

Couples who Collaborate: Jay Albee

MARY-KATE SABLESKI

Jen Breach and J. Anthony—known collectively as Jay Albee—are the LGBTQ+ couple behind the *Riley Reynolds* (2022) book series. Riley is one of the first non-binary characters for young readers (ages 8-12). A fourth grader who lives in a neighborhood in South Philly, Riley navigates their community as any fourth-grader would, with curiosity, adventure, and imagination.

Jay Albee's four books, all published in 2022 by Stone Arch Books, include *Riley Reynolds Slays the Play*, *Riley Reynolds Rocks the Park*, *Riley Reynolds Glitterfies the Gala*, and *Riley Reynolds Crushes Costume Day*.

Q: How did you meet and come to start working on books together?

J. Anthony: We met through the comics industry. I've been making comics since about 2006.

I had a little bit of an online presence, and I attend industry conventions and shows. I think we were Twitter friends first, actually. We had a lot of mutual friends, with similar tastes and similar aesthetics.

Jen: Indie comics is a pretty small industry. People go to the same four conventions every year.

J. Anthony: So, we were bound to run into each other eventually. She bought me a drink in 2012 at a show in Maryland. We became friends, and in 2014, we started dating. We got married in 2018.

Jen: And, we started collaborating in 2020.



J. Anthony: Obviously, we are both creators. A lot of our conversations were creative and kind of around creative things—going to see a movie and then picking it apart for hours afterwards, or sharing books and then talking about the format and the characters and that kind of thing. It was a very gradual thing to start collaborating. It doesn't really feel like there was one decisive moment when we decided to give it a shot. It was more of us being involved in each other's projects, until we got to a point where it made sense to just do it together.

Q: Could you talk a little bit about your process of creating books together?

J. Anthony: Our conversations are almost always in some form or fashion creative or analytical. There are a lot of concepts, or umbrella ideas, or categories that we will put stuff in. Nothing ever really starts from scratch. Riley, for example, we came up with a fourth grader and then we start brainstorming. We think about fourth graders, what was it like being that age? What themes do we keep coming back to when we talk about our childhood,



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when we talk about you know, an ideal childhood, or what we miss from our childhood, what we enjoyed about our childhood.

Jen: Or what we've observed in fourth graders.

J. Anthony: At its ground level, it's big concepts, big loose themes. It's a pyramid that builds and builds. For example, we loved the idea of a kid in their neighborhood, interacting with their neighbors, vendors, the local businesses, the libraries, schools, and classmates. Another layer is the events or moments or struggles. Then it comes time to take all those loose ideas and put them into books. We've done two four-book series (we are in the midst of creating the second), so in those cases we then think about four different things we can do across the books.

Often, we will go out, have lunch and just sit in the restaurant and just "blue sky" it. It helps that we live together, because it's in those random moments that these ideas kind of pop up. At night as we're reading before bed, we come up with new ideas and we can talk about them right then. So then, practically once we have kind of a loose idea, Jen is the drafter to pitch to the editor. She'll write a loose outline with our ideas.

Jen: We got that process from doing writer-for-hire gigs. The editors need a little pitch just about the idea, and then they need a detailed outline of what's going to happen in each chapter. I found that it actually works really well for our projects as well, because we can see the pacing or where there's a hole where not much happens or, characters we haven't fully developed. So, this detailed outline is basically just the culmination of all our conversations, or where our conversations are at that particular moment.

J. Anthony: It's also nice at that stage to have such simple descriptions to compare the books to see where the elements are too similar from book to book or chapter to chapter, for example. From there, we'll flesh out the outline, making sure that the beginning and the end are tight and have an even progression.

Jen: We continue to brainstorm and make sure that the actual words on the page correspond to the base of that pyramid, representing the themes and ideas that we've been chatting through.

J. Anthony: Practically speaking, I'm very much the rambling idea person. I spend a lot of time saying, "How about this?" "How about that?" Jen does the actual writing of the paragraphs and the sentences. She will unpack the outline and write a loose draft, and then I'll go in and basically edit it.

