

Couples Who Collaborate

Jarrett and Jerome Pumphrey

MARY-KATE SABLESKI

Jarrett Pumphrey and his younger brother Jerome may not be a couple in the traditional sense of the word, but these brothers certainly form a dynamic partnership to create memorable picture books.

Since a young age, the two have been working together to craft stories to engage and entertain readers of all ages. They wrote their first book together as teenagers (*Creepy Things Are Scaring Me*, 2003). With two more picture books to their collaborative credit, including *The Old Truck* (2020) and *The Old Boat* (2021), watch for much more to come from this wonderfully creative duo.

Jarrett, who lives with his wife and two sons, had a successful career as an entrepreneur, where he used his storytelling skills as a creative director at various tech companies. He was the founder and CEO of a company focused on clear, removable orthodontics, where he used his skills to market the product and create a brand for it. He now writes and draws full time from his home.

Jerome's family includes his wife, son, and daughter. He previously worked for The Walt Disney Company as a graphic designer. He studied graphic design at the Art Institute of Austin, and now works from his home.

Q: How did you decide to create books together?

Jarrett: We've actually been writing stories and drawing pictures since we were kids. We went to a school that really encouraged us to work together, even though we were not in the same grade. We got to work on a lot of projects together and then, when we got home, we just kept that going. We



Jarrett and Jerome Pumphrey.
Photos courtesy of Jarrett and Jerome Pumphrey.

worked on our own stories together. Then, one day, when we were in our teens, Jerome came home with a big stack of books on how to get a children's book published.

Jerome: We were already making full stories and drawing our own pictures, so I thought that was the next fun logical thing to do was to make a real book. My mom actually took me to the bookstore, and we bought these books, and I thought, "This looks super easy! You just make this a certain way, and then you send it to publishers." It felt like the doors were wide open.

Jarrett: Our first book did get published back then, by HarperCollins, and they published the text with another illustrator. We had set out to do both jobs, but they wanted a different illustrator. It was still great. We were ecstatic about it, and we had big hopes and dreams for that one particular book. But it didn't necessarily go that way for us; we didn't see the success we had dreamed of. So, we ended up getting jobs. I pursued an entrepreneurial path. Jerome ended up as a graphic designer at Disney and so, then fast forward twenty something years, we wanted to try writing children's books again. That's when we started working on *The Old Truck*. We took our time, and



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the whole landscape of publishing had changed quite a bit in that time. We decided we needed an agent this time, so we compiled a list of agents who worked with our favorite authors and found one who we hit it off with right away.

Q: Where did you get the idea for *The Old Truck*?

Jerome: I was driving to visit Jarrett, a good three-hour drive. On the drive, I passed so much of Texas, old farms with old tractors, old trucks sitting out in the field. I thought that would be a great idea for a story. I was thinking very visually at the time. I was thinking how the truck doesn't move, and that made it into the book, as the truck actually does not move throughout the whole book. I was thinking how the world has probably changed around these trucks, and that might be a good story.

Jarrett: My head went to the family that owned the truck—what's their story? We got to talking about our own family. We decided we'd make a family that represented us, particularly the women who raised us. The book is very representative of all these very strong women who raised us. They were strong, and persistent, and achieving their goals. We wanted that to be the spirit of the little girl in the book. It's kind of the spirit of that truck, too. That's the story—perseverance, hard work . . . you can make your dreams come true.

Q: Can you describe creating books together?

Jarrett: We share a space in my home studio for a lot of the work that we do. Jerome has his own space at his house as well. We do a lot of printmaking, making stamps for the illustrations in our books on a big workbench, and then we make prints with the stamps. Our process is really a mix of traditional and digital. We try to leverage digital for the efficiency it provides, but without losing the charm and the happy accidents that we might get working traditionally. So, we will scan these prints in, and we'll composite our image digitally. We set rules for ourselves, so we don't make certain

changes or manipulate the prints in any sort of way that we couldn't in the original. We want to avoid losing that charm, which is what we like about these stamps.

