

# Writing with Four Hands in Two Languages

BY ANDREW KATZ AND JULIANA LÉVEILLÉ-TRUDEL



Andrew Katz and Juliana Léveillé-Trudel published their first picture book, *How to Catch a Bear Who Loves to Read/ Comment attraper un ours qui aime lire*, with CrackBoom! Books in November 2018. Through an unconventional co-writing process, they created two original versions of the same story, one in English and one in French. Their book was released simultaneously in both official languages, and it will be featured in the Montreal Westmount Library's bilin-

gual Summer StoryWalk®, opening June 21, 2019. This is the story of a unique artistic collaboration between two writers, but also between two languages and two cultures.

*Ne pas se montrer le bout du nez* is an expression familiar to French Canadians. Roughly translated, it means that someone or something 'isn't showing even so much as the end of its nose'; that it isn't presenting itself, isn't appearing, at all. For example, on a grey rainy day, a French speaker

might say *le soleil ne se montre pas le bout du nez* (the sun isn't showing so much as the tip of its nose.) To express a similar idea in English, one might say something like 'the sun isn't showing its face.' But there is no expression that refers to the sun as having a nose.

We don't tend to think about the idioms of our native language; they come to mind and roll off our tongues almost completely naturally. It is often only when we speak with someone with a different mother tongue that we begin to notice the idiosyncrasies in the way they put words together, and in how we do as well. This type of interaction is common in Montreal, where both of us were born and still live. Montreal is Canada's most trilingual city, and one of the few places in the country where the *two solitudes* really do mingle and talk to each other — and sometimes write a picture book together.

The term *two solitudes*, popularized by Hugh MacLennan in his 1945 novel with the same title, refers to the notion that English and French people live side by side in Canada without actually participating in or even being aware of each other's culture. And there is, indeed, some truth to this notion. History books and newspapers also carry many stories of conflict between the French and the English in Quebec and in Canada.

But there is another story that happens, too, when people of diverse backgrounds find themselves in the same place — a story of creativity, in which people make something together they never could have made separately.

That is the story of our co-writing adventure.

**The inspiration** for *How to Catch a Bear Who Loves to Read/ Comment attraper un ours qui aime lire* came to us one day when Andrew spotted a book lying around that he didn't recognize. The book looked intriguing, and he made an excited lunge toward it, as if it were a chocolate chip cookie. Juliana joked that to make a trap for Andrew, the thing to put in it would not be food but a book. We laughed at this idea, and also agreed that this unexpected twist might make for a good story. Juliana, who has an overflowing love of animals, had always longed to meet a bear, certain, despite the obvious risks, that the two of them would get along. And so the tale of a young girl and a bear who loves to read began to take shape.

We imagined a young girl full of spunk, daring and imagination, and we named her Julia, after the creator with whom she shares some personality traits. Julia loves playing and reading in the forest by her house. However, she despairs slightly at the fact that she has never spotted hide nor hair of a potential ursine buddy. She has other animal friends among the trees: a squirrel named Scotty, a groundhog named Abigail and a skunk named Frieda. (In French they're known as *Léon l'écureuil*, *Charlotte la marmotte* and *Georgette la mouffette*.) But she is the kind of kid who dreams big and her biggest dream is to befriend a bear — imagine the hugs!

Then one day, a book she is reading gives her an idea about how she might attract a 'bearnormous' new pal. But what she doesn't yet know is that if there is indeed a bear in her forest, this bear might love something even more than

food — a good page-turner.

When it came time to put these ideas into words, we decided we'd take turns. One of us would try our hand at a scene first. We would then pass the scene along to the other person, who would play around with it as much as they liked. After that, the other person would write out the next scene. Finally, the other person would pass the story — now longer by one scene — back to us. And the process would continue like this, back and forth.

Because our native languages are different, our process also included an added twist — Juliana would write in French and Andrew would write in English.

Juliana led off, describing our protagonist's predicament — i.e., no bear in sight. As she reflected on how to phrase this conundrum, a gentle variation on the familiar French expression above occurred to her, in a very natural way: *aucun ours ne montre jamais le bout de son museau*, which translates to 'no bear ever shows the end of its snout.'

After finishing a draft of the opening, Juliana emailed it to Andrew, who then re-wrote it in English. As we had agreed on together, he didn't translate the French version word for word, but instead gave himself the liberty of adding or changing details, re-ordering events, and so on. But although he made changes to the text, he also took inspiration from his writing partner. One line in French struck him as particularly original, and brought a smile to his face: the one about 'no bear ever showing the end of its snout.'

As an anglophone, he wasn't sure he ever would have thought to formulate Julia's problem this way. He could have opted for a phrasing closer to the English expression, such as 'no bear ever showed its face.' But the concreteness and comic charm of the French sentence kept tickling his imagination. So he tried to capture these qualities in his own draft, writing, 'no bear ever showed its snout.'

Once Andrew had translated and reworked the opening, he wrote out a new scene of his own. Then he sent the story — all in English now — back to Juliana. Re-writing it in the same way her colleague had done, she took inspiration from some of the changes he had proposed, as well as from his English phrasings. As she read his new scene, she found herself charmed by this sentence: "the bear was lending a helping paw to an old turtle." The English expression "lending a helping hand" could be translated as *donner un coup de main*. But somehow the image of the bear extending his paw was more vivid in English. So Juliana sprinkled the French version with a bit more detail, to make the line more visually appealing: *l'ours tend gentiment la patte à une vieille tortue*, which translates to 'the bear kindly extends his paw to an old turtle.'

