

Couples Who Collaborate

Steve Jenkins and Robin Page

MARY-KATE SABLESKI

Robin Page and Steve Jenkins are the husband and wife/author and illustrator team behind more than forty books for children, well-known and beloved for their clever exploration of the animal world. Sadly, Steve passed away on December 26, 2021.

For lovers of children's literature, he left behind a legacy of creativity, curiosity, and kindness that will be felt for generations to come. Robin shares Steve's commitment to making a difference in the lives of children through the books they created.

Jenkins began his career in New York City, working in advertising and design. He and Page started their own design firm in 1982. Nightly read-aloud sessions with their children led them to use their artistic skills to make books for children.

In his career, Jenkins wrote, illustrated, or art-directed more than eighty books for children, many of those with Page. His books were translated into nineteen different languages and awarded numerous accolades. Their book *What Do You Do With a Tail Like This?* was awarded a Caldecott Honor in 2004.

Jenkins' art was marked by its distinctive collage style, which brought out the personalities and intricate details of the animals he created. He had an insatiable curiosity for science and the animal world, clearly evident throughout each of his stunning books.

Page has illustrated more than twenty-five books for children, many of them in collaboration with her husband.

Page trained as an art designer and illustrator and has illustrated several books of her own including, *A Chicken Followed Me Home* (2015), *Seeds Move!* (2019), and *Shall We Dance?* (2023).



Together, the two impacted the field of children's publishing through their instinctive mix of writing, illustrating, and design skills, as well as their attentiveness to the questions children ask about the animal world. In this interview, Page shares her favorite moments in the work she and Jenkins did together. She offers a poignant tribute to the legacy they built together as a quintessential and enduring couple who collaborate.

Q: How did you and Steve meet?

Robin: We both went to design school in North Carolina. Steve was getting his masters, and I was getting my undergraduate degree. We met while he was working as a teaching assistant in my classes. I finished my program a little early, and Steve wanted to go to New York to work. So, I applied to Cooper Union Design School, was accepted, and we went to New York. Steve worked for a great design firm in New York City. We were doing quite a bit of freelance work on the side, so we decided to start our own design business. We did a lot of designing for the *New York Times* and fashion design companies. Once we had children, and we started reading books to them each night, we decided we wanted to make books for them, and for other children. I had already collected so many children's books because I enjoyed the format.



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From *The Bird Book*: Design by Steve Jenkins and Robin Page; illustrations by Steve Jenkins. Used by permission.

With two small children, Steve decided that working a full-time job and trying to work on picture books was a bit too hectic. He was literally going to work, coming home for supper, and then going back to work. It was too much! So, we moved upstate New York, and we still did not feel far enough away from the business to be able to separate and work on our own projects. On a whim, we visited Boulder (CO), and decided to move here.

It was that year that Steve published *Biggest, Strongest, Fastest* (1997). It was the first successful book, really, and it is still in print today. We were still doing our design business at this time on the side, too. But then, we published *What Do You Do with a Tail Like This?* and we received a royalty check in the mail. We were both so surprised that we could make money from doing this work we enjoyed so much!

We had so much more fun doing books for children than the freelance work, so eventually we stopped doing the design business and started making books exclusively. We enjoyed the independence, and the autonomy to push ourselves on our projects. Since our kids were still young, we also appreciated being able to set our own schedules and goals. So many of the early books came from [our children] Alec and Page's questions as children, so it was work that grew from our family.

Q: What process did you and Steve follow when you created books together?

Robin: When we started, one of us would just have an idea, and we would take it from there. Steve's brain was so amazing, and I would not have been able to do some of the books we did without him. Those books are really his. The books we did together tended to be a little more simple in format and style, as opposed to those we wrote or illustrated separately. We were so comfortable working together on projects in our design business, that it was so easy

to go back and forth. It was just easy, in the shared space we created in an old artist's studio in our home, to look over each other's shoulder at our respective desks. We both read each other's copy, and provided feedback. Because our brains worked so differently from one another, we were able to offer other perspectives on what should be included.

We worked together since 1981, so it was just natural for us to work together on a book project. We were very honest with each other. When a couple is also raising children together, it makes the collaboration process work very seamlessly. It was a group effort to do the best that we could, both in raising children and making books.

