

Couples who Collaborate

Cheryl and Wade Hudson

MARY-KATE SABLESKI

Cheryl and Wade Hudson are the dynamic duo behind Just Us Books, the publishing company they started in 1988. Their collaboration together began when they published *AFRO BETS ABC Book* (1987), after receiving rejection after rejection from major publishing companies citing a lack of interest in books about Black children.

Just Us Books has received numerous accolades and awards over its thirty-five years in business, in recognition of its significant contribution to the publication of diverse books for children. In 2022, the couple was awarded a Carle Honors award from The Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art for their contribution to children's literature.

Cheryl began her career in educational publishing doing textbook design. She employs those skills as the lead editorial and art director for Just Us Books. Cheryl is also a gifted fabric artist, creating quilts reflective of Black history. Wade Hudson has won numerous accolades for his more than four-decade career in children's publishing. He has written over thirty books for children, including picture books, anthologies (co-edited with Cheryl), and poetry.

Q: How did your collaboration begin?

Cheryl: Just Us Books reflects how we started as "just us," just Wade and myself. We actually met over fifty years ago through mutual friends. It wasn't love at first sight, but it was interest in books at first sight. I was doing some research at the Peabody Museum for a book I was working on. While visiting a friend there, I met Wade, and we just really hit it off. At that time, I was doing art editorial work for an educational publishing company. We started collaborating on projects that included Wade's poetry, and made



Cheryl and Wade Hudson.
Photo by Stephan Hudson Photography.

use of my graphic design skills. A year later, we got married, and we've been working together ever since.

Wade: When we first met in Boston, and realized we both shared an interest in creating books for children, I came up with an idea for a book about a group of kids. You illustrated it. We didn't do anything with it, but we had the concept. What was the name of it?

Cheryl: *Hometown*.

Wade: *Hometown*, right! We never published it, but I think at the particular time we recognized that there was a need for stories that feature Black youngsters. This was in 1971 or '72. I think that was really the first project that we did together. I used to write poems for Cheryl and put them to music and surprise her.

Cheryl: You called me on the job! I'm supposed to be working, and he writes poetry to me.

Wade: So, I guess that's a collaboration as well.

Cheryl: Right around that time, there was a push in educational publishing to be more inclusive because there were very few, if



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.

any, people of color in textbooks. We didn't have children yet, but we knew that there was a need for more stories by more Black authors. At that time, even anthologies didn't include people like Gwendolyn Brooks or Langston Hughes. The stories available at that time were really basically all White stories. Our attempt to remedy the situation was by creating our own stories, most that we never published. About ten years later, when we actually had children, we got even more serious about collaborating on these types of projects.

Wade: Our collaboration, and we've collaborated on a lot of different projects, is really motivated by our desire and our need to make a difference in the world. We are both artistically inclined, and we're very creative, and were creative as children growing up. I think it was fate that the two of us met, having similar sensibilities and similar concerns about the world. We brought our individual experiences being involved in the Civil Rights Movement and what was going on in the 1960s. Those experiences connected the two of us together. Since that first meeting, we've been on a journey that would be incomplete without the two of us being together and collaborating together in so many different ways. In addition to creating books together, I've encouraged Cheryl and her artistic pursuits over the years, and she supported me with my playwriting and other projects that I have done. To boil it down to the essence of it—our relationship has been a really big, giant collaboration.

Q: Can you tell us about the first book you made together?

Cheryl: Actually, that first book that we published together with both of our names on as collaborators and editors was an anthology, *In Praise of Our Fathers and Our Mothers: A Black Family Treasury by Outstanding Authors and Artists* (1997). We asked our friends to contribute to this work that praised our fathers and mothers, because there's a lot of negative press about Black families. There was a lot going on during that time in 1996 with the O. J. Simpson trial and responses to that, and absentee fathers and absentee mothers, and the narrative that was prevalent in the news was a negative one, and we said, *wait a minute. This is not really how we grew up.* This is not the reality that we knew. We can praise our fathers and our mothers. That anthology came together by putting together contributions from writers like Joyce Hansen, Walter Dean Myers . . .

