

Couples Who Collaborate

Tom Angleberger and Cece Bell

MARY-KATE SABLESKI



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Tom Angleberger and Cece Bell are the unique couple behind numerous memorable books for children. The couple creates joyful, relatable characters and settings that invite children to return to their books again and again. In addition to their collaborative projects, the couple also supports each other in their independent pursuits, which are also hugely successful. Their insights and experiences on collaborating and creating books for children draw from their years of experience, and success, honing their craft together.

Cece Bell is the author and illustrator of a diverse range of books, including Newbery Honor-winning autobiography *El Deafo* (2014), Geisel Honor-winning *Rabbit and Robot: The Sleepover* (2014), *Rabbit and Robot and Ribbit* (2017), *I Yam a Donkey* (2016), *Bee-Wigged* (2017), *Itty Bitty* (2009), and the Sock Monkey series. She has also created books with her husband, Tom, including *Crankee Doodle* (2013) and the Inspector Flytrap series. She earned her graduate degree in illustration and design at Kent State University and became a full-time author and illustrator after many years of working as a freelance illustrator and designer.

Tom Angleberger is the author and illustrator of the popular Origami Yoda series, the QWIKPIK series, and numerous other funny and engaging books. Tom worked as a newspaper reporter before deciding to write and illustrate children's books full time after the birth of their first son.

Tom and Cece currently live in Virginia. They met while undergraduate students at The College of William and Mary, where both were art majors and worked in the graphic design department. Now, they share the same career, but not always the same studio space. Their collaborative thoughts about

creating children's books together are inspirational, honest, and, of course, funny.

Q: How did the two of you meet?

TA: Cece and I met in college. We'd run into each other our freshman year, but it was sophomore year when we both worked on the graphics staff of the college newspaper.

CB: I was not nice to Tom at first! I wanted to make straight A's, and *LIKING a BOY* was a *BIG DISTRACTION!* But he won me over!

Q: Did you always plan to create books together?

TA: We actually started work on a book while we were in college. But never finished it. My writing was poor, but Cece's cut-paper illustrations were going to be awesome.

CB: I remember that. Those cut-paper illustrations were *AWFUL!* But I was proud of them at the time. (And that's another way Tom won me over. Always so supportive about the stuff I made.)



Mary-Kate Sableski is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Teacher Education at the University of Dayton, where she teaches courses in children's literature and literacy methods. Her main areas of research interest include diversity in children's literature and struggling readers.

Q: Describe your process of creating books together, from the idea stage, to drafting, revising, editing, and publishing.

TA: A lot of the “work” we do together goes like this: One of us says something crazy out loud. The other one says, “that would be a great kids book.” Sometimes we pursue it for a few minutes. Sometimes we actually write it down or draw a few pictures. But it very rarely becomes a book. But sometimes it does. We were on a long car ride when we created *Crankee Doodle*, just bouncing ideas back and forth. By the end of the ride, we had the whole book. Later, I wrote it out, but the story itself had been “written” out loud on that car ride. And then Cece spent a lot of time making the paintings.

CB: I also spent a little bit of time editing Tom’s writing. Hopefully he wasn’t *too* mad about that . . .

TA: As far as the other stages, those are often solo. Cece doesn’t need or want me hanging over her shoulder while she’s drawing. But the fun comes when she shows me what she’s made.

CB: I love to surprise Tom with my interpretations of things. I especially loved writing and illustrating these little one-page comics for him in the Inspector Flytrap books. So much of what we do when we collaborate is to try to create these silly little gifts for each other—something hilarious for the other to discover and get a big laugh out of.

TA: We used to spend a lot of time talking over our stories and trying to help each other think things out (usually in our kitchen). But these days, it’s often more about lending an understanding ear when the other one talks about what they’re up to. For instance, I’m working on a book about fractals and poor Cece has had to look at so many fractals and hear about so many fractals, that when/if the book finally comes out, she won’t need to read it.

CB: The fractals are cool. I dig them but still can’t quite get my head around what exactly they are. And yes, that understanding ear is the best. It’s pretty wonderful to be able to talk to your spouse about some of the frustrations that can occur when you’re working on a book—like, this font is awful! Why did they choose this font? First-world problems for sure, and others outside the biz might think, “who actually CARES about a font?” So it’s nice that we can have these discussions without feeling poo-pooed. (Poo-pooed looks even better typed than I anticipated!)