Since Steve passed away, I have been working to finish *Why Elephants Have Big Ears* (2023). I also had to finish *The Bird Book* (2022) as well as a counting book we were working on together. We also had another idea for a book, called something like, *Run? Don't Run?*, focused on what to do when you see a gorilla, for example, and I've been working on that one, too. Knowing my own weaknesses, and how Steve really complemented them, I



have reached out to my youngest son, Jamie, to help write the new books. He has a talent for writing. I feel comfortable designing, and I am getting more comfortable illustrating, but I am still not very comfortable writing.

Q: It sounds like a future interview will have to take place on this collaboration! How wonderful to have children who share your artistic talents.

Robin: My daughter is a modern dancer. She just had a baby, so I made a little book for him, which I hope to pitch to an editor soon. Yesterday, when I was getting the copy together for the counting book, she and Jamie came over and read through it. Alec, my other son, is a physicist, and is very quiet and very much like Steve. He went to art school initially, but decided to pursue physics as a career. Jamie works with me here in the studio, which has been a delight.

Q: How much editing happened between you and Steve, before sending your manuscripts to editors?

Robin: A lot. For the cut paper that Steve did, there could not be a lot of editing, because of the nature of the art. With my work with digital art, there was more editing. But with the manuscripts, he and I would work back and forth to edit and rewrite. I have a lot of the manuscripts Steve worked on, and the rewriting, comments, and revision can be seen. Our editors are so capable. They see the problems with a child understanding the text, and guide us to make changes, but they never rewrite the text for us. They just bring up the question, or the direction, and make suggestions to help get it right. I am so lucky to continue working with both of our editors, who are phenomenal women, who have been working with Steve and me for a long time.

Q: What was it like for you and Steve to work with other authors?

Robin: Both Steve and I have illustrated for other people. Steve consistently illustrated for three authors or so as an illustrator. In his case, he did not design the book, he just illustrated it, and gave it over to the editors and art directors. Typically, authors and illustrators do not have much contact with one another. For me, having input on the design of the book was critical. When I started with Beach Lane, I just requested that I also design the books I illustrated. All the books I have worked on with other authors, I have also designed them. I just felt that, I have been a designer all my life, so it is more natural for me to control that part of the process.

Q: What opportunities did you and Steve have to share your work with children together?

Robin: We did a lot of work together sharing our books with children. Right before COVID, we were on an international tour. We were in Dubai, which was a fantastic experience. The children, teachers, and librarians were so great. We worked with children from kindergarten all the way up to high school. We did a lot of workshops on cut paper and producing little books with them, and it was so much fun. Steve and I loved working with the people of Dubai, and we were both sad to cut our international tour short.

Selected Books by Steve Jenkins and Robin Page

Why Do Elephants Have Big Ears. Little, Brown, 2023. 40p.
The Bird Book. Clarion, 2022. 48p.
The Animal Toolkit: How Animals Use Tools. Clarion, 2022. 32p.
The Shark Book. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2021. 40p.
What Do You Do If You Work at the Zoo? Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2020. 40p.
Look Again. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2019. 32p.
The Frog Book. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2019. 40p.
Who Am I: An Animal Guessing Game. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018. 32p.
Look at Me! Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018. 32p.
Flying Frogs and Walking Fish. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016. 32p.
Creature Features. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014. 32p.
My First Day. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013. 32p.
How to Swallow a Pig. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013. 32p.
Sisters & Brothers. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013. 32p.
How to Clean a Hippopotamus. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010. 32p.
Move! Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2006. 32p.
I See a Kookaburra. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2004. 32p.
What Do You Do with a Tail Like This? Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2003. 32p.

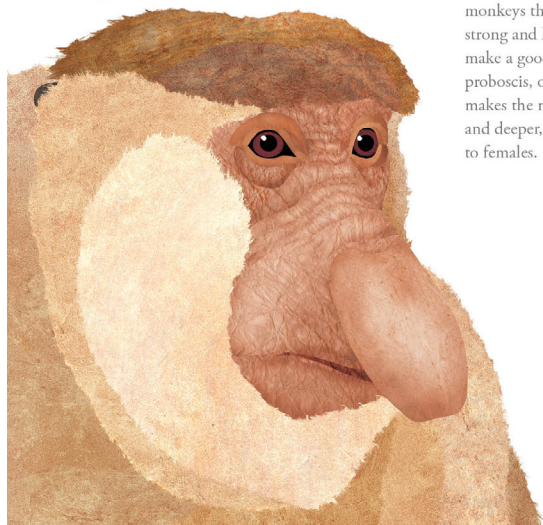
I am trying to continue the work now, via Zoom, in Saudi Arabia, with third, fourth, and fifth graders. Using Zoom is not like being there in person with the children. I cannot share the art with them face to face, and it makes it difficult to really show the full piece. But it is still a rewarding experience to work with the children.

