

# A Tale of Two Katherines

## Newbery Medal Winners Who Collaborate

MARY-KATE SABLESKI

**T**wo Katherines. Three Newbery Medals. One Newbery Honor. More than sixty books for children, and more than seventy-five years of collective writing experience. Both beloved authors of books for children. And both are “couples who collaborate,” with co-authored works with their spouses to their credits.

In this centennial year of the Newbery Medal, there are numerous opportunities to search the archives to find unexpected patterns and surprising coincidences across the winners. A quick history of the Medal reveals that couples have won Honors in years past, but no couple has ever won the top prize.

Katherine Paterson and Katherine Applegate are two past winners of the Newbery Medal, winning for their incredible solo works. However, both also have histories of collaborating with their spouses, creating other memorable works for children.

Paterson is the author of more than thirty books for children across an impressive almost half-century career. She has two Newbery Medals (*Bridge to Terabithia*, 1978; *Jacob Have I Loved*, 1981), and one Newbery Honor (*The Great Gilly Hopkins*, 1979). She won the Hans Christian Andersen Award in 1998, the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award in 2006, was named the National Ambassador for Young People’s Literature in 2010-2011, and won the Laura Ingalls Wilder Award in 2013, all a testament to her lifetime achievements and contributions to children’s literature.

Applegate is also the author of thirty books for children, including *Home of the Brave*, *Wishtree*, *Crenshaw*, the Roscoe Riley series, and the Endling series, to name just a few. In 2013, her book *The One and Only Ivan* won the Newbery



Katherine Paterson  
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Katherine Applegate  
Photo courtesy of the author.

Medal. Her newest book, *Willodeen*, focuses on a fantastical world in many ways like our own, facing climate change and natural disasters, but with magic and imagination.

As writers, Paterson and Applegate follow quite a few similar patterns. Both began writing at young ages, though neither of them identified this as a career path until later in life. Both Katherines enjoy the writer’s life they feel lucky to live—working from home, sharing stories, and communicating with their readers.

As with many writers, both of these wildly successful women share stories of rejection, and the need for persistence and resilience in pursuing a path to published writing. Both have written across genre and format, creating novels, early readers, and picture books to delight their readers with each new publication. And both, when their books are read with children, elicit wonder and awe at the worlds they create.

Of course, sharing a name does not mean they are the same writer. Each Katherine approaches her craft in different ways. Paterson tends to write about real people in real situations, with books that reflect the complex challenges of childhood. Applegate is a fantasy writer, who imagines animals in human



**Mary-Kate Sableski** is an Associate Professor at the University of Dayton in Dayton, Ohio, where she teaches children’s literature and literacy methods courses. She is a current member of the Schneider Family Book Award Committee.



situations to give the reader a different lens on the world. Applegate finds value in series books, while Paterson tends to write stand-alone stories. Across the field of children's literature, their contributions are numerous and varied, and ever-present features on library shelves.

## All About Collaboration

Collaborating with one's partner can prove both challenging and rewarding. Couples featured in past Couples who Collaborate columns in CAL have discussed their separate and shared work spaces, their editing and revising processes, and the ways in which they help each other grow as writers and illustrators through their collaboration. Couples collaborate in varied ways and across varied spaces.

Kevin Henkes, a Newbery Honor winner for *Olive's Ocean* (2004) and *The Year of Billy Miller* (2014), creates books with his illustrator wife Laura Dronzek. The couple work in separate, but connected, creative spaces in their Wisconsin home.

Shannon Hale, winner of a Newbery Honor for *Princess Academy* in 2006, went on to collaborate with her husband, Dean, on several series. They work in common spaces, working around the schedules and needs of their four active children. For Paterson and Applegate, their collaborative experiences with their spouses arose from distinctly different contexts and purposes, but with common outcomes: books kids love to read.

