

Couples Who Collaborate

Jonathon Stutzman and Heather Fox

MARY-KATE SABLESKI

The up-and-coming husband and wife duo of Jonathon Stutzman and Heather Fox are already making a splash in the literary world with their funny, unique picture-books.

Heather is a graphic designer, illustrator, and “doodler.” Her first picturebook was *The Elephant’s Nose* (2015), a collaboration with Jonathon. The couple has worked on several other picturebooks together, including *Llama Destroys the World* (2019) and *Don’t Feed the Coos and Butts are Everywhere*, both scheduled for release in early 2020. Jonathon began his career as an award-winning filmmaker, receiving multiple accolades for his short films. He recently wrote *Tiny T. Rex and the Impossible Hug* (2019), the first book in a series with illustrator Jay Fleck.

Heather and Jonathon live and create in Pennsylvania. The couple met while in college and began working on books together right away. They shared their thoughts on working together as a couple, and their upcoming projects, including their upcoming wedding.

Q: How did you two decide to start making books together?

JS: We talked a lot about creativity when we were first introducing ourselves to each other. I think that’s one of the things that originally drew me to Heather, her creativity and her love of art, because that is something that is very important to me, too. We hadn’t really discussed making books at that time, but a little later on in our conversations, one of our things we wanted to do together, just as a dream, we made this list, which included for example, “Let’s go travel to this place” or “Let’s do this thing.” One of the things on that list was “Let’s make a book together.”

HF: Around the time that we met and started hanging out, I was a sophomore in college, and I had just started taking



Heather Fox and Jonathon Stutzman

a children’s book illustration course. The whole premise of one of the projects for the course was to take an existing folk tale and illustrate it. I picked an older, outdated folk tale, and I said, “Hey Jonathon, would you want to rewrite this and make it more fun?” I wanted to put some more whimsy in the book. So, that’s how that whole process started. He wrote something, and then I created illustrations and it turned out to be really fun! We ended up self-publishing that project, and we did a few local school and library visits (*The Elephant’s Nose*, 2015). Being self-published was so much more than we were willing to take on, with marketing and the PR stuff. We decided at that point that we were going to try and write an original story and try and get an agent so we could try and sell a book.

Q: Tell us about your process of working together to bring a book from the idea stage to completion.

JS: I have a lot of weird ideas! I’ll just write a bunch of stuff like kind of scattershot ideas, things that pop into my head, then I’ll throw them Heather’s way before they are actually molded or formed. Heather will take the ideas, and if something clicks with her, she will create a character, or some art, and then that will inspire me to finish the story. I’m not sure if every book starts like that, but I feel like most of them have been that way.



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HF: Or, sometimes I'll just like draw something like a character, and he's like, "Oh that's great do you want to write a story around this character?" So, that's another way.

JS: In *Llama Destroys the World* (2019) I was just thinking of fun titles because titles are some of the hardest parts of writing a book. . . . Heather had already drawn this cute llama character, and I thought it would be an awesome juxtaposition, if I use some kind of character to destroy the world accidentally. Llama just fit that bill; he is so cute!

Q: As a couple, how do you work with your editor?

HF: Before we even try and send out a story, we try and edit to the best of our abilities. Right now, we've been working on a story that our editor is just sending us notes and letting us work together. So, that's been nice, too, being able to work through the problems that we're having on the book. It is no longer just me working on mine separately and him working on his manuscript pages separately. Now, I feel like it is becoming more of a collaborative process.

JS: We definitely edit as we go and try to create the best book that we can before we send it to our editor. We also get feedback from our agent. We'll send her the story first, and then some of the art, and she'll give some nice feedback. After it's ready to go, we send it to our editor. Our editors are so creative and bring so many great ideas to the table. It really is such a collaborative process, making picturebooks, not just with us, but with the team together. That's been awesome, too, because I think our editors have given us so many great ideas. So, it's really fun when we get edits back, and we think, "This is a great idea, why didn't I think of that?" I think sometimes when you are creating something, you are in this space of your mind where it's hard to look outside of it and get a different point of view. I think that is the important part about publishers and editors, because you can make a better product, a better book.

Q: Can you tell us about the space that you work in?

HF: We normally work better when we're not at our house. We like to go to Starbucks, and we just grab a table and sit down, and we usually talk for a while. I feel like when you're writing you're just writing. We'll bounce some ideas off each other, but for the most part it's just getting ourselves in a different environment so that we're able to focus better. There are tons of people around, but it seems to work for us that way.

JS: I'm always thinking about stories all the time, anything can trigger some kind of connection in my head that will inspire me for a new story or something I'm working on. So, it's really hard to make sure we find that balance. I can't go to sleep at night if I'm working in my room all day because I'll just go with my adrenaline and thinking of ideas and I won't be able to sleep. So, it's really important for us to give our home a little space from where we're working. We just

moved and we have this office space. We might try to see how it works, like having a specific designed office in our home. But I think a lot of our stories came from our late night diner sessions where we would just meet up at 3 a.m. or 5 a.m. We would just brainstorm so many ideas and draw doodles and sketches. I am a big proponent of play and creativity. That's how you create fun art! So, it felt like we were kids again, we were playing make believe and I really love that. So, hopefully we can continue to incorporate that into our lives.

Q: How do you maintain that work/life balance and work through any creative differences?

HF: I feel like are always thinking creatively, so I feel like our work is always a part of our conversations. I think when we're working through a book together, one of the difficulties that we face is trying not to offend each other when we have differences. If I draw something and he thinks that it should be a different layout or something, then we have to be sort of gentle with each other, because we both take offense to things. It's tricky to figure that out.