Locally, Steve and I would often go to schools around Boulder. Steve was asked to go to many schools on his own, and often I would just go along with him. When we would go into under-resourced, high-need schools, Steve really struggled with how to best help the children and teachers. Particularly when we would then go to a more affluent school where the students and teachers have everything they need—books, supplies, resources, etc. He struggled with that difference, and what it meant for children, and how to help them have access to resources.

Q: Your books offer so many connections for children who are curious about the animal world. I am sure it was a treat to have you both visit!

Robin: Workshops were particularly fun. We enjoyed giving them a problem, like how many ways do animals solve this problem,

Why do male
proboscis monkeys
have a
big nose?



A big nose shows female monkeys that a male is strong and healthy and will make a good mate. The proboscis, or nose, also makes the male's call louder and deeper, which appeals to females.

Why do
red-eyed
tree frogs
have big
red eyes?



This tiny frog sleeps during the day, and its big eyes help it see at night. They also help in another way. If a hungry bird or snake wakes the frog during the day, it pops open its eyes. The sudden appearance of two bright red orbs can startle the predator, giving the tree frog a chance to escape.

From *Why Do Elephants Have Big Ears?*: Design by Steve Jenkins and Robin Page; illustrations by Robin Page. Used by permission.

and ask them to show us through the art. Steve often talked about that, and how the collage and rough edges of his art can help bring imagination to the situation, and give a different kind of feeling, rather than just looking at a photograph. It puts you in a different place. He enjoyed sharing this experience with children during our school visits.

Q: What was Steve's favorite book he published?

Robin: *The Animal Book* (2013). He worked so hard on it, and it took a really long time. He was proud of it, even when it came back.

Q: And yours?

Robin: While making *Creature Features* (2014), we had pictures of animal portraits all over the wall. Steve really wanted to do animal portraits. People would come through here and describe why they thought the animals looked the way they did all the time. So, Steve's thought was—I know, let's just ask them, why they look the way they do. And, I thought that was great! So, that is my favorite book. I love the concept of it, I love the simple design of it, I love the art of it. It's a great book, that just talks about why animals look the way they do.

Q: Robin, what is next for you?

Robin: Well, I am working on the counting book that Steve and I started together, as well as the *Run? Don't Run?* book I mentioned earlier. A lot of the art that Steve completed for some of the books, such as *Why Elephants Have Big Ears* and the counting book, needed to be redone due to changes in publishers over time, so I am working on redesigning some of his art. It is a mentally

difficult task for me to complete. But Steve would have likely redone them anyway, because he probably would have thought he could have done them better now. Honestly!

Through Beach Lane, *Shall We Dance?* (2023) just came out. Though I did not write it, *Sleepy* is the next book I am working on illustrating. I feel like there is a spider book somewhere out there, too, because they are just so interesting. I am also working on compiling some of Steve's infographic books he wrote for younger readers into a larger volume.

Q: Do you have a favorite memory of your work with Steve?

Robin: So many of our ideas came from going out and having a date night. You know how when you are away from the kids, but all you can think about is the kids? So many good ideas came out of that time we had together, talking about our kids and their questions. We also really enjoyed going to schools together. We had the same feeling about wanting to make a difference in the lives of children, particularly those in under-resourced schools. We both always felt the children we met, their questions, their interests, were incredible.

For us, it was always to push the work to the best place it could be. We were two different personalities, but we shared that goal, to get to the best place the book could be by the time it was sent off. That said, it is very difficult to get a book back from a publisher, and not see all the mistakes, and not think you could do that just a little better. Steve and I both always felt that way when books came back in their published format. We were always striving to make the work the best it could be in that moment. &