My specific strengths have to do with the sensory experience. I'm a visual artist, so I'm often very conscious of what the characters are doing physically while they're saying something or what's going on in the background, or the momentum. So, once we know what we're writing in general, we will get the meat on the page, and I'll go in and stitch in detail and character.

Jen: He's very good at that part, adding in the little tiny moments of personality, even just in the phrasing or the dialogue. I write

the idea of the sentences to get it on the page, and then he's just great at refining the actual voice of the character, and how they move through space, what they're doing with their hands. The actual drafting and redrafting takes the least amount of time in our process. The brainstorming takes a lot of time, then we take a few passes at the outline, but the actual manuscript goes pretty quickly.

J. Anthony: We spend a lot of time trying to figure out what we're trying to say, and then the actual saying of it is pretty straightforward once it happens. With the Riley books, specifically, once it's all written, I do several drafts of the art. There's an illustration at the end of every chapter and because I know the story so well, along with some prompts from the art director, I just have to figure out what to show. I'll do several drafts of sketches and then, the final art is pretty straightforward.

Jen: And I don't do anything at that point! I work on something else.

Q: It sounds like your collaborative process really enriches the projects you work on together.

Jen: Absolutely! I've never enjoyed writing more than since we figured out that we can work together on a project. It's an absolute delight.

J. Anthony: It really is indicative of our relationship in general, which I see as a collaboration in a kind of big abstract way. We're collaborating on living in the same space, we're collaborating financially, we're collaborating on what we want to be doing with our lives or where we want to be living. Ideally, in my mind, a couple at least has some elements of collaboration hopefully, if there's healthy communication.

Q: Can you describe your workspace?

J. Anthony: Well, in the summer it's a little bit different. We have an office upstairs, with two desks on opposite sides of the room. The room is full of books and my art supplies and gets great sunlight. We will spend most of the afternoon up there working independently, but then turning around, and you know, having whatever conversation we need to have.

But in the summer, it's a little too hot up there, so we've been working downstairs on the dining room table. Sometimes we'll both be working on the table, sometimes I'll be in the other room sitting in the chair, scribbling in a notebook or typing on the computer.

Jen: We're pretty flexible about it honestly, like the office is a beautiful space, but it took us really about a year and a half to figure out like how to set it up. I think that's our vibe in general. We just have an idea, set it up, try it, see what works, what doesn't, and then shift it all around.

Q: Which came first, setting up the workspace together, or working on projects together?

J. Anthony: When I moved in with Jen, it took me a long time to feel like it was my space also. It was a turning point for me to set up my desk. For awhile, we had the two separate desks against the windows, and then eventually, we put the desks together, facing each other. That ended up working out pretty well.

Q: How is it different to work with your spouse, as opposed to another author or illustrator?

J. Anthony: For me it is the availability, the constant communication, the opportunity for spontaneity. We can be taking a walk to the grocery store or even be in the grocery store and come up with an idea, like, "What if Riley baked a cake?" That's the biggest difference for me compared to other collaborations.

Being in a relationship, there's vulnerability and I think when collaborating, it takes a certain vulnerability to be able to say to your partner, here's an idea and just put it out there. And then there's vulnerability, depending on the spectrum of feedback you get. Some of it can be painful and some of it can be hurtful or depleting, and between us there's a real faith and understanding that we mean each other no harm, and we respect each other's craft. We can give each other feedback that, with anybody else might take a certain kind of pampering or pushing but with us, we can be a lot more straightforward and direct. I really value that.

Jen: Yeah, that's well said. For me, just practically it's better than collaborations I've had in the past. Usually, it's very much a process in which I write a thing, and I hand it off to somebody who edits the thing, and then somebody else illustrates the thing, and then if I'm lucky, I get to see some pencils or something.

And that's what Riley would have been, as well, if the editor hadn't taken J. Anthony on as the illustrator. We were already collaborating on the writing, but it was under my name, for the first book at least. When J. Anthony came on as the illustrator, we started really co-writing, which is then why we put it under a joint pen name. Because, it was 100 percent a joint effort. Riley would have been that process of writing something, handing it off, and an illustrator working on it. But, because our desks are in the same room, it didn't have to be like that.

