

Couples Who Collaborate

Chris and J.J. Grabenstein

MARY-KATE SABLESKI



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How will you *Shine!*? This question is at the heart of the new middle grade book by married couple J.J. and Chris Grabenstein. Inspired by the story J.J. always wanted to read, but no one had yet written, this book is the first collaboration by the duo. Funny, sensitive, and relatable, *Shine!* is a delight, just like the couple who created it.

Shine! is J.J.'s first book. An actress, singer, and voiceover performer, she's no stranger to the children's book world, however, having narrated several of Chris' books in audio format. J.J. grew up in Michigan, moving to New York after graduating from Northwestern University.

Chris is well known for his chapter books, including the *New York Times* bestselling Lemoncello series, Wonderland series, the Haunted Mystery series, and *The Island of Dr. Libris*. Chris has partnered on the award-winning *I, Funny* books with James Patterson, as well. Chris has worked as an improvisational comedian, an advertising executive, and is also a playwright and screenwriter.

J.J. and Chris are a couple who truly *Shine!* with their enthusiasm, creativity, and generosity of spirit. Though this is their first official collaboration, their past work together built the foundation for this debut coauthored novel.

Q: How did the two of you meet?

J.J.: We were fixed up on a blind date.

Chris: It was kind of fun because I knew the friend [who set us up] from church so I always say we were fixed up at a church social, like something from *Little House on the Prairie*.

Q: J.J., how did your theater career influence the book?

J.J.: When we started writing *Shine!*, I really wanted to approach things from an acting standpoint because that's what I'm used to. I really wanted to act out the scenes. I would say to Chris, "Oh, and then Ainsley says . . ." And Chris . . . has a background in typing and journalism. He thinks through his fingers while he's typing. But I didn't know this because we'd never worked together, of course. So, I'd come in the room and I'd say, "Wait, Ainsley has to say this." He'd signal for me to stop because he had a whole scene going on in his head that I couldn't hear. And I was interrupting him, and I didn't even know it.

Chris: My [college major] was communications, broadcasting, journalism, advertising, and we had to pass a typing test in



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freshman year before we could take any next level courses. I can do like a hundred words a minute. So now I can't write by hand. It's too slow.

I've also done some acting. I wasn't as good as J.J., but I always tell kids if they want to be a writer, one of the best things they can do is get involved in their drama club. Be either backstage or onstage because a play is nothing but character and dialogue. And those are two tools that you're going to need when you try to write a story. You can shape a character, just slightly, so people can tell who's talking without you having to even tag the dialogue. J.J. was great at helping create characters like that.

Q: How did your collaborative process work writing *Shine!*?

J.J.: We started with a really, really, really detailed outline. For, I want to say months, we worked on that outline. It had specific lines of dialogue in the outline for different characters. We really talked through it for quite a long time before we ever actually got to writing the book.

Chris: The technique we used is very similar to what I used to work in advertising, in which they put you in teams of writers and art directors. My partner and I in advertising, we had to toss good and bad ideas back and forth, and try to flesh them out and block them out. So, J.J. and I did all that blocking out together, then I'd go to my room and write what we talked about into its first form because you always need something on paper to react to. Then, J.J. would look at it and tell me, let's do this. It's like clay, someone's got to mold the clay first, and then you sculpt all the details.

J.J.: When Chris writes a book, I am his first editor. We sit down and discuss each and every reaction that I had. And, of course, it's always up to him. Sometimes he agrees with me; sometimes he doesn't. But he always has the last word. Well, this time was a little different. My name's going on this book, too. This was my idea. So, it was very interesting the first couple of times we sat down to talk through the notes we had for each other and for the book.

Chris: When we talk to kids about collaboration, we say the enemy in collaboration is the word "no." The most powerful tool is to say "yes." We've both done some improvisational work in our theater days and the whole rule of improv is, say "yes." You take what your partner gives you and then you move it forward. You can never say "no" when you're doing improv or else you're just kind of wasting time. You have to say "yes" and move the story forward. So, at least in your first draft, there are no bad ideas.

Q: Chris, how is collaborating with J.J. different than collaborating with other authors, like James Patterson?

Chris: It's much more fun; she's better looking than James! He was my boss back in the day and taught me a lot about writing,

about grabbing people's attention and stuff. I guess it's exactly the same thing that J.J. was saying about how she gives me notes; he's always the boss on the things that we write together, so he'll give me an outline and then I execute it. The guy reads and works harder than anyone I've ever met. With J.J., it was more daily back and forth. With J.J. and I, it's like, we're living this and here's these three pages, what do you think? You know, as opposed to it being once a month like it is when I work with Jim.

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

J.J.: Part of the time when we were working on it, Chris was on the road visiting schools and I was here. So sometimes when we were in the same place, we would work in Chris's office and that's when I'd be interrupting him with my dramatic renditions for what I think it should say.

When we were actually in different places, we could send the pages back and forth with notes in the margin and sometimes that was almost easier. We weren't clashing with each other in terms of how we wanted to work. We could just write notes and send them back and forth, and work in our own time, and then address it and write back to the other person. So sometimes we'd send the same page back and forth like seven times. The whole book actually took two and a half years. We went back and forth seven different times with our editor as well and did seven different versions of it.

Chris: Part of that was because we both almost had two ideas when it started and my idea wasn't as good as J.J.'s. Finally, after about the third draft, we just got rid of the idea I had and focused on this other one.

Q: What role does your work play in the call for more diverse books in children's publishing?

Chris: Well, we obviously can't do our own voices for any ethnic group, but we always try to have a colorblind cast and make attempts to make it inclusive and broad. We've been able to get authenticity readers for books when I include characters who are diverse. We try our best to show the rainbow that is America, without pretending that we could have anything close to an "own voice." In all of my books, I try to write them in a way where I'm not too specific about what the characters look like, so kids have an easier chance of seeing themselves in that role.

Q: Any final thoughts?

Chris: Somebody wrote a review of *Shine!* and it said, that by working with J.J., it has opened up like a whole new aspect of my work. I think all my books always have humor and heart, but probably heavier on the humor. And writing with J.J. created a book with even more heart than usual. J.J. is Piper—she has a huge heart. &