JS: It's hard, I think, in any creative space. I was a filmmaker before I started writing picturebooks. It's hard to know where the line is, of just trying to make the work better, but when is it time to say something, when is it time to just let it go, especially since Heather's the illustrator and I'm the writer. The illustrator illustrates, and the writer writes. When is it my place to have a suggestion on art? That's difficult for me because I storyboard when I write, and I think very visually.

I also know that she's the illustrator, so it's difficult for me sometimes if I have something in my mind. I'm sure that's the same with other writers when they send their work off to an illustrator, and they have no idea what's going to happen. It's like magic when the art comes to life and brings those words to life, but there's also the things that take a little adjusting to. I think that's one of the things that makes picturebooks awesome, is just like the collision of two different creative people.

Q: How is it different to work with Heather, as compared to an illustrator you do not know well?

JS: We came in the industry together, so I feel like we're a team. As far as working with the other illustrators, it is a completely different process because I don't know any of them. I met Jay Fleck for the very first time in Chicago for the release of *Tiny T. Rex*. It is just strange that he had done a whole book with me and I had never met him. I work with Heather, and we see each other every day. So, it's a completely different process.

HF: It's nice for me because he had his big book release, and I just stood in the shadows and watched everything unfold, and I knew that our book was coming two months after that. I could see how things might go for us when our book finally came out. I could step back and watch him go through the process first.

Q: Can you talk about your experiences sharing your books with children?

HF: One of the best things is to see kids latch on to the book and try to create their own llamas. We went to a second-grade class and the kids didn't know we were coming. That was really exciting because they were all screaming, "Oh my gosh! This is awesome!" We read our books to them, and it was really cool because they had so many ideas! They wanted to know, "Are you having a second llama book?" I told them, "You can take these characters that we created and you can go home and you can write your llama sequel," and they were just so excited. That was so encouraging, I think, for the two of us because we are doing something that is impacting these kids' lives and helping them create things and draw and write stories.

JS: The best part about what we get to do is being able to create something that kids can identify with or find joy in. I remember as a child, books were a part of my life, and they were important to my creativity, and my relationships with my parents when they would read to my brothers and me. We get to create things that impact kids in that way, which is amazing.

We enjoy talking to children, and just seeing their joy in an author and illustrator and seeing that these people are just humans who created this book. I think that actually encourages them, especially one of the big things for them is seeing that we're a couple. I think that humanizes us even more, it's not just some weird figure head out there in the world. These are just people, and they have a relationship.

One of the factors of being a creator is that you encourage kids, and a lot of kids don't feel encouraged, or don't think that they're good enough as a writer or creator, so just getting to tell our stories helps. We were their ages once, and we used to draw really silly drawings, and we got better over the years. I think that's a really amazing thing.

Q: What's next?

HF: We just released our cover for our second book that's coming out in February 2020, *Don't Feed the Coos*. That one is finished on our end, so currently we are working on the sequel to *Llama Destroys the World*.

JS: We have *Santa Baby*, which will come out the winter of 2020. This one is a really funny take on a Christmas story. Santa's feeling old; he wishes to be young again. He turns into a baby and the elves have to kind of rush to try to fix Santa so he can save Christmas.

Q: I can tell you two have a lot of fun thinking of these ideas together!

HF: We are really excited to have a Christmas book because Christmas is our favorite season.

JS: We love the magic, decorations, lights, and music, so it will be fun to have a book that's about the holiday season. But then we have a couple of other new books coming out next year and later, including *Butts are Everywhere*. We have a graphic novel series called Fitz and Cleo, about two characters who are brother and sister, who are ghosts and go on fun adventures together. That's one of the books that I'm most excited for because I was such a reader of comic books growing up, so this is kind of an ode to *Calvin and Hobbes* and *Peanuts*, comics that I loved reading as a kid. There's something about comics that is so fun, and that challenges us to do something different which I think will be fun.

HF: I think we both went through a period of our childhood that we dreamt of being a cartoonist so that's going to be fun. I haven't started working on anything yet for it, and I have not done a large format graphic novel, so it's going to be challenging, but I am excited for it.

Q: How do you see your work fitting into the We Need Diverse Books movement?

JS: We both feel humbled that we get to make picturebooks because it is so important to the education and entertainment of children. I really latched on to books as a kid, so there is a lot of power there. We really have to be cognizant about the messages that we tell in our stories. So, that's something I always try to do when I write something, even if I write a silly book. I know I'm also coming from my own perspective, and Heather is as well. I'm always telling stories that I find funny. I write what I enjoy reading, and I think that's an important part about creating too because, when creators are telling personal things, that's when you get to the best books and best works of art. It is always important to be empathetic and to be thinking about the whole world because, it's not just me as a child reading this book. There are so many different children around the world. Our book is in the UK, which is awesome, and *Tiny T-Rex* is in Korea and China. That's the great thing about cute animals or dinosaurs. They can reach such a big audience, just because all kids can relate to animals. I think our only book that has a human child is *Don't Feed the Coos*. I just love people, so whatever I am writing, I want it to reach someone in some way, and make them laugh. I think when we are creating, we try to focus on that—how will this bring joy to someone's life?

One of the biggest things with picturebooks is they are such a shared experience, more than any other media form. With books, it's normally a librarian or a teacher or a parent, or another adult, reading to the child. Or, if the child can read it themselves, they may be reading it to a friend or a sibling who cannot read it. It is such a beautiful shared experience.

I think that's why it is important to make sure books have different viewpoints, characters, and perspectives in them, because we can then empathize with each other. We are all just people, the same human race. I think that is one of the most powerful things about picturebooks; we share them with each other and that is a great way to connect with each other. &