

Couples who Collaborate

Jessixa and Aaron Bagley

MARY-KATE SABLESKI

Couples who collaborate to create children's books together offer fascinating and inspiring lessons for collaboration in its many forms. Jessixa and Aaron are a creative, dynamic couple and the creators of several books for children, including the middle grade graphic novel, *Duel* (2023). They live together in Seattle, WA, with their son.

Jessixa grew up in Portland, OR, and attended the University of Washington and the Cornish College of the Arts, where she met Aaron. She has a background in comics, fine art, and illustration, and received many awards and accolades over her career for that work. But a particular love and passion for creating picture books brought her to her current pursuits. She creates books as a solo author and illustrator, illustrates for other writers, and, of course, creates books with her husband.

Aaron also attended the Cornish College of the Arts, where he met Jessixa in a comics class. His illustrations have been featured in multiple outlets, including *Illustroria Magazine*. His first picture book *Vincent Comes Home* (2018) was also the first collaboration for the couple.

Q: How did you meet, and begin working on books together?

Jessixa: We met as undergraduate students at Cornish College of the Arts in Seattle. We spent a lot of time in comics class getting to know each other. We did not do much collaborating then. After we graduated, we started drawing together. In those early days, we created collaborative drawings, like little bits like here and there. We just kept at it, and then we were doing it more seriously without realizing it. Someone asked us to do a show based on a drawing they saw that we did together. So, we did a little gallery show with just all of our drawings. And, he proposed to me at the show.



Aaron: I did! When we were hanging the show, there was a spot in the gallery, that was kind of weird. We didn't know what to do with it, so I said, "I have an idea." The next night, when we were there installing, I said, "All right, turn around," and then I asked her to turn back around, and I was on one knee, with a cupcake and a button with a ring drawn on it. We didn't have any money to buy rings at that time.

Jessixa: It was the sweetest thing.

Aaron: Jewelry of any kind at that point was so out of our purview. We had bought the button maker together, so I thought, a button will work! It was one of the first things we bought together.

Jessixa: That, and a pencil sharpener.

Aaron: Oh yeah, that's right!

Jessixa: It was fun. We called the show *Duet*. We did several shows like this—they were not narratives, but we sometimes picked a theme for all of the drawings to follow.



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Aaron: These shows led us to make five little mini comics, all based on this mythology we created about my parents' house that's been in the family for three generations. The house is really old and cool, and we just made stories up about the big black walnut tree in the yard, or some strange man that lives in the basement and sends marbles up the air shafts to a kid that lives there. Just all kinds of weird stuff.

Jessixa: We also wrote a comic about a robot that learns to love. That was very early on. We were having fun. But we had a very natural desire to try to do this on a next level, a professional level in some form. So, after I sold my first picture book, we met with my editor for that book, Neal Porter. It was my first time meeting him, and Aaron was with me. Immediately, Neal asked us if we ever considered making a book together. He told us he really loves working with couples, and particularly married couples. We were so stunned! I still had not even officially published my first book!

Aaron: I mean, I did show him my artwork when we met. I showed him some of my little mini comics. I just show my work to people naturally. It is a nice icebreaker conversation. That conversation with Neal really planted a seed from the very beginning for us to think about making books together.

Jessixa: The first few ideas we tried, Neal did not take. Part of an editor's job is saying no to things, and if he had not said no, then we might not have gotten to our first picture book together. *Vincent Comes Home* was based off of a story that Aaron was writing for one of his little mini comics. Neal suggested he try to turn it into a picture book.

At first, Aaron was trying to do it on his own. As we talked about the book and shared ideas, I just kind of fell into working on it with him. Neal thought it was great! We had no qualms, because at that point we had been doing collaborative illustration for so long together. We knew it would look like one person illustrated it and would not feel disjointed. Fast forward to many years later... I had been doing picture books. Aaron had been doing a lot of illustration work, and he really loves working collaboratively with people. So, continuing our collaboration was always something very normal and natural.

When I got the idea for *Duel*, I thought I could write and illustrate it myself. But, like I always say to kids when I do school visits, "Would you want to spend three hundred pages just drawing your sister?" It was more challenging than I thought. So, I immediately asked Aaron if he thought he would want to illustrate it. We had been working on other graphic novel ideas for years, so this was a nice transition from doing smaller things to doing a whole book, and then for us to really get an opportunity to lean into one side each, him illustrating and me writing, instead of it being completely collaborative, which we had normally done before.

