Couples who Collaborate

Mary Ann and Perry Hoberman

MARY-KATE SABLESKI

Mary Ann Hoberman and her son, Perry Hoberman, make children's books all in the family.

Though this column usually highlights couples in the more traditional sense of the word, typically in a committed relationship in any form, defining the term more widely yields a delightful collection of couples who collaborate to produce children's books.

The Pumphrey brothers were the first sibling couple discussed (see vol. 19, no. 4 (2021): 27–29). In this column, we feature a mother-son duo, Mary Ann and Perry Hoberman, who have partnered for their very first collaboration, *Away with Words* (2022). No stranger to family collaboration, Mary Ann describes a dream come true, partnering with her son to create a picture book, and Perry, a well-known artist in his own right, shares similar sentiments to describe collaborating with his legendary mother to create another contribution to her impressive collection of children's books.

Mary Ann Hoberman is well-known and adored in the world of children's literature. Her career spans more than six decades, and represents a wide variety of familiar poetry and picture books that have accompanied countless children through their growing years. She won the Excellence in Children's Poetry Award from NCTE in 2003, and was named the Children's Poet Laureate by the Poetry Foundation in 2008. Her books are ubiquitous in early childhood classrooms and library programming. She collaborated with her late husband Norman Hoberman on four picture books. Her children and extended family are a community of artists who are both skilled and passionate about creating art in many forms. Her oldest son, Perry, is an artist, and the most recent family collaborator.

Perry Hoberman is a media artist, educator, and musician. He lives in Twentynine Palms, California, with his wife, the artist Julia Heyward, and two cats. Hoberman has been exhibiting and performing locally, nationally, and internationally for more than four decades. Using a wide variety of high and low technology, Hoberman has done pioneering work in such areas as virtual reality, interactive media, and stereoscopic imaging. He has been the recipient of many awards and honors, including fellowships from the Rockefeller and Guggenheim Foundations, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the New York Foundation for the Arts.

Q: How did you decide to work on a book together?

Perry: She's been on my case for literally decades to illustrate one of her books. I drew a lot of cartoons and illustrations when I was younger, and then I kind of slipped into the art world, thinking that kind of stuff was what I did when I was a kid. But you know, fast forward a few decades, and I stopped teaching about five years ago and moved out to the desert. I have more time now, so when she brought it up this time I said, "Okay, let's do it!"

Mary Ann: It just seemed a natural step because he enjoyed doing cartoons for birthdays and all kinds of things. I was going through my books that are out of print, or that were published a long time ago, or fallen out of demand, and I noticed there were a lot of them

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that seemed to fall into the category of language. Everything from puns, talking about "commas and their dramas," to rhymes, and I got this idea that a book about language would be a great thing to do with Perry. It's just been great fun; there's nothing better than to work with one of your own kids.

Q: What a dream come true! How about for you, Perry? You grew up with your mother's books surrounding you as a child.

Perry: One thing that gave me pause in agreeing to do this with my mom was the fact that my dad illustrated the first four books my mom wrote. And, in my opinion, she's never had a better illustrator. I did not feel like I would be able to live up to that. What he did was just beautiful.

This book was basically a group of poems about language that were arranged alphabetically. One of the early ideas for the design was to have a giant letter on the left-hand page, with poems and illustrations on the right. It was a sans serif big red letter, and then there'd be little drawings around it, of characters, kind of hanging out on the letter. But that idea went by the wayside as the book took shape.

Mary Ann: I'd already done an alphabet book for little kids with very short little poems, and it was long out of print. When we started *Away with Words,* I realized that this was not going to be a book for very little children. It was going to be a book, in our minds, for everybody. So, we had to think of another way to present the poems, and not as an alphabet book. One way we did this was by talking about the title.

Perry: For a long time, the book was going to be titled *Alphabetter*.

Mary Ann: Yes, we thought about calling it *The Alphabetter Book*. We did end up using that in the book, but it did not end up as the title. I sent the book off to the editor with the table of contents in alphabetical order as a way to organize the poems. I didn't think they would actually end up in alphabetical order in the final book. Perry thought about it differently.

Perry: There are multiple poems for some letters, and only one for other letters. So, we settled on a focus on the alphabet and letters.

Mary Ann: We talked a lot about the title *Away with Words*. To me, it has at least two meanings, "**a way** with words!" and then, "**away** with words." So, because of those multiple meanings, we knew that would be the title for our book.

