High* (2017).

Shannon is a prolific writer who has been writing books since the age of ten. A Newbery Honor winner for *Princess Academy* (2005), Shannon has written more than twenty books for young audiences, including her graphic novel memoirs, *Real Friends* (2017) and *Best Friends* (2019). *Austenland* (2007), a book for adult audiences, is also a major motion picture. Dean is newer to writing, having recently left a career in technology to write full-time. His credits include a picture book, *Scapegoat* (2011), and his collaborations with Shannon. Both Shannon and Dean are always working on new projects, both individually and together.

Shannon and Dean have been married for nineteen years. They live in Salt Lake City, Utah, with their four children. Their interview explores their creative process, the role their books play in children's lives, and how their work reflects our diverse society.

Q: Tell me a little bit about your work together.

SH: Going way, way back, our first collaboration was a graphic novel around 2004. I was really seeing a lack of books for certain kinds of readers. Dean grew up reading comics, and there really weren't comics for kids. At that time, there really weren't any accessible books for kids in that format, and I



Shannon and Dean Hale. Photo by Jenn Florence.

thought for visual learners and certain kinds of kids it would be a lifesaver, like it had been for Dean. So, we wanted to write one, and Dean was working full-time at another job, and I think I was too, actually.

We wanted to write one together because his breadth of knowledge about comics was so great. I had a lot of respect for the medium, but I didn't have a lot of experience in it, so I thought that we needed to collaborate together, since I was mostly a novel writer. So, that's when it first started, and we found that we liked writing together.

DH: In terms of a timeline, if it was beyond one year ago, it all blends into one thing. *Calamity Jack* (2010) was after that, wasn't it?

SH: Yes, then we took a break because you were working full-time and we were having more and more kids, and it was just getting hard to collaborate, so we didn't write together for a few years. Until . . .

DH: Until I quit my job.



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SH: I think you were still working while we wrote *Princess in Black*. I do think it was after *Princess in Black*.

DH: Yes, I was working when we wrote the first three *Princess in Black* books.

SH: The first four. It was really hard to collaborate with the kids and the work schedules and everything, but for *Princess in Black* we were both so excited about it. The idea was really sparked by our four-year-old who made the comment that princesses don't wear black, and as soon as Dean got home from work, I was like "A princess in black!" and he said "Yes!"

SH: With our kids at home, we knew exactly what kind of book we wanted to write. With that idea, we could have done a graphic novel, or we could have done a middle-grade novel, but there was a real lack of transitional chapter books in our household, and we were desperate for them. That's why we chose that particular format.

Eventually, I wrote the first *Ever After High* book and they wanted me to write three more on a pretty tight timeline. So, I asked, "Is it ok if my husband writes with me?" and they said "Sure!" so I called him at work and said, "Put in your two weeks, hon, and come home and write with me."

It was because of *Ever After High* that we were able to do that; before then we didn't make enough to be able to support a family through writing, so that was a real blessing. Then once he was home, our schedules were more aligned, and we got to write more together.

Q: How did you two meet?

DH: We have known each other longer than we haven't.

SH: We were friends for eleven years and were friends or dating for eleven years, we were friends from high school, and were part of the same group of friends.

DH: Yeah, you were sixteen? I can't remember.

SH: I was fifteen. You were sixteen, so I mean gosh it's a long time, that's thirty years if I am doing addition right. I had a crush on him for a long time. We didn't want to get too serious too fast, I remember being younger and thinking I'm going to marry him but I don't want to get married right away, so I remember pushing him away thinking, it's too soon. We didn't really start dating until our twenties.

DH: Then after high school we were never in the same state.

Q: You probably never expected to be writing books together someday!

SH: I never expected to be a writer; it was just a side dream; we never talked about collaborating, and that was never something that crossed our minds.

Q: Dean, you have some experience reading comics, but did you ever think you would be a writer?

DH: I always felt like I wanted to, but I didn't really think it was possible, it was like wanting to be an astronaut you know, or a wizard, like this is something that would be super awesome but not really in the cards realistically, and I thought that even after Shannon had many books published.

I have never been particularly good at long-term follow through, which means I have dozens of books half-finished, but everything I've collaborated on with Shannon I've finished.

SH: What's the common denominator in all that?

Q: One always needs an accountability partner in any relationship.

SH: I am the finisher.

Q: As a couple, how does the editing process back and forth go?

DH: I like to say, and this is a quote from Shannon, that she has to remind herself that we are writing a first draft.

SH: I have to remind myself that I am shoveling the sand into the box so that later I can build the castle. It's a meme now.

DH: Right, and I mostly shovel sand, just the contractor.

SH: It is good honest work.

DH: I provide the granite and she shaves it off.

SH: I really am the reviser and that just comes from more years of experience. Revising is tough, and it really takes a certain eye and a certain amount of experience to be able to see what should and shouldn't be there, but we work together really closely. It starts off with, and he hates this, but, we do have to be in the same room when we are outlining and breaking the story.