Wade: That was really one of the first anthologies of that genre. It brought together a variety of book creators. I'm sure that there were anthologies done before that, but in terms of the focus of the anthology, I think that that was really one of the very first ones to do that.

Cheryl: Right. And Jerry Pinkney, Andrea and Brian Pinkney, as couples who collaborated.

Wade: The cover was a collaboration. Leo and Diane Dillon did the cover.

Cheryl: I think there were forty-eight contributors, also Virginia Hamilton. The book offered a different perspective, and our

perspective was of the legacy, the shoulders that we are built upon.

Q: It's interesting to trace that book to your more recent books, like *We Rise, We Resist, We Raise Our Voices* (2018), which is similar, but reflects modern issues.

Wade: *We Rise, We Resist, We Raise Our Voices* was inspired by what was happening during the election season of 2015 and 2016, which threw a lot of us for a loop. So, we started thinking, what could we tell young people about what was going on? It was such a toxic environment, and that still has not changed that much. So many different groups of people were being marginalized in public debates and public forums. We knew that there were a lot of young people and children who were being hurt by the language being thrown out there. We started reading different articles where students in school were being bullied by other students that were using the same kind of language they heard politicians and candidates use in their debates. So, we said, how can we really talk to young people? We reached out to a lot of our friends in the industry who've written books and illustrated books for the demographic that we wanted to talk to, and they were more than happy to be a part of it, so that was how that one started.

Q: Not only do you collaborate together, but the way you've collaborated with so many other creators throughout your career together, creating these books is really amazing.

Cheryl: Our entire working relationship has been a collaboration because we do a lot of talking, I mean, you know that's what we do, communicating our thoughts about the political situation, about the artistic world. Even though our tastes are different in some respects, we really are one in terms of our mission, and our desire to tell stories. We want to share stories. So many stories have not been shared. And a lot of literature, so called literature that's been out there for years has been stereotypical, marginalized, apologetic. Not coming from our voices, but people who have written about us. That mission is just really strong. Let's tell our story, and I have to hand it to Wade, he's come up with most of the ideas. He'll start by saying, "You know, that's not right. What can we do about it?" So, a lot of our joint projects have been initiated through a thought or idea from Wade, and then we go back and forth and develop it.

Q: How do you create books together? What is your process?

Wade: One thing that we did early on was to establish areas of responsibility. I think that has been really helpful. I have certain responsibilities that are defined. It doesn't mean that we don't work together on those, but in terms of having the primary responsibility for a particular area, that is what I bring to the table, and then what Cheryl decides to do is what she brings to the table, and then we discuss it. Cheryl brings an expertise and experience as an art director. She is the one who works with the artist, and also with the design of the book that we may be working on, and also the editorial process. My responsibility as far as Just Us Books is concerned is the overall operation of the company, but also marketing, sales, and promotion. We also bring in our adult children,

Katura and Stephan. Katura assists with the marketing, sales, and promotion of the books. Stephan helps with the design and layout of the books. We come together in meetings to determine whether something is working, and we'll bring our input, but it's always the job of the person who has a specific area of responsibility to come back and bring other ideas to make it better.

Cheryl: We go through the same processes as the major companies. We just have fewer people involved in it. We have created books where we have sought out an author to write the manuscript. We have created books that have come to us through blind submissions. We have our editorial team, and sometimes outside readers to review the manuscript. If we think it's something that aligns with our publishing policy and budget, we make an offer. If there is something that needs to be worked on or further developed, we work through that process of editing. We follow the same steps that a major company would: marketing on the front end, determining where we're going to try to sell the books, what outlets, reviews, going through sketches, finishes, approvals, finding a printer, doing proofs. All of that is pretty much the same, but we do it as a team, and then we hire, and depend on freelancers as we need them.