Q: Can you tell us about your process?

Aaron: Well, for *Vincent Comes Home*, we would trade back and forth with the writing a lot with that one. We relied on Neal a lot then, too, since it was our first book together. And now, our process for writing is usually like Jessixa sits at the computer, and then I lay down somewhere and I tell her things, and she writes things based on that. And we just go back and forth.

Jessixa: We actually do a lot of writing together for a lot of different projects, whether it is stuff for our son's school, or other projects. We spend a lot of time talking back and forth about our ideas, and then we sort of weave it together. He offers some ideas, I offer some ideas, and we merge and tweak them. I may write something, and I will ask him to read it, he makes some changes.

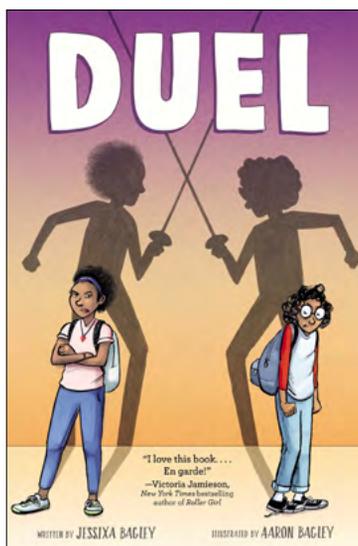
Our process is very much taking the best things that we say, and turning it into something that makes sense. When we collaborate on illustrations, we do not usually change each other's work much. We just add to it with some things we draw together. That process is more organic. We just let each other do what their strengths are with the illustrations. When he draws something, I want his intent to come through, so I really do not want to change it.

Aaron: I love collaborating like this because one has to relinquish a sense of ego. Something else comes through when there is not that competition of who did what part, and so a better product emerges. When we create together, I never feel like, I have to do this so that people will see that I did. I never feel like that.

Jessixa: For our graphic novels, like the one we are working on now, I am doing the writing, and Aaron is illustrating. It is funny, because then, when we see the full thing finished, it is not that I think that I did the illustrations, but I just feel like they are also mine. And Aaron says the same about the writing. We trust each other completely. I trust his choices always—he has impeccable taste. He is a phenomenal artist. I know when I do something he is going to treat it with care and consideration, and bring his talent to it like nobody else can.

Aaron: That is why working on *Duel* together was so different. Everything to that point had been very collaborative. Getting the manuscript for *Duel* from Jessixa was a new experience for me. And now, we are working on our third graphic novel, and it is great. I will illustrate anything she writes, because everything she writes is so good. It could be like the most mundane thing I would think, oh, this is going to be fun!

Q: How much revision and editing happens before your books even get to an official editor?



Jessixa: We are both very lucky because not everybody that makes books has a partner that also makes books. We understand the value of one another's work, and what needs to go into it. Because Aaron and I are doing the same things, even when it is a project that I am just doing by myself, I can trust him with giving thoughtful editing advice. When we work collaboratively together, the editing is super fluid. We share advice back and forth on each other's work. When we make our graphic novels, there is a very clear line. I am the author, and typically, I would be thousands of miles away from the illustrator. I am not supposed to have input. But I spent many years as a child reading the *Highlights* magazine feature in which there is something different across two pictures, so apparently, I am very good at spotting things that are not the same. I notice when there is not consistency across the illustrations. And so that does become an issue. It can be awkward because I am not sending him this over an email and just hitting send, and then I get to go about my day. I have to actually watch his discomfort when I point these things out to him.

Aaron: When you are drawing 330 pages, to get it right every single time, and you think it is all accurate, the continuity is perfect...it never is. Particularly in the coloring process, that is when these inconsistencies are really apparent. It can be a little tricky to do the changes at that point. It is meticulous. I will leave mistakes in because it feels good. It feels human.

Jessixa: He teases me because there is a mistake in *Duel*, but he will not tell me what it is. I always want to fix every inconsistency, but sometimes we do not see them until the editors say it is too late to correct them. We like to tell that to kids, too, because they love looking for the mistakes and telling us when they find them.

Q: How is it different to work with a family member as compared to another author or illustrator?