DH: I prefer when we do the long walks and we are holding hands.

SH: Like a retirement commercial! I don't like going out in the winter, I don't like being cold. If the season is right, we will do a lot of our outlining taking walks. When you collaborate, its more work up front than normal. You really have to have the whole thing outlined chapter by chapter—exactly what's happening in each one. So, we do a tremendous amount of work and labor before we ever start writing, much more than when I am writing alone. Once we've got an outline, we split it up and each of us takes the chapter that we are most excited about. We write different chapters, and then we "Frankenstein" it all together and see what we've got, and that's when I do most of the revisions. Then, we pick up the kids from school.

SH: I would not do it with someone else in this manner; I can't believe we pulled it off, honestly, and it's only because we know each other so well. I mean, I couldn't just jump in like this with someone else . . . It is tricky and it takes more time to collaborate than to do it alone, but the benefit of it is that you get this energy of two people, and can come up with some really cool stuff. In *Princess in Black*, Dean came up with the line "twinkle, twinkle, little smash," which has such a focus in that one line. It's so good.

DH: I've earned my keep.

SH: He is so smart with certain things, like even if I'm the main person revising, if I get stuck somewhere, he is such an idea person from the decades of comic reading. I will just lean on him, whether I need a new plot idea, or if I need a new name of something, I will just ask him. It's always so fun.

Q: How does the collaboration process work?

SH: So, when we are outlining, we are both pitching ideas back and forth, so by the time the outline is down there is no way to tell who thought of what, and we are also building off of each other's ideas, and even in terms of exact lines, we are never really sure of that either, because there is enough revision, so it's really hard to know who wrote what pieces. We know who wrote the first draft of a particular chapter, but the other person gets all over it by the time it comes out.

Dean does revise, just not as much as I do. I prefer this process because it's really nice for it to feel like it's one whole unit and not, "this is your part, this is my part." I talked with a couple who collaborated one time, a husband and wife team who collaborated on a book, and they had a process in which they go into a document and when they think that there is a part that their partner had written that they think needs to be changed, they will write in parentheses, "you know, I think this line needs to be tweaked or something or maybe you don't need this paragraph," and I was like, are you kidding?! That would just take so much time just to read it. Just do it! I couldn't imagine if I had to tiptoe around emotions and worry about hurt feelings.

Q: So there are no hurt feelings?

DH: Sometimes I will write stuff that I know will not make it.

SH: Yeah, we both do that with little things in a draft because we know it will make the other person laugh, even though it's not going to work in the story. Which is fun, just put some little nuggets for the other person. Honestly to tell you the truth, if there have been hurt feelings in the past then I have no memory of it.

Q: Has winning the Newbery Honor influenced your working relationship together, knowing that one of you has won that honor?

DH: She says that all the time, "Well, which one of us has won the Newbery Honor?"

SH: It comes up anytime we have a disagreement, "Did you win a Newbery Honor? No?" But really, I don't think so, it's actually been so long now, that was 2006.

DH: That's just the relationship we have.

SH: I don't think it has anything to do with the award.

DH: It's just who you are.

SH: Yeah, I'm the finisher. I have the personality type. What works for me is to tie my sense of self-worth directly into finishing a book, so if I want to feel good about myself then I have to finish it. I don't think the doctors would recommend that, but it's helped me be prolific.

Q: When you share your books with your children, and other children, what are the reactions of both groups of kids?

SH: Our kids really are involved before the books come out. We use them as much as possible as an in-house editing system. Our now fifteen-year-old, since he was maybe about eleven, would read all of mine and all of our manuscripts and give notes, and he would even suggest funny lines. He has a great sense of humor. Our twelve-year-old really loves graphic novels, and she has been into memoirs, so *Real Friends*, which is pretty cool.

Q: They probably see your books everywhere!

SH: Yes, and they have friends who are fans, and I think sometimes she wants some separation, she wants us to just be mom and dad, which is fine.

DH: They did help us with some of the princess hero names, which was good.

SH: They did for the upcoming princess heroes. It has been really nice. So our last two are twins, so for the last four years we have had these two little girls who are the perfect age for it in house. That honestly has been really helpful in thinking about what the kids care about at this age. And we see them and their little friends, so we are just really immersed in kids of that age, whether we are out doing book presentations or just at home. Every once in a while, I will give myself a check when we are starting to write something that we think is funny, and I think, will they think this is funny? Sometimes, we think, "well, no they wouldn't, they wouldn't get that joke, they wouldn't care about that—let's refocus." We sometimes start getting too fussy, and then we arrange things, and realize that's unnecessary, let's bring it back to what kids would say, what kids would do. They keep us grounded.

Q: How might your books appeal to both boys and girls, even though in *Princess in Black*, a girl is the main character?

SH: I always like to point people to my *Washington Post* article.¹ When we came up with the idea for *Princess in Black*, besides wanting more transitional chapter books, another reason we wanted to do the book for that age group was because I knew from experience that boys don't care if a book is about a boy or a girl when they are younger. They have to be taught to be ashamed of that, whether from subtle hints made by adults or outright shaming from adults and peers.

