

Couples Who Collaborate

Robbi Behr and Matthew Swanson

MARY-KATE SABLESKI



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Robbi Behr and Matthew Swanson are the captivating and hilarious married couple behind more than eighty publications, including the middle-grade mystery series *The Real McCoys* (2017), and picture books *Everywhere, Wonder* (2017), *Babies Ruin Everything* (2016), and *Sunrise Summer* (June 2020). Funny from beginning to end, this couple's humor and quick wit contribute to their delightful appeal. The team works together out of the "hayloft" of an old barn on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, where they also share plenty of laughter with their four children.

In addition to being an illustrator and print maker, Robbi runs a commercial salmon fishing operation each summer in Alaska, something she has been learning to do since she was a child.

Matthew is the writer and art director of the team. His self-described "weird little stories," using a "stream-of-consciousness" style of writing, are complemented by Robbi's detail-oriented illustrations that fuse together with the language to produce a rich storytelling experience.

This couple has been collaborating on books since 2006, when they quit their office jobs to pursue a career in creating illustrated books. They are currently working on a new book series called *Cookie Chronicles* (2021), about a boy who takes the advice he reads in fortune cookies way too seriously, as well as planning a cross-country adventure.

Q: How did you two meet?

RB: I think it was freshman year of college. Matthew was in a play, and I was like, "That guy seems so funny and cool."

MS: I wish I'd known this at the time. She didn't tell me. I found out later. *Years* later.

RB: We didn't actually know each other very well in college. It wasn't until a few years after we graduated that we got together.

MS: I was working for our college as an admission officer, and every day after work I would go for a run. I would run around the front side of this building, but on one particular day for no particular reason, I ran around the back side of the building through an unattractive parking lot, and there was Robbi. I



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said, “Hey, I recognize you!” and we did the thing that you do when you went to school with someone, and you’re excited to see each other again in a different context . . . we exchanged email addresses. We then spent a full year writing each other every single day.

RB: After about a year of this, I said, you know, this is weird. You’re now my best friend, and I’ve never actually sat in a room with you before.

MS: So Robbi brazenly invited herself to come visit me one weekend, and we decided that we rather enjoyed one another’s company. Two weeks later, I was meeting her parents, and later that year, I went to Alaska with her family. . . . It was my audition to see if I was even worthy of being a boyfriend, let alone her eventual husband. Somehow, I survived.

RB: I don’t know if you passed the audition or not, but, here you are; so far, nobody else has passed. So I’m stuck with you, I guess.

MS: And we have basically spent 99 percent of our lives together ever since.

Q: How did you decide to make books together?

RB: It was probably two years before we even put it together that Matthew liked to write and I liked to draw. I knew I wanted to go to graduate school for illustration. I was trying to put together a portfolio, and I realized that I’m not very good at coming up with things to draw on my own. Matthew had been writing these weird little stories at night and I thought they were interesting, so I decided to illustrate them.

MS: They were narrative voices that toyed around with an idea. I love voice and I love ideas.

RB: These stories had no plot, no character development, no description, which made them perfect for illustrating. There were so many holes for me to fill.

MS: Nonlinear, sequential meditations on a subject is how we like to describe them. So Robbi decided that she would take my one of my manuscripts and redeem it with her contributions.

RB: I wasn’t trying to *redeem* anything, I just needed something to illustrate. He had written this kind of long series of . . .

MS: Meditations on adolescence.

RB: I started illustrating them as a book. And it ended up being super fun.

MS: What we loved was the idea of the illustration and the language coming together to form a third narrative, so that



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if you looked at either the illustrations or the language alone, you would be utterly baffled. But if you saw them working together, this third thing would arise that represented the actual narrative of the book.

RB: There were not for children, but they functioned like picturebooks. This was kind of like a big flash moment for us, that we could create picture books for adults. We loved the idea.

MS: We thought our book was so good that it was going to be a best seller. We felt like we had hung the moon, but we didn’t know how to bind books at that point. So, we printed out a single copy and Robbi hand-trimmed all four sides, but we didn’t even know how to put a cover on it. So, we used big binder clips to hold it together.

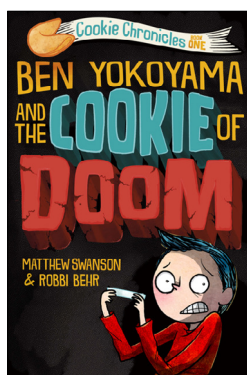
RB: Making the book was so arduous that we only ever made four copies. It is very hard to have a best seller when you only have four copies.