Paterson's collaboration with her husband, John, came many years after winning her two Newbery Medals and one Newbery Honor. *The Flint Heart* (2011) was a story John Paterson heard about and wanted to read. He tracked down

a copy of the book and queried publishers to re-issue it since it was out of print. Most had concerns for the old story's reliability to modern audiences, originally published by Eden Phillipott in 1910. Still, Katherine and John felt it could be re-imagined for a modern readership. So, the Patersons set to work on revising and recasting the story. John Rocco completed the gorgeous illustrations, and the result is a book that takes an old story and gives it a decidedly new twist. The book still reflects the same whimsy and humor of the original version from 1910, but contains a distinctly Paterson feel to the language and storyline.

The Patersons also collaborated on three other books: *Consider the Lilies: Plants of the Bible* (1986), *Images of God* (1998), and *Blueberries for the Queen* (2004). The latter, illustrated by Susan Jeffers, is a story based on actual events from John's childhood, told with fantasy and imagination. *Consider the Lilies* (illustrated by Anne Ophelia Dowden) and *Images of God* (illustrated by Alexander Koshkin) are two gorgeous illuminations of biblical stories and representations, reflecting the Paterson's strong Christian faith.

Prior to their collaboration on *The Flint Heart*, Katherine credits John with incredible influence on her writing career. He was the person who knew how to get Katherine past those writer's block moments every writer faces, by reminding her to keep on writing.

Paterson states, "He believed that I could write during all those years that no one wanted to publish anything I had written. He was the one that made me put 'writer' on the IRS form instead of 'housewife.' He is my first editor and my best booster. And no matter what I say, he always thinks I can write another book."<sup>1</sup> Sadly, John passed away in 2013, leaving





behind a legacy of collaboration and inspiration, and the incredible work and life he and Katherine shared.

For Applegate, the collaboration with her husband, author Michael Grant, occurred years prior to her Newbery Medal winning book, *The One and Only Ivan*. In 1996, the first Animorphs book was published by K.A. Applegate (the pen name for Michael and Katherine), and changed the reading lives of numerous children of an entire generation. Published between 1996 and 2011, Animorphs was a widely popular series that appealed to teens' and tweens' sense of fun and adventure. The duo wrote the first twenty-five books in the series before moving on to other projects. In 2020, the first Animorphs graphic novel brought the series to a new generation of readers.

Like other couples who collaborate, Applegate and Grant work together as sounding boards for one another. Having an in-house writer to go to for help with plot—an aspect of creating a story Katherine credits Michael with being skilled at—helps Katherine push through writer's block.

Applegate's recent novels present a distinctly different premise than the couple's collaborative work. After Animorphs, the two wrote their own separate ways for a while, with Michael sticking to science fiction, and Applegate focusing on the

fantastical animal voice. Interestingly, both have remained committed in their own ways to the fantasy, animal focused stories that made them a household name.

In 2012, they published *Eve and Adam*, a young adult science fiction novel, together. Applegate says, "We told the publisher, Jean Feiwel, that she would have to have a clause included that covered any marital counseling that we required as a result because we hadn't collaborated in a long time. And, in fact, because we both developed our own styles, and we were writing for different age groups, it was really smooth sailing I think."<sup>2</sup>

Winning the Newbery Medal is a pivotal moment in any writer's career. For Paterson, the Medal launched her into an illustrious and distinguished career as one of the most beloved authors for children, leading to an eventual collaboration with her husband. For Applegate, the Medal demonstrated the power of her unique voice as a writer for children, crafted and honed in collaboration during the early years of her career with her spouse.

No matter the path taken, children, librarians, and teachers everywhere will always find something worth sharing in a book written, whether solo or collaborative, by one of these much-adored Katherines. &

## References

1. Katherine Paterson, "Interview with Katherine," <http://katherinapaterson.com/interview>.
2. Reading Rockets, "A video interview with Katherine

Applegate," <https://www.readingrockets.org/books/interviews/applegate>.