

# Couples Who Collaborate

## John and Hayley Rocco

MARY-KATE SABLESKI

In their solo careers, John and Hayley Rocco are no strangers to the children's book world. Their latest adventure found this couple putting their heads together to create *How to Send a Hug* (Little, Brown, 2022). The Roccas, who live in Rhode Island with a plethora of pets, are enthusiastic about this first collaborative work, which shares the joys of sending a letter through the mail.

As evidenced by her numerous pets, Hayley is an animal enthusiast. She has a passion for animal photography. In elementary school, she wrote a book called, *My Pets Dead and Alive*, reflecting her love for animals, and a hint at her future career, from a very young age. Her work as a children's book publicist gave her the opportunity to work with many well-known children's author and illustrators, and also led her to meeting John at a publicity event.

John is an accomplished children's book author and illustrator. *Blackout* (2011) won a Caldecott Honor, *How We Got to the Moon* (2020) won a Sibert Honor, as just a few examples of the numerous accolades and awards his collective work has earned. He collaborated with several other authors to illustrate books over the years, including Katherine and John Paterson (*The Flint Heart*, 2011), Rick Riordan (*Percy Jackson* series), and Susan Choi (*Camp Tiger*, 2019).

**Q: How did you meet . . . and then decide to work on a book together?**

**John:** Well, Hayley spent fifteen years working as a publicist in the children's publishing arena. We met at a children's book function, and long story short, we fell in love.

**Hayley:** During the pandemic, I was working at the Girl Scouts doing marketing and communication. I was working from



John and Hayley Rocco

home, so that cut out a lot of the traveling time. I didn't really have excuses anymore as to why I couldn't sit down and focus on writing. So, John really nudged me, because I was spending time writing a lot of letters, which is something I love to do. So, he said, you need to get that book done about writing a letter.

**John:** We had maybe four or five projects that we were working on over the years, and one of them was this book called *To Write a Letter*. Hayley was sitting down at least once a week just writing letters, writing letters to people all the time. Sometimes she'd get some back, but she would just keep writing letters to people. And I said, that's the book we need to be working on right now.

**Hayley:** We hope to inspire kids to see the magic in what it is to write and receive letters. I was looking at a text from my uncle, who had been going through my grandmother's stuff, and he found this letter from my great grandfather to my grandma at two years old, which said, "This is your first letter from your grandfather." It was very sweet and sentimental. It's a letter that stayed with her, her whole life. There's something to having those memories and carrying them with you.

**John:** No one prints out emails and texts and puts them in a shoebox. For me, this book really got solidified when Hayley



**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.

wrote the letter to the reader, which is in the very back of the book, explaining how the letters and cards she received and wrote become these connections to her family and to her friends. She cherishes them, and she can pull them out and look at them, and have these memories. It's not the same when you get a Facebook notification from three years ago, reminding you that [you] were at that café, and you had that croissant, and you wanted to show everybody how delicious it looked. It's beautiful when I see Hayley pull out these boxes of letters, which she does quite often, and revisits these memories.

*Hayley:* The cool thing about writing letters during the pandemic was [that] a lot more people started writing in return. I was getting letters, because people knew I liked receiving letters. They described how nice it was to just sit, and be able to read or work on that little side project. Having that little bit of history of this time from different people's lives that I get to treasure is kind of cool.

*John:* I think letter writing is becoming a lost art, really. Children today sometimes don't even learn how to write in cursive anymore. They move on to the computer or the tablet so quickly.

*Hayley:* But how excited are they when they receive a letter?

*John:* Right, because the mailbox has become this place where you get bills and ads, nothing else. It used to be this exciting thing to go to the mailbox and wonder what might be in there.

*Hayley:* In a letter, you get a real message. That's kind of how the book moved from being about writing a letter, to asking, what are you actually doing when you're writing a letter? You're sending a piece of yourself, and the love that you feel for that person.

*John:* That's the hug.

**Q: The illustrations look quite different from your past work, John. How did you create them?**

*John:* The endpapers come from the two of us spending a day, just having fun drawing some images.

*Hayley:* I got to illustrate those, too! That was just us goofing around together.

*John:* We kind of came up with this concept, about halfway through the project, where the letter is actually a hug being sent through the mail. When the letter is put in an envelope, it is like putting it in a jacket . . .

*Hayley:* You are keeping it warm by putting it in a "jacket," or an envelope.

*John:* . . . and it's going on a long journey. And, while the main character is waiting for the letter to arrive at its destination, she does a lot of thinking.

*Hayley:* She's imagining what journeys her hugs are going on and how they're getting to where they need to go. We did some research on all the different routes and ways that you can receive mail. There's only one mail delivery that is still using donkeys, and that is in Havasupai Falls, AZ. I am from Arizona, and I actually used to go hiking to the Havasupai Falls, which is off of the Grand Canyon. We would see the mail delivery donkeys coming down the canyon. It is very cool!

*John:* There's something magical about sending and receiving a letter to feel connected.

*Hayley:* In the illustration showing all of the people receiving their letters, we incorporated actual letters from people in our lives, which we think is really special.

**Q: Can you describe the process you use as you work together to create a book?**

*Hayley:* It's very give and take. I can kind of see where he's going with his sketches. We really play off each other's work. I'll write something and ask him, how does this feel? And we tweak it back and forth that way.

*John:* When I make books on my own, and I write and illustrate them, I have a certain freedom, because I can tweak the text and the images simultaneously. That allows me to make the best products that I can make. When I'm illustrating someone else's text, whom I may or may not know, the manuscript is set in stone. So, doing this with Hayley was the best of both worlds. First, I didn't have to write the text, which is the more challenging part for me. Second, she's right here in the house, so I can ask, what if we did this, and she can say, I want to change the text here, what if we had this in the picture. It's even better than doing books on my own.