Q: Perry, how did you go about illustrating the poems?

Perry: Some of the poems suggested very straightforward illustrations, and some were really hard to illustrate because they were kind of abstract. When I first started illustrating, I used large letters, taking up the entire page. It was difficult to figure out how to fit all of the poems on the page with the letters, though, so we dropped the big letter idea eventually.
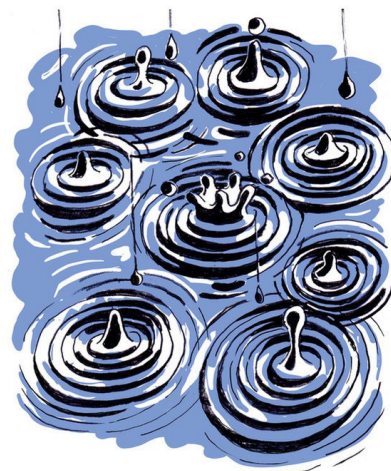

Illustration from *Away with Words,* written by Mary Ann Hoberman, illustrated by Perry Hoberman; used with permission.

Q: Did you work together to make those decisions, or did you work on the art and text separately as in a typical author-illustrator relationship?

Mary Ann: Most of the discussions occurred over email with all of us, so I was aware of the discussion. As the book moved closer to completion, Perry worked directly with the art director, but for the most part, we were all part of the discussion. Typically, editors like to keep illustrators and writers apart as long as they can. Things can get a little bit hairy sometimes when the author and the illustrator either don't agree with each other, or don't agree with the editor. It was freeing in a way because with my son I didn't have to be so tippy-toe about everything. We could talk it through, and I would still love him, and I hoped that he would still love me.

Perry: One thing I was noticing, looking at the book more recently is the way it gets a little less silly toward the end. Starting with the poem *Over*, with the eyes on the moon. And then there's some more silly poems, but then you've got *Regression*, which is a little more sedate, and then *Spellbound*, which is really not funny. Those poems are more poignant. *Take Sound* was definitely the most difficult to illustrate. I just ended up doing a bunch of water drops going into water. I was basically trying to illustrate a concept that doesn't really lend itself to illustration very well. For *Note*, the art director basically just cut everything. I had a very busy illustration for that poem. So, there were these instances when the editors took material away from the illustrations. And,

Illustration from *Away with Words,* written by Mary Ann Hoberman, illustrated by Perry Hoberman; used with permission.

my mom and I did have to fight for a few things where the art director or editor didn't quite get what we were trying to do with the poem and the illustration.

Mary Ann: In *Vast*, the art director wanted to make the children in the illustration into adults. But the illustration was exactly what I wanted the way Perry created it. I still look at it, and I love it. Many people single it out as one of their favorites. So, I just laid down the law, and said the characters simply cannot be adults.

Perry: *Vast* was a very abstract one, but it came to me right away. There were a few instances like that where the suggestions did not line up with what we wanted to do in the book. The next poem, *Very*, is essentially playing on the idea that the word "very" can be positive or negative. There's a boy eating ice cream who's smiling, and the girl is scolding him, because she is saying it is very bad to eat ice cream. The editors did not want the girl in the illustration to look angry, but if she didn't look angry, the whole meaning of the poem, the joke, was missed. So, we discussed that with the editors, and we settled on the illustration as it looks in the book.

Q: Can you talk about how you considered diverse representation in the book?

Perry: We did a lot with skin color, and representing different groups of people. In my experience, personally, I've noticed that for many cartoonists and illustrators, our default is just to make every character some version of yourself. I think guys draw guys, girls draw girls. I have a kind of stock figure that I just draw if I'm not thinking about it, which is clearly me. Creating diverse characters for this book required a different mindset. At some point, we thought about having a consistent line of certain characters that would reappear throughout the book, but we decided against it. Some of the characters are definitely related to other characters in the book, but we thought of each of them as distinctive.

Mary Ann: One of the problems with diverse representation, too, is that the default for women is male also in the language—we use he/

him as a default in our writing. That was my default, too, and I never even thought about it that much until we were doing this book.