Wade: I think what may set us apart from major publishers is that we are always looking to bring a book to life that addresses a need of what's missing in the canon. I'll use our story as an example. We both grew up in the South basically during the late fifties and in the sixties. We did not have the kind of books that are available now. And so we knew the impact of not having books that have characters in them who look like us, of not having the opportunity to read about experiences of people who look like us, and not knowing as much as we needed to know about Black history and Black culture. So we are always looking for books that help to shine a light on the fullness of Black history, Black culture, and Black experiences. We are always looking to see what's missing. What's needed? What do our children, not just Black children, but all children need to know to help, to enlighten them, and to empower them, and to offer us a better opportunity for them to come together as one world?

Q: How is it different to work with your family member on a book as opposed to another author or illustrator?

Wade: For me, it really does not, because the project that we are working on is the focus. I try to approach it the same way regardless of who I am working with on it. Now, obviously being married, you know, sometimes personal things may creep in, and you have to deal with that and push it aside, so that you can focus on the project. With each person that you collaborate with it's a different relationship. Even with the anthologies that we did, each contributor was different, and you have to relate to them differently,

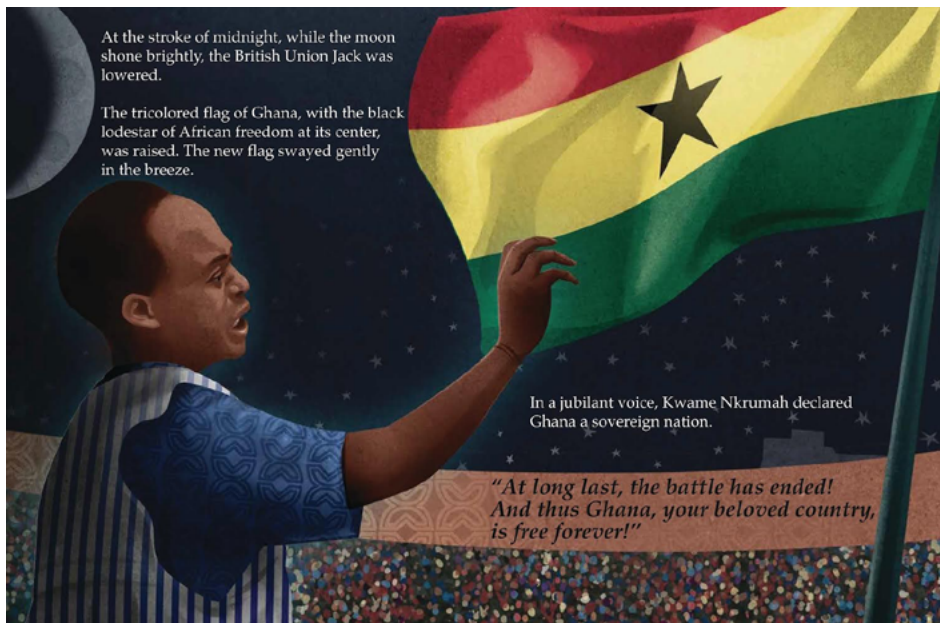


Illustration copyright Laura Freeman, published in *Kwame Nkrumah's Midnight Speech for Independence* by Useni Eugene Perkins, illustrated by Laura Freeman.

because we all have different sensibilities and ways of looking at the world or looking at how our project should be done. So, it's a matter of coming together and finding common ground for the sake of the project itself becoming the best that it can be. Just as teachers work differently with each student, we work differently with each person we collaborate with, including each other.

Q: What is it like to share your work with children?

Wade: That has been the blessing of what we do, the opportunity to connect with the students. We like personal engagement. We like to be at an assembly or in a classroom where we can actually connect with students. They are three generations from us, and they are so interested in what it was like for us to grow up in the past. They are full of questions about when we were growing up. To me, young people really are the hope of the future. I am so encouraged and hopeful for a better future, if we can get the adults out of the way.