Q: What has it been like to share your work with librarians, teachers, and children?

Jen: We shared our work at the 2022 American Library Association Annual Convention in Washington, D.C. We heard some very personal stories from people whose kids are gender non-conforming. There was one little kid who was like vibrating with excitement coming up to the booth. Somebody else in the booth mentioned afterwards that they literally skipped away after we signed the book. We heard from a couple little kids from either themselves, or from their parent, about how important it was for the kid to see themselves reflected in the book.

The book has a glossary in the front, and we heard from one parent that it was really useful for them because a lot of people are nervous to say the right thing. And the glossary kind of helps with

The Pen Name Process

Jen Breach and J. Anthony use the pen name Jay Albee for their collaborative works.

"It just kind of felt inevitable," said Jen. "It's such a co-authored process, and product, and work." J. Anthony added, "It's hard to extricate who's doing what."

"I think that's kind of the power of the joint pen name," said Jen. "It can be confusing for some people, who wonder why there are two photos on the book, but one name. People ask, which one of you is Jay? Which one of you is Albee? And we just say, well, we both are."

"It's complicated, it's all entangled, and I think the pen name honors that."

familiarity about phrases but also really just prompts people to talk to each other. We also heard from one person that a child who read the book found a way to describe their own gender identity from the book, and to talk about it with their mom. That was, honestly, my biggest wish for the book. So, I guess we can retire now!

Q: How do you see your work contributing to conversations around diversity in children's literature and the need for literature that reflects all people?

Jen: I'm still surprised that this is the first non-binary main character for the age group. I keep expecting someone to say, oh, ten years ago there was another, but there has not been another. So, there's that kind of level of representation to which we have contributed. The other thing that surprises me still is that a publisher was even interested in publishing it.

J. Anthony: It is definitely a dicey time in publishing for books like this, in certain communities in particular.

Jen: Yeah, I expected them to want to change it to queer parents or something like that. Originally, the first book was about banned books. The editor loved the character, but working with the editor and J. Anthony, it became really clear that what I wanted was for this series to be aspirational. I wanted to represent diverse characters, but more so diverse experiences.

A lot of the literature for children around queer identities or gender non-conforming characters contain a lot of trauma, especially in the YA space or even in middle grades. In the picture book space, the goal is typically more towards explaining the terms. So, we wanted to write a story about a gender non-conforming fourth grader that is not about non-conforming at all, Riley is well loved, well supported, and very secure in their identity. Gender rarely

comes up at all. We just get to use gender neutral pronouns for Riley and that, honestly felt like a huge statement in and of itself to make.

Q: Do you have any advice for other couples who might be interested in collaborating to create books for children?

J. Anthony: The idea of trust and vulnerability is critical. If you don't have that in your everyday life, and in your everyday kind of way of communicating, it might be a little bit more difficult. I don't think we would be able to collaborate if we didn't already have faith in our vocabulary with each other.

It is important to be able to constructively criticize or communicate our needs, or our vision, or ideas or our ambitions, and then, acknowledging and needing each other's help to get there. Also, acknowledging each other's strengths by saying, "I can't do this, and I respect that you can. What are you seeing that I'm not seeing?" And then, respecting that different perspective.

Jen: Also, respecting kind of spontaneity and shifting roles. The roles we described earlier are the default, but sometimes J.

Anthony writes the first draft, or the first draft of the first chapter. We are not precious about what is my part and what is his part. So, having either very few boundaries or very clear boundaries in the process are helpful.

Another key part is to remember that the collaboration is about a project. It is important to be able to take critique and use feedback constructively. When your partner says this paragraph doesn't read right, it is not the same as saying you are a bad person.

Q: What's next?

J. Anthony: We are doing two books under another Capstone imprint for DC comics. It's a Supergirl and Batgirl team up series, and we are doing two chapter books in that series. I am not illustrating this time, I am just co-writing. It is a nice change of pace, because I feel like writers often, when they work with artists, they often say I can just make stuff up and then the artist has to deal with it, and it is very true. It's very liberating. We have several picture books and early reader projects in the works, too. &