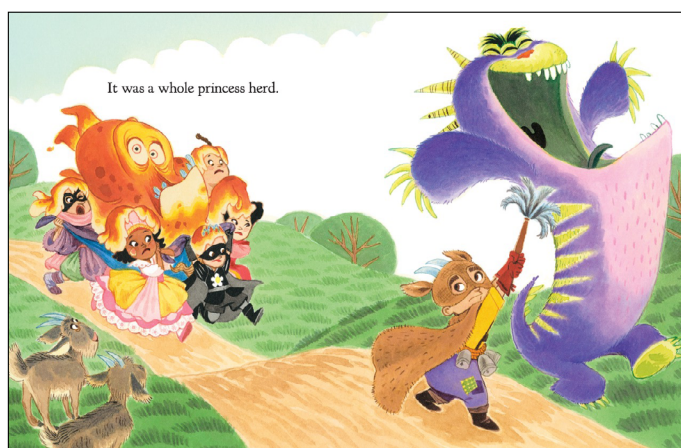
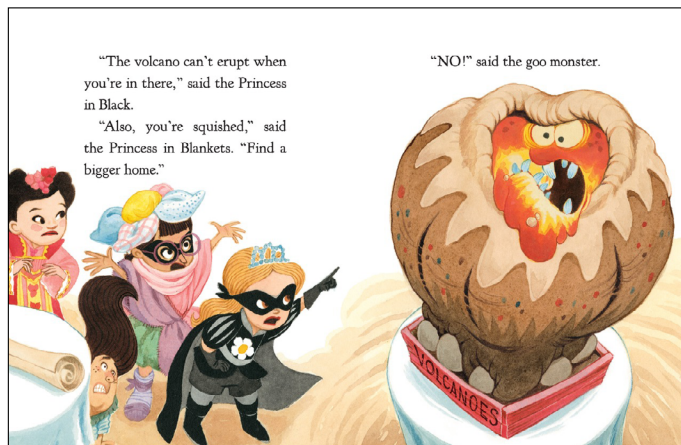
By third grade, it can be really hard to get them back because they have been spending so many years being told these things, but if you can get them at pre-school and kindergarten to fall in love with a really fun adventure story that happens to be about a girl, then it can be harder as they grow older for them to buy in to the ideology that boys can't enjoy books about girls; they have already proven that not to be true. I think it is really important that boys get to read books about girls, because reading is one of the most profound ways that we develop empathy for people different from us.

Q: Upcoming projects to talk about, besides *Princess in Black*?

DH: We just wrote the first middle-grade *Wonder Woman* graphic novel.

SH: Yes, this is exciting, and that will be out next year. The illustrator is Victoria Ying.

She is on an island of all women. Our book takes place entirely on Themyscira because its *Wonder Woman*, age eleven, and she has never left Themyscira. She is the only child, and everybody



Interior art from *The Princess in Black and the Science Fair Scare* (2019). Text copyright © 2018 by Shannon and Dean Hale. Illustrations copyright © 2018 by LeUyen Pham. Reproduced by permission of the publisher, Candlewick Press, Somerville, MA.

else is an adult, immortal woman. So, it really doesn't get into gender at all.

It's really the story of what it is like to be the only child in a community where everybody else has achieved perfection. You are this kid, still trying to learn. I love that Dean and I wrote it together!

DH: I do, too!

SH: I think it is really nice to get a male and female voice together presenting this story. I do think that, although this is a sign of inherent sexism, I do think it can be easier for some people to take a story of a girl if a man wrote it or a man is involved. That makes me sad, that is a clear sign about discounting women, just like disguising their first name as initials; we know that to be the case.

I have a lot of stories about the sexism I have experienced as an author. I have had a couple of male authors who write books about girls

call me on it and tell me that that couldn't be because they write books about girls and they haven't experienced that. And I say, that's because you are a man and it really is. There is a difference in a book about a girl written by a woman and a book about a girl written by a man.

A book about a girl written by a woman is perceived as being only for girls, and a book by a man, whether it is about a girl or a boy, is written for everybody. It is the idea that women only have specific stories for their gender, and men's stories are universal. I don't love that it's the truth, but it's the current ideology that we are trying to undo.

But I do think it helps to have Dean up there and have us sitting side by side presenting together saying this is OK, we like the same stories, I'm a woman and he is a man, and that's OK. &

Reference

1. Shannon Hale, "What Are We Teaching Boys When We Discourage Them from Reading Books about Girls?," *The Washington Post*, October 10, 2018, [www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/parents-and-teachers-please](http://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/parents-and-teachers-please-stop-discouraging-boys-from-reading-books-about-girls/2018/10/09/f3eaaca6-c820-11e8-b1ed-1d2d65b86d0c_story.html?utm_term=.ea540660cdcd)

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