Q: Describe your work space for us. Do you work together, alone, at home, etc.?

TA: Most of the actual “work” work gets done alone. I do a lot of my work on the porch or at a table. I recently got a roll-top desk, but that’s more about protecting my stuff from the cats than anything else.

CB: I have my own studio space next door—it’s one of those Home Depot barns that’s been “finished” on the inside. But there’s no running water or toilet, so I run home to use the bathroom and end up “at the water cooler” yakking away to Tom about all our various projects. My studio is definitely off limits to just about everybody—and that includes the cats *and* Tom. :)

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

TA: As an author, I usually have almost no contact with the illustrator during the process. But when Cece is illustrating one of my stories, she and I obviously end up talking about it. I think it made the Inspector Flytrap books so much better, because she was able to reshape the books to fit her own vision. And it was a great vision.

CB: Tom is too generous. I can be pretty bossy with my vision of how I think a book we’re both working on should go. The tricky part for me about working with Tom as opposed to another writer is that I’m a lot more sensitive to his criticisms than I am to others’. I’m probably more sensitive than he is but I think we both try to be nice when we disagree about something. At least I *hope* I’m nice.



Interior art by Cece Bell for *Crankee Doodle*; permission granted by the creators.

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

TA: That’s the best thing ever. Having kids make origami Star Wars characters, often from their own designs, is the coolest thing ever.

CB: I agree with Tom. It’s the best thing ever to feel connected to your readers. And I especially love meeting kids who use hearing aids or cochlear implants. It feels like we are instant friends.

Q: The We Need Diverse Books initiative has had an enormous impact on the children’s book market. How do you see your work fitting into this movement?

TA: Well, since I'm an autistic adult and a lot of characters are autistic kids, I think I fit in pretty well.

CB: I think my book *El Deafo* fits into this movement as a representation of disability lit, as it's a depiction of childhood hearing loss and using hearing aids—and the feeling of being different as a result.

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

TA: The roles of author and illustrator are pretty straightforward in the industry. But a real collaboration totally mixes those roles and upends all the rules. You're not firing off an email to an art director who will pass it on to an illustrator. You're face to face. The potential for a huge disaster or a huge success is much greater. For me, it's been easy because Cece is an amazing artist AND a great storyteller. When she gets a big idea, she cannot be stopped. So often I just need to stay out of the way!

CB: Again, Tom is too generous! My advice would be to be kind and thoughtful when you give each other suggestions, and to set aside separate, non-family time to talk about the project so that it doesn't take over everything. I'm really lucky to get to make things with someone as hilarious as Tom is. He's such a creative and generous and exciting collaborator, for sure. &

Books by Tom Angleberger and Cece Bell

- Angleberger, Tom. *Inspector Flytrap*. Illus. by Cece Bell. Amulet Books, 2016. 112p.
- Angleberger, Tom. *Strange Case of Origami Yoda*. Harry N. Abrams, 2015. 208p.
- Angleberger, Tom. *Poop Fountain!: The Qwikpick Papers*. Amulet Books, 2014. 144p.
- Angleberger, Tom. *Rocket and Groot: Keep on Truckin'!* Marvel Press, 2017. 272p.
- Angleberger, Tom. *Crankee Doodle*. Illus. by Cece Bell. Clarion Books, 2013. 32p.
- Bell, Cece. *I Yam a Donkey!*. Illus. by the author. Clarion Books, 2016. 32p.
- Bell, Cece. *El Deafo*. Illus. by the author. Harry N. Abrams, 2014. 248p.
- Bell, Cece. *Rabbit and Robot and Ribbit*. Illus. by the author. Candlewick Sparks, 2017. 48p.
- Bell, Cece. *Chick and Brain: Smell My Foot!*. Illus. by the author. Candlewick, 2019. 72p.
- Bell, Cece. *Bee-Wigged*. Illus. by the author. Candlewick, 2017. 40p.

Index to Advertisers

ALA Graphics cover 3
 ALA Editions..... cover 3

ALSC..... cover 2
 Loyola Press cover 4