

Couples Who Collaborate

Sarah and Ian Hoffman

MARY-KATE SABLESKI



Ian and Sarah Hoffman

California couple Sarah and Ian Hoffman are the authors of *Jacob's New Dress* (2014), *Jacob's Room to Choose* (2019), and *Jacob's School Play* (2021). The duo, who live in San Francisco with their two children, were inspired to write these books based on their experience raising their gender nonconforming son. They are passionate about making sure children see themselves in literature and represent their experiences in sensitive, informative ways.

Sarah is a developer and Ian, an architect. By day, they renovate old homes together. Both have written and illustrated an array of articles and books in their other careers. The “Jacob” books, however, are their labor of love as a couple. Passionate about the issues they write about in their books, Sarah and Ian are a delight to talk with, and an inspirational couple.

Q: How you did decide to work on picture books together?

Sarah: Well, we were working in architecture and real estate together. So, we already had a business together.

Ian: We work together to buy old, unloved buildings—like *really* unloved. The more it is leaning, the more we love them. We fix them up and then we rent them out, and then we manage them.

Sarah: So, when I wanted to get into writing, I started writing about what I knew, which was real estate. I started selling articles to a trade magazine. The other thing I knew about was parenting our child, who was a little boy who wanted to wear a dress. So, I wrote an article about him. I knew that it was a sensitive topic. I knew enough to change his name in the article, but the backlash was so swift and extreme and bizarre

that I realized it was not enough to just change his name because people knew who I was from my work or my other writing. That's when I decided to take on a pen name. I started writing for magazines and ended up getting an architecture column in a local newspaper. I brought Ian into it, so it was our first experience writing together and it paved the way for our work together on picture books.

Ian: We're really different workers. Sarah thinks very fast and big picture. I think slow and am very detail oriented, which is a great complementary skill set. But as you can imagine, if we're sitting side by side, Sarah throws out an idea, and I am thinking through the consequences. Meanwhile, she is wondering if I am awake. We pass things back and forth to each other.

Sarah: Ian was interested in picture books from the time he was a kid and had written one for his niece. So, there were there were roots in our lives going back a long time before we finally came together to produce a book.

Ian: When we finally realized what was needed in the world was a picture book about a boy wants to wear a dress to



Mary-Kate Sableski is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Teacher Education at the University of Dayton, where she teaches courses in children's literature and literacy methods. Her main areas of research interest include diversity in children's literature and struggling readers.



Interior art sketches from the Hoffmans' new book. (Used with permission of Magination Press.)

school, we were positioned in a place where we could actually pull that off.

Q: Why use a pen name?

Sarah: I think it's the right thing to do in part because we realized it wasn't safe for us to talk about our family in this way when so many people had such strong, and sometimes violent, feelings. This is really our son's story to tell, and he was little and we didn't know how he would want to tell that story or where his story was going. It can also be frustrating to us because we can't share our books through our personal networks. So, the books have to stand for themselves in many ways.

Ian: The books are not necessarily our son's story, but they were inspired by our experience raising him. He has always appreciated the opportunity to not be defined by what he did when he was three or four years old.

Q: How do you see your book fitting into #WeNeedDiverse Books and the #OwnVoices movements?

Ian: We think it's so important that every kid see themselves in a book. That is such a powerful and affirming thing for them. And it's so important for kids to see that there's this whole range of humanity, this variety, that are kids who have experiences. The more you see, the more accepting of what is going on in the world.

Sarah: When a child who's gender typical is seeing a child who's gender creative in the pages of a book, this doesn't just teach them about gender diversity; it teaches them about acceptance of all ways of being different.

Q: In your books, you represent various perspectives through your characters. The character Christopher represents the stereotypical bully. Can you tell us more about the role he plays in the story?

Sarah: It's a really natural response for a kid to think, well, my Dad taught me that wearing a boy wearing a dress is wrong, so it must be wrong.

Ian: And in the book, we don't necessarily suggest that Christopher is going to change. It's up to Jacob to find his own feet in the world, and to know that there will be Christophers.

Sarah: That was an intense thing for us to realize as the parents of a bullied kid. Sometimes, it's about education and changing the bully's behavior, and sometimes it's about changing the victim's response to the bully. That was a tough

one, but it is very real.

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

Sarah: It is so gratifying!