Jessixa: It is so much fun to get to work with Aaron. Because we have easy access to each other, the process can be more fluid. Good changes and revelations that affect aspects of the story emerge, because we are right here. But it is not just a proximity thing. It is also because I really know him, and I trust him. The number one thing that people say when they find out that we are married is, "I could never make a book with my husband." We have just been doing this so long. We are really okay with working through those sorts of things. And I think when you illustrate for somebody else, if it is somebody that you do not know, you are not sure exactly like what is going to be okay. I am a little apprehensive, because there is always the question of whether they will like it. But I never feel that with you.

Aaron: I have not illustrated a picture book for anyone else, or, a graphic novel for anyone else. I have done freelance work, so working with clients that you do not necessarily know, I think you have to generalize a little more, putting your strengths in front of them. It is a little bit like getting to know someone, a new friend almost. And the more that you get to know them, the more you know how to work with them. The things they do not care about, the things they do. I feel like I am always seeking to impress them, and I am always trying to impress Jessixa in anything I do. I want

her to be impressed with either writing, or ideas, or illustrations, and it is the same with someone else, but on a different level.

Q: How do you see your books working to be inclusive of diverse perspectives, backgrounds, and identities?

Jessixa: When I was growing up, I did not see myself in books. The only books that resonated with me were books where the animals were characters, because it was just about their experiences and their feelings. I could connect to that. I did not feel outside of that world.

Now that we are making books with people in them, it is very natural for us to want to be sure that we are showing many different experiences, types of people, body sizes and ethnicities, because that is the world. That is not us trying to pretend a diverse world exists. These are kids' actual experiences.

Aaron: I think representation with knowledge of someone else's experience, but not overstepping your boundary. I included a character in our next graphic novel that uses a wheelchair. I did not add anything in there that was about using a wheelchair. I just put him in one. Across the entire book, I had to include him in all these scenes, where a person in a wheelchair might face challenges. So, instead of having Jessixa rewrite the story, I just approached it as though he was a person for whom I had to make accommodations. That gave me a perspective on how it would be if I had this character over to my apartment. We have stairs. It is one and a half flights up the stairs, so I could not have him over unless we figured something out. We would have to figure something out. And that's how I approached it in the book. But I also did not use it to further the story. It was just to have this person in there, as he would be in the real world.

Jessixa: This conversation about being inclusive and adding diversity to books is inherently problematic because it is coming from a perspective that we need to put people in these books. But everybody already exists in the world. If you look at it from that perspective, it can feel like there is a "normal," which means there is a "not normal."

All of us are normal. All of us are in the world, and all of us should be in books. I enjoy creating stories about the experiences kids have day to day. I do not want it to always be about pain, or othering, or trauma. Every kid has these feelings of isolation, or grief, or loneliness, or feeling different, or wanting to fit in. Those are universal truths that we all have the right to feel.

Q: What is next for you?

Jessixa: We are almost finished with the second graphic novel, called *Dear Jackie*. It is a separate story from *Duel*.

Aaron: It is a middle grade graphic novel. It stands alone, and is not connected to *Duel*. It is about a middle schooler and her best friend who are starting off in middle school, and they have to go separate ways. They end up traversing middle school in these new social groups, and there are a lot of social expectations. The

main character is trying to navigate these new social expectations without her best friend helping her along the way. To try to make an effort to fit in, she invents a secret admirer and starts sending herself love letters.

Jessixa: What could go wrong, right? I am just finishing up the edits on my own middle grade graphic novel called *Jazzy the Witch*, and it is the first of two books right now. It is for slightly younger middle grade readers. And, we are working on our third graphic novel together right now.

Q: Do you have any advice for other couples who might be considering working together to create books?

Jessixa: We have never been asked that.

Aaron: I think it is important to find a way that works for the both of you. When we write together, it is conversational. Find what is going to support your process, and then don't judge it. It definitely takes a lot of respect. Respect the thing that the other person does, and leave your ego at the door. You can really ruin a project when someone takes over the process.

Jessixa: Trust, and allowing each other's strengths to shine through. Find a process that is unique to your communication style. And yes, try not to let your own personal agenda or personal ego get in the way. And, on the other side, if it is not working, for example you are either not getting credit or your voice is being squashed, then get out. Go and do it on your own. Collaborating with your spouse is not for everybody. But as long as both people agree that they are trying to make the work the best it can be, then it will come from a healthy place. &