When we work on a book, we both do the writing, and we both do the illustrating. But we do individually have our own strengths. I would say Jerome is certainly much stronger at illustrating than I am, and I tend to be more of the editor. When we make a book, it is very much how the two work together, and so I imagine it would be much harder for us, the result would be different if I just worked on words and he just worked on the pictures.

Jerome: We concentrate on what the story is, even thinking of themes, thinking of the nuance that we want to be there, but we really work out what that story is. And, knowing that some will be told with pictures and some will be told with words, there might be a little bit of the voice coming up, like what we think some of the lines may be. But we don't get too into the weeds with that. We really concentrate on the story, and that way we're both able to contribute to that. And then we can hash out some words, and then think through these pictures. And that way, it seems to be pretty seamless.

Jarrett: We are built in sounding boards for one another.

Q: What is it like to share your work with children, especially during a time with limited in-person visits?

Jarrett: We have been very lucky that we got to share our book in two or

three events before the lockdown happened.

Jerome: We did one virtual book festival, which was to an auditorium of kids, whom we didn't really get to interact with, but we got to see their smiling faces and that was cool.

Q: How do you see your work fitting into the #weneeddiversebooks movement?



Books by Jarrett and Jerome Pumphrey

Pumphrey, Jarrett and Jerome. *Creepy Things Are Scaring Me*. Illus. by Rozanne Litzinger. Harper-Collins, 2003. 32 pp.

Pumphrey, Jarrett and Jerome. *The Old Truck*. Norton, 2020. 48pp.

Pumphrey, Jarrett and Jerome. *The Old Boat*. Norton, 2021. 56pp.

Jerome: We wanted the books to feature people that look like us. It's just natural, so that was our approach. The visual voice that we gave to the book is that the pictures include a lot of people of color, and that's important to us.

Jarrett: When we see the books that are celebrated, and even the books that are overlooked, we think about how we want to make books that represent us, not just talking about the

struggle of being black. One of our favorite books growing up was *The Snowy Day* by Ezra Jack Keats. We put a tribute to that book in *The Old Truck*. The bedroom scene in our book was a tribute to the opening spread where Peter wakes up and he sees the snow outside his window. What we love about that work, and what we hope to do in our own work, is just feature a black kid just doing everyday things, enjoying life, being a kid. It doesn't have to be about the struggle of being black. That's how we hope our work adds to that discussion. I think those books are just as important, if not, maybe more important, in my opinion, honestly.

Q: What is next for the two of you?

Jarrett: Our next picture book, *Somewhere in the Bayou*, published by Norton, comes out in spring 2022. It's about some critters that are trying to find their way across a river. They encounter a log that they want to get across, and they see a tail. They're not sure what to make of this tail. The book is about what this tail is attached to, and what ends up happening to them. It's a little different from our previous books, but I think it's a great one. &

Avocado Is More Than Just a Fruit

Debut Author Discusses Journey

Sharon Verbeten

Momoko Abe's journey began in the fruit and vegetable aisle in a supermarket, just like her debut picture book *Avocado Asks* (Orchard, 2020).

While the story follows one wondering avocado, it turns out to be about more than just a fruit. The book is a story about search for one's own identity and finding peace with it. On her blog, Abe, who grew up in Japan but now lives in London, shared these observations about creating her book.

"My guac-amazing three-year journey with my little avocado began with one simple question that popped into my head while I was doing grocery shopping—is an avocado a fruit or a vegetable? Then I wondered what if an avocado itself doesn't know the answer? That's how I found a seed of the story!"

Abe said she instantly felt a connection to the character in identity crisis. "As a Japanese who lives in UK, I don't feel quite like Japanese nor quite like British. I used to hate this feeling of not knowing where I belong.

"The more global and modern our societies have become, the more fluid and diverse our identities have become, which is, in my opinion, something to celebrate. However, it's a blessing and curse. Complexity comes with complication and confusion. Also, I believe the main issue lies in our tendency to put labels on others and ourselves."

Abe set out to "write a story for all the kids in the modern world where identities are not as simple as they used to be."