Perry: Almost all of the poems in this book are first-person, so the issue of gender is addressed in this way. Another thing that we did to sort of mitigate the dilemma of whether the character is male or female was to make some of the characters into animals, which was really fun, and worked for some of the poems. For instance, in a spread towards the beginning with the walrus and the penguin, it was just perfect to just use ridiculously inappropriate animals. But then the poem facing it is *Belong*. I first drew the character stretching "long" as a little boy, and it ended up being a little girl. But the editors suggested that character could become a giraffe. The character, however, could not be a giraffe, because a giraffe doesn't have to stretch to reach anything. It's already the tallest. So, we had to put our foot down on things like that.

Q: It is fascinating to hear how you really worked as a team, advocating for one another's work. Were there ever any disagreements between the two of you?

Perry: I don't think the two of us had many disagreements throughout the process. Once I got going on the illustrations, there were some that took more revisions than the others, but with computers it is really simple to do a new version. So, we worked really well together and it went pretty smoothly.

Q: Have you been able to share your book with children? What have been their responses?

Mary Ann: We have a little fellow right in our own family, and we've enjoyed sharing it with him. Children are interested in the pictures, and with poetry, children can memorize them when the book has been read to them multiple times. I always encourage new parents to start reading to their children in utero. And then, as they grow, sharing books together helps children get used to turning the pages, holding the book, looking at the pictures. As we said, this book is for everyone! I've always believed that books can stretch to any age, depending on what you want to do with it.

Perry: I think both the illustrations and the text can appeal to any age. Some of them clearly would appeal to really young kids, and they're really silly. And then some of them are less silly, and maybe a little more complicated, but the humor and the themes in them can really appeal to any age, including adults.

Q: Do you have any advice for any other family members who might be considering collaborating to create a book?

Perry: Wait forty years before you do it! Either way, I recommend it.

Mary Ann: Just that it's grand! I suppose it could destroy a relationship if it wasn't too strong to begin with, but it's really a wonderful thing to do together. There are all kinds of creativity in the family, both backward and forward. Our family gatherings are great fun!

Q: What might be next for the two of you?

Mary Ann: Well, I hope I can persuade Perry that at some point we get to see the fourth book that Norman illustrated for me, *What Jim Knew* (1963), back in print with Perry's illustrations. The main character in that book is named James. Perry's original name was James Perry Hoberman. But then what happened?

Perry: Well, when I moved to New York, I was living on the Bowery. Before I moved there, the film critic James Hoberman lived near me, and people kept mixing us up, with our mail and other things. So, since he was there first, I figured at that point I would just drop the James and go by my middle name, Perry.

Mary Ann: So, we have this book, *What Jim Knew,* and it's not exactly out of print, but it's sort of waiting there, and if someone orders it, the publisher will print a copy, but it's not very satisfactory. So, I got the idea that it would be a wonderful thing for Perry to re-illustrate this book about him. But, since his father illustrated it first, he's very reluctant.

Perry: I think maybe I'll do a sort of meta version of it, where I'm, myself, being asked to illustrate a book that had the illustrations by my father, written by my mother, and what I think about it.

Mary Ann: Doesn't that sound like fun?

Perry: Another idea that's been in the back of my mind for a long time, relates to work I've done with stereoscopic 3D work both for performance and installation, but also prints, and so on. I have an idea for a kind of 3D pop-up where the reader would wear red and blue glasses, and things would pop off the page.

Selected Books by Mary Ann Hoberman

Away with Words. Illus. by Perry Hoberman. Little, Brown. 2022. 32p.

The Sun Shines Everywhere. Illus. by Luciano Lozano. Little, Brown. 2019. 32p.

You Read to Me, I'll Read to You: Very Short Tall Tales to Read Together. Illus. by Michael Emberley. Little, Brown. 2014. 32p.

Forget-Me-Nots: Poems to Learn by Heart. Illus. by Michael Emberley. Little, Brown. 2012. 144p.

What Jim Knew. Illus. by Norman Hoberman. Little, Brown. 1963.

Hello and Good-by. Illus. by Norman Hoberman. Little, Brown, 1959.

Q: Is there anything else you'd like to share with our readers?

Mary Ann: The poem "Take Sound" was based on a poem called "Take Sky" by David McCord. I thought it was a beautiful poem, so I wrote "Take Sound" as a tribute to him. I wasn't sure if it would fit in this book, because it is so serious. But I think it fits very well in the book, with all of the other poems. And, I can read it now, if you'd like me to?

Q: How lovely! Mary Ann Hoberman read me a poem, and that is all I need! &