Ian: Doing elementary school presentations is kind of exhausting—you have to be "on." I have no idea how teachers do this every day. I have nothing but respect for them. But it's so exhilarating, and kids say things back to us that we never thought of ourselves. That's always a surprise and delight. We've also been able to present for the older kids in middle school; we always ask them what they think, and they tell us stuff about their world that we wouldn't know otherwise. They have a lot of insight into what's going on.

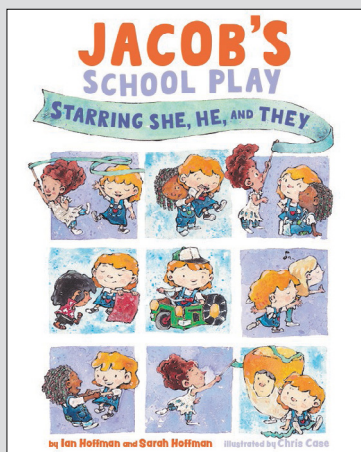
We've also noticed the sort of cultural shift as we've been doing this, we have this little routine that we were doing. We ask the question, "What's a girl who likes to play sports and wear typically boy clothes?" And when we started doing this, people would say, "It's a tomboy." Now, they just look at us, puzzled.

Sarah: They don't know what that's called. They say, "That's just a girl."

Ian: It was last year that we noticed this, and their teachers said that it was something they just noticed last year. There was a sudden shift in thinking.

Sarah: What we noticed was that the older kids noticed the tomboy, and the younger kids did not. So, it was like passing out of their vocabulary.

Ian: It was amazing.



Books by Ian and Sarah Hoffman

All are illustrated by Chris Case.

Jacob's New Dress. Whitman, 2014. 32 pp.

Jacob's Room to Choose. Magination, 2019. 32 pp.

Jacob's School Play. Magination, 2021. 32 pp.

Sarah: Sometimes, we'll get called into a school just because they want to do education around this, but sometimes they have a particular student who's maybe been having some issues with the other students. And we can't always tell who this kid is, but often, especially with little kids, there'll be someone in the back of the room and throughout the presentation, they just do a slow creep closer and closer, and by the end, somebody is sitting right under us and sometimes wants to touch our shoe or our sleeves.

And then we know, that's where we're making an impact.

Often, big schools might have us do an assembly for three hundred kids and they'll invite parents. Especially in the beginning, parents were seeing this for the first time, and they had never seen a book with their kid's issue reflected. They would just come up to us crying, telling us what a difference the book had made in their kid's life. That was always pretty incredible.

Ian: A parent will come up and talk to us, and like, show us the picture of their kid holding the book and stuff. And I have to say like it's humbling. As writers, we're proud of what we do,

we pay a lot of attention to it and we want to put our best book out there in the world and help people. But, to actually see the face of the kid that you're helping—we feel like we created something bigger than ourselves.

Sarah: A lot of what goes on is invisible to us, as far as people reading the book. People write to us a lot, and that is fantastic, but somehow being face-to-face with the human being whose life you've affected is pretty awesome.

Q: So, what's next?

Ian: Our next book is *Jacob's School Play, Starring He, She, and They*. It should be out this summer.

Sarah: We wanted to write about how children present, because for our son being a person who identified as a boy, but liked to wear a dress, it was very jarring for people. So, the first issue for us to talk about was just what it's like to be a person in the world who looks a different way than people expect.

The biggest issue our son faced as he got older, and the biggest concern that parents write to us about, was bathrooms. It was important to us to go in the direction of talking about pronouns because that is just such a huge issue for kids right now.

It was different for our kid who was always super clear—I'm a boy, I just want to wear this pink dress and have long hair and wear pink shoes and go to the opera. But for a lot of other kids, their changing pronouns, is really big and important and very confusing for people. We wanted a simple way to explain it to kids because we find that when you just explain it to kids, they're like, oh, okay, no problem. That person is a they? Okay, got it. As adults, we chronically stumble over this, and so we realized that the way to make social change is to introduce these ideas to kids.

Ian: That's what they do all day. They're like, okay, this is red; this is black. Even when they are little. They learn that bananas go in their mouths, but sand from the sandbox should not.

Sarah: I feel like this behavior is very normal in the sense that, as human beings, we want to put things in boxes. That's not just what we're taught to do but it's naturally how our brains function. So, you can also easily teach that out of people. But you can give them more boxes and make the boxes feel more expansive; so that's what we're trying to do with this third book. &