MS: So, flash forward, Robbi goes to graduate school and takes a children’s book illustration class. She asked me to write her a manuscript to illustrate, and that became our book *My Henderson*

Robot (2006), which I still love. Again, no story, no plot.

RB: Making our first children’s book did nothing but further our love of putting our words and pictures together, and our desire to make books together someday.

MS: After graduate school, we got jobs at a design firm. We were making actual money. We bought a house and a dog.



We got a car with windows that went up and down when you pushed a button, and we even bought a couch. We thought we had successfully made it to adulthood. We had all the things we thought we were supposed to want.

RB: But honestly, we weren't happy. Because we knew that what we really wanted was to be making books together.

MS: So we sold our house and quit our jobs and moved to Chestertown, Maryland, where Robbi had grown up. Her parents owned an old barn that her mom used as a pottery studio. We carved out part of the hayloft to make a home where we planned to live for a year.

RB: But that first year turned into two and then five and then eight. During that time, we started two subscription services and were creating about ten books a year.

MS: Our lives were a whirlwind of writing, illustrating, fulfilling orders, going to the post office. We were making stuff constantly.

RB: We were doing all of these small press shows. At one of them, this guy who worked at Disney picked up one of our books and took it to a production meeting.

MS: This gave us the opportunity to connect with a New York editor named Erin Stein, who hired us to make a book in the Super Hero Squad series. We shared our self-published books with her, and she got excited about the prospect of working with us to make a book with our own characters and content. That led to working with her on *Babies Ruin Everything* (2016). And then to *The Real McCoys* (2017) and *Everywhere, Wonder* (2017).

Q: How did self-publishing inform the work you do today?

MS: By doing things on our own terms, making our self-published books and seeing where they led us, we have been able to arrive at this place where we're making middle grade novels with Macmillan and Random House. Which is a place we might never have arrived if we had taken the more the direct route.

RB: And frankly, I don't think we even knew that this where we wanted to be. I mean, at the beginning, we thought we were going to revolutionize the way that adults read books. And we still might. We're not done.

MS: If you had asked me growing up, I didn't even know what a middle grade book was—even as I was reading them.

RB: And you always said that you'd never write a novel. That you couldn't write something that long. Or with such a complicated plot. In our experience, if you follow the scent of creativity, good things happen.

Q: What is the process of creating together?

RB: Well, when we were self-publishing, Matthew would give me a stack of the ten or so manuscripts that he was feeling most excited about. Then I would go through and pick the ones that I liked best. And a lot of times these were written very quickly in a stream of consciousness. So, there's a step where we had to go through and figure out what the book was actually about. Because Matthew often had no idea.

MS: Robbi is always, to this day, my first reader. It is exciting now to have professional editors to work with, and I get to work with some brilliant people. But Robbi is the one who reads my writing first, gives me a gut check, and helps me fix some fundamental problems before I even hand it off to our agent or editor.



It's the greatest gift to have such a smart reader right here in my house. I don't know if all illustrators are as gifted readers as Robbi is, but I suspect I'm pretty lucky to have someone who understands both worlds so well.

RB: Back in the good old days when we were self-publishing, we would literally sit down with the manuscript and read through it together.

MS: We'd break it into spreads, and then we'd talk about each spread and say, what is the text trying to do here? What holes is the text leaving? How can Robbi fill those holes, add something to the narrative? And that was always my favorite part of the process, just talking through ideas.

Q: How do you decide on the illustration style for each book?

MS: Robbi reinvents herself with every single book as she tries to find an illustration style that will best complement each manuscript. It feels like I am collaborating with a different illustrator every time. This constant shifting of gears drives Robbi crazy, and yet she does it of her own choosing.

RB: I start working with the manuscript and I think, you know what? That's not what this book is trying to tell us. It's trying to

be something different. And so I have to come up with something entirely new for the illustrations.

MS: There is a lot of gnashing of teeth.

RB: I think the another thing we do is we keep each other honest. There are places where every writer, every artist, every illustrator decides that something is good *enough*, and then stops trying to make it better.