Q: A major focus of your work is on contributing more diverse books to the market. Do you have anything else to add about this important element of your work together?

Cheryl: Last summer, Wade and I were asked to do a lecture at Simmons University. They have a Summer Institute in Children's Literature. Because we are authors, illustrators, graphic designers, editors, and publishers, we know we bring a different perspective. We may be talking about *We Rise, We Resist, We Raise Our Voices* as an anthology, but we also talk about the history of publishing, and how we began in it. We end up doing a lot of talking about the history of institutional publishing, and how we stand on the shoulders of people who came before us in the 1800s, James Russworm and Samuel Cornish, who established *Freedom's Journal*, which was the first African American newspaper in 1827. Wade and I were members of a collaborative group of people in



Illustration copyright Rafael Lopez, published in *We Rise, We Resist, We Raise Our Voices*, edited by Wade Hudson and Cheryl Willis Hudson

1988, when we started our company, the Multicultural Publishers Exchange, that was doing the same thing as #weneeddiversebooks aims to do today. So we've been here, and we've been telling our story, but it's either been hidden or erased, or minimized, and we've got to tell that whole story. The same message was being sent during the early seventies, when editors and art departments said, "Well, there are no black illustrators." There were plenty of black illustrations but they were not being hired to illustrate editorials or anything.

Wade: We are often considered pioneers, Cheryl and I. We understand why we would be called that, but we are not the real pioneers. Black people have been fighting to tell their stories since they've been here. They've been fighting to get to define themselves, because too often they were defined by other people. An editorial written in the first Black newspaper, *Freedom's Journal*, said, "We wish to plead our own calls. Too long have others spoken for us about things that concern us dearly." You know, so we are just standing on the shoulders of those who came before us, and the baton would just pass on to us, and it's our leg of the race that must be run. But we are not the first ones to run this race, we're just continuing it. Our focus, to be honest with you, has been more about Black book publishing, but it is just as important to publish books about all people. The Multicultural Publishing Exchange was a multicultural organization, but it didn't last that long, maybe five or six years. #Weneeddiversebooks has expanded this focus to the need for diverse books for everybody.

Q: Do you have advice for other couples who might be considering collaborating together on either a book or a company?

Cheryl: Make sure you have your own office space and have plenty of storage space!

Wade: I think it's important that particularly in a couple, a married couple or any couple, it's important to like each other, and that's different from loving each other. You have to like being together. Cheryl and I are together a lot, you know, and if we really didn't like each other, we wouldn't work, and that's different from being in love with each other.

Cheryl: It's important to have fun together. It's important to be on the same page, and to really enjoy what you do. I mean it's a challenge, you know, running a business and being successful in it. The fun part of publishing a book is getting the art and the illustrations together and seeing it in the

bookstore, seeing it in the library, and going on tour. But there's so much other work that goes into running a business and keeping it viable that you don't see when you see the cover of a book, so it's important that you really be committed to your principles and your passion. In terms of advice, you know, working together requires give and take. Liking each other, loving each other is one thing, and sharing the same values in terms of what you're publishing, to children, to the office. It just requires a commitment.

Q: What else is next for the two of you?

Cheryl: I am working on a book on African American music. It is a poem about African American spirituals, and I am working with a fantastic illustrator.

Wade: I have three books that are coming out. One is *Invincible Founding Fathers and Mothers of Black America*, a picture book illustrated by E. B. Lewis. You hear people talking about Black America, right? In this book, we sort of show America was formed. We share some of the important events that led up to it, and the important people who helped to shape the founding of Black America. The second book, *The Day My Mother Voted*, will be released in spring 2024, and focuses on the first day that my mother voted in Louisiana for the first time. It's a representational story based on the true story. The third book is a middle grade novel, *The Reckoning*, that will be released in spring 2024. It's a story about a twelve-year-old Black kid in a small town in the South who wants to be a filmmaker. &