*Hayley:* I often start out by writing too much, so seeing his images helps me cut and edit, based on where he was going with the illustrations.

*John:* We went through quite a few drafts before we took it to our publisher, and they had some suggestions. We were able to respond to those suggestions together, which was so much better than when I have to do that on my own.

*Hayley:* We could look at it from a different angle together. Originally, we weren't going to include any of the digital communication pieces, which actually is very important to today, and to the book itself. Adding that made it a better book.

*John:* We've both known other couples who create books together, like Leo and Diane Dillon, who actually worked on paintings together, but in separate studios on the top and bottom floor of their house.

*Hayley:* And Ted and Betsy Lewin, who were such a magical couple.

*John:* So, we had mentors who could mirror how it would be for us to write books and illustrate books together.

*Hayley:* Who doesn't want to work with their best friend? It's fun!

*John:* Right now, I think we have probably five other project ideas that we're working on. I think there is a theme to the books that we create together. They are grounded in a sense of nostalgia, but also things that we need in our lives today that we're losing touch with.

**Q: Do you have a shared space, or do you work separately?**

*John:* Well, Hayley writes all over. I think with writing, you can do that very easily. She has a writing studio on the top floor and then across from it, I have my studio.

*Hayley:* Sometimes I'll work in the kitchen to give John space upstairs to work on his other projects.

*John:* We live in a in a very old three-story farmhouse. It was built in the 1850s, and so I think the top floor used to be an attic. It is now a writing studio and an art studio.

**Q: Can you talk about your plans to share your book with children?**

*Hayley:* The idea would be to work with kids on writing letters, and what it means to share a hug. We'd like to ask them, "How do you want to deliver your hug? Imagine that person opening that letter and what they might feel." We think it would be really fun to do some letter writing workshops with kids.

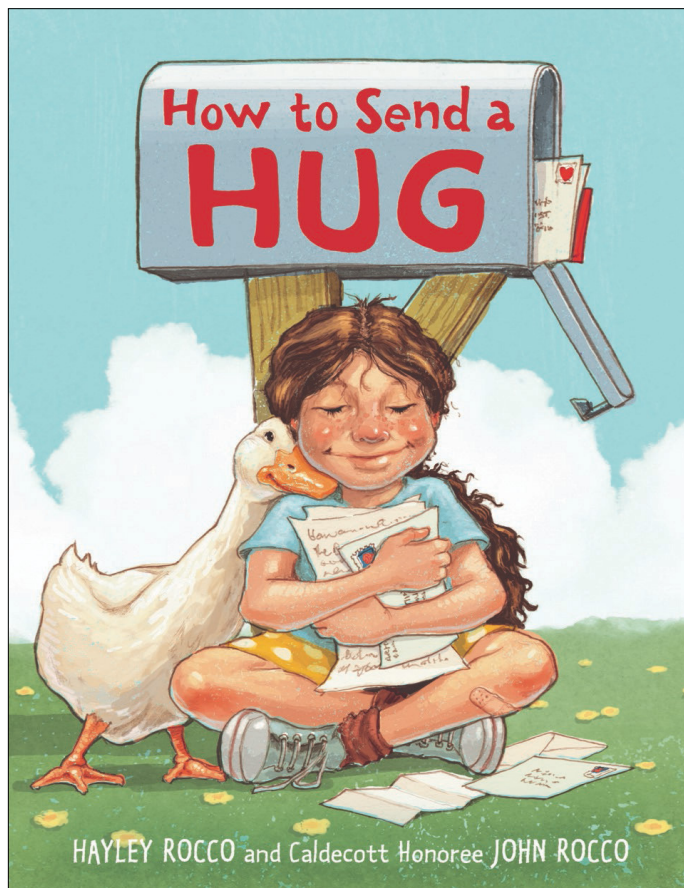
*John:* I think this is the first time in history that we have a generation of kids that learned how to use Zoom before they learned how to write.

*Hayley:* Right, so we're hoping we can ignite some excitement, in the kind of old fashioned, but very relevant and important practice, of writing letters.

**Q: How do you see your work contributing to conversations about diversity?**

*John:* If you look at most of my books, it's very difficult to determine the character's skin color, for example. In *Blackout*, I created characters that reflected the reality of Brooklyn, so with many different types of people. I try to create characters so that kids can identify with, and say to themselves, that's me.

*Hayley:* We think it is very important to make sure everyone's represented in the books they read, and the books we create. We hope our work is supportive and uplifting to people of all backgrounds. In *How to Send a Hug*, we tried to reflect as many types of families as we can, particularly in that illustration showing people receiving all of their letters.



**Q: Any advice for any other couples who might decide to work on a book together?**

*John:* Make sure you are best friends first. That helps us.

*Hayley:* It can be a little tough when you when you are really focused on what you want in a book. But, trust each other, and remember that your partner's perspective is important.

*John:* I think I can be a bit of a bulldozer at times. Hayley has a more graceful way of presenting an idea, so I have to keep myself in check, sometimes, to not be a bull in a china shop.

*Hayley:* But, that helps me, too, with organizing ideas. I think finding each other's strengths and using them to complement each other helps. Communication is key, and making sure that you are patient and understanding, and are willing to listen. That's all anyone needs, right?

*John:* Stay excited about it, because it's kind of an amazing thing when two people who are married or couples or whatever, can work on a project together and bring it out into the world. It's emotional, it's unusual and it's a blast.

*Hayley:* We're so fortunate that we get to do this for a living. We can be sitting at the beach having a glass of wine, and talk about our ideas. It's a dream come true! &