MS: But because this is our joint creative product and we are both incredibly perfectionistic about it, sometimes I will be perfectionistic on Robbi's behalf in moments when she is feeling lazy or just depleted. And she does the same for me. Sometimes you get so tired and you can't take your own work past a certain level unless you are lovingly encouraged. So, we lovingly encourage each other to be to be as good as possible, and sometimes that means raising our standards for each other in a way that helps the work.

Q: How does your work fit in with the #WeNeedDiverseBooks movement?

RB: When we were self-publishing, I started to realize that all of my characters looked the same. Just drawing them with different hair styles wasn't serving our readership. But the interesting thing is that Matthew, the way that he writes, he doesn't ever describe specifics about the people that he's talking about, so I have a lot of freedom to interpret.

MS: For example, our picture book *Everywhere, Wonder* is about a child's exploration of his world. I never describe the character, or even mention a character in the writing.

RB: So I decided to make the character African American, in part because we hadn't, to that point, made books with characters who didn't look exactly like me. In our new series, *Cookie Chronicles*, the main character is half Japanese. I feel like I can speak to that experience, but ultimately I am American. I think there's an interesting branch of diverse books that is talking about mixed racial experience or mixed heritage experience. I grew up considering myself 100 percent American and often forgetting that I have any attachment or claim to being Japanese. I was the only person in my community who was half white and half Asian. My mom was the only Japanese person in our town. It wasn't until I got to college that people started asking me, "What's your heritage?" I didn't even know what that meant.

MS: We think it's absolutely important and transformative for readers to be able to see themselves in the books they're reading.

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

RB: It wasn't until we started doing children's books that we started presenting to kids, which is a totally different

Books by Matthew Swanson and Robbi Behr

- *The Real McCoys*. Imprint, 2017. 336p.
- *The Real McCoys: Two's a Crowd*. Imprint, 2018. 336p.
- *The Real McCoys: Wonder Undercover*. Imprint, 2019. 352p.
- *Everywhere, Wonder*. Imprint, 2017. 48p.
- *Babies Ruin Everything*. Imprint, 2016. 40p.
- *Ten Thousand Stories: An Ever-Changing Tale of Tragic Happenings*. Chronicle, 2013. 32p.
- *Super Hero Squad Flips Out! A Mix and Match Book*. LB Kids, 2011. 12p.
- *Sunrise Summer*. Imprint, June 2020. 48p.
- *Cookie Chronicles Book 1: Ben Yokoyama and the Cookie of Doom*. Knopf Books for Young Readers, March 2021. 282p.
- *Cookie Chronicles Book 2: Ben Yokoyama and the Cookie of Endless Waiting*. Knopf Books for Young Readers, March 2021. 282p.

experience than presenting to adults, because kids are honest. Their enthusiasm is full to the top. Kids are always running up to you and hugging you and giving you high fives and telling you how they want to read all of your books. There's nothing better for the soul than visiting an elementary school.

MS: We try to tell them our story, make them familiar and comfortable with us as creators, but then also let them know there are lessons and opportunities in our books to apply to their own creativity, to do their own storytelling.

RB: We are excited about our next project! Our kids go to a Title One school (serving a high-poverty community), and we did a schoolwide book giveaway, where we raised money and we gave each kid one of our books. Then, we did a day long school visit. We went into every classroom, we signed books for the kids, we talked to the kids, we did two presentations.

MS: For a long time, we were just being asked to come present at these very affluent public and private schools. When we went into our local school and we saw the excitement of those kids who wouldn't necessarily . . .

RB: Who have never owed a hardcover book . . .

MS: They said, "Oh my gosh, you gave us a *real* book!" I got shivers because these kids were so excited about this seemingly simple thing that I take for granted, and that my own kids take for granted. So, we've been doing this repeatedly over the last couple of years. We've been raising money to do these giveaways and presentations at various schools throughout our community. But Robbi and I have always had this dream to spend a year out touring the country talking about collaboration and creativity and giving away books.

RB: So we are partnering with the First Book Foundation to spend a year on the road. We purchased a school bus, which we are converting into a tiny home, and we're going to take

our children and do a nationwide tour. We will visit Title One schools in all fifty states and give away, we hope, at least fifty thousand books. We want to bring attention to the incredible disparity in funding for our nation's public schools.

MS: We see our trip as an opportunity to increase awareness of this problem while giving our kids and our followers the ultimate American field trip.

RB: We plan to head out in the fall of 2021. We are starting private fundraising right now, and we are going to do some grassroots fundraising later this spring. &