Continually passing the story to our co-author in this way and having it come back each time in a *different language* — not so much translated as *transformed*, infused with the flavour of new expressions, new turns of phrase and new ideas — was definitely one of the most invigorating aspects of our collaboration. The idiosyncrasies of the other person's native language nourished our own writing and vice versa, and allowed us to create two original versions of the story, one in English, one in French, which neither of us would have been able to write by ourselves.

**Most writers** to whom we've described our co-writing process have expressed astonishment. "I could never write with someone else!" some have said. "I wouldn't be able to stand it if a sentence wasn't just the way I thought it should be." But when your writing partner doesn't share your mother tongue, sharing the writing process with them turns out to be much less fraught. Juliana leaves the exact phrasing of the English to Andrew, and Andrew keeps his big paws off Juliana's choice of words in French. (Forgive us; we had to get in at least one bear joke.) And as we discovered, collaboration between two authors who write in different languages can enrich a story in other ways as well.

If the other person's language brought fresh ingredients to our work, so, too, did their culture. In the stories Andrew grew up reading, for example, forests were a recurring landscape. While these forests could be places where characters got lost and encountered danger, they could also be places where characters were able to experience a new kind of freedom — a freedom to play, discover and grow. There were the Forest of Arden, the Hundred Acre Wood, Terabithia, and many other forests where imagination was free to run wild. This is the kind of forest Andrew pictured for our main character: a safe place for exploration, close enough to home to hear her mother calling her for lunch, and free enough for her dreams of friendship with animals to come to life.

Juliana, for her part, has always loved audacious stories that take delight in breaking taboos, the type of stories that have been growing steadily in popularity in French children's literature in Quebec. Notably, Quebec author-illustrator Élise Gravel has shown a fondness for subjects that aren't usually discussed in polite company. Gravel has created a series titled *Les petits dégoûtants* (Disgusting Critters), which celebrates tiny beasts that generally get a bad rap — cockroaches, worms, rats and slugs, among others — and recently she has also written a picture book titled *La tribu qui pue* (*The Stinky Tribe*), about the adventures of a group of children who live wild and naked in the middle of the forest. A hit in Quebec, *La tribu qui pue* still has not been picked up by any publishers south of the border, who, so far, have judged it too obscene.

It was a bit of Gravel's influence that inspired Juliana to imagine the *concours de pets* (farting contest), a little game that Julia and her friend Frieda, the skunk, like to play together. Among francophone audiences, very few, if any, readers took note of this pastime, except to point out its comic nature. On the other hand, to our surprise, a small but vocal number of commenters in English Canada and the United States judged this joke to be inappropriate, a minor controversy we now affectionately refer to as 'Fartgate.'

As for the kids we read the book to in libraries, bookstores and schools, in both languages, they tend to just briefly giggle and move on with the rest of the story.

**Beyond how it shaped** our picture book, our bilingual collaboration and friendship has influenced us in other ways, broadening horizons that might have been hidden or inaccessible to us otherwise.

Our book was published with CrackBoom! Books, an imprint of Chouette Publishing, who release all their titles

simultaneously in French and in English, targeting at once French Canadian, English Canadian and American markets, as well as French markets in France and elsewhere in Europe. But with our book, for the first time, Chouette published not an original and a translation, but two original versions. This opportunity — to publish both in our own native language and in our second language — was a first for us as well, and it opened doors into new literary worlds. Andrew, for instance, had never participated in, much less attended, the Montreal Salon du livre, a mega-event in Quebec French culture. The Salon had simply never been on his radar; in English Canada, even in English Montreal, that kind of book fair, which includes speakers, workshops and nearly a stadium full of books, doesn't really exist. But a few weeks after our book was published, Andrew found himself sitting behind an author's table with Juliana inside the Salon, meeting French kids and their parents and signing the French copies of their books.

Anglophone culture has its own kinds of literary events that you'd be hard-pressed to find in the francophone milieu. One example is the oral storytelling nights hosted by American and Canadian groups like The Moth and Confabulation, in which anyone (no need to be a professional) can get up in front of an audience and tell their own personal story — sans notes, sans costumes, sans props. Juliana, who had never experienced this kind of amateur storytelling, fell completely in love with it, and in collaboration with Confabulation created *Enfabulation*, a French version of the same event, which just finished its second season, and which continues to draw larger and larger crowds of francophones curious about this form of storytelling.

We have shared with each other our cultural treasures: Juliana, a playwright and novelist as well as a children's author, now attends the Stratford Festival of Canada each summer. Andrew, who grew up watching *Passe-Partout*, but somehow had never heard of *La Petite Vie*, now watches reruns of this iconic Quebec comedy. We have drawn from our differences to help create a richer narrative universe around Julia and her forest friends.

But after over six months now of reading our picture book to kids, in English and in French, we have witnessed, above all, how children are the same, whether they are introduced to Scotty the squirrel, Abigail the groundhog and Frieda the skunk or *Léon l'écureuil*, *Charlotte la marmotte* and *Georgette la mouffette*.

They just want to hear a good story. 🐾

This article was written by Andrew Katz and Juliana Léveillé-Trudel, with four hands in two languages. We hope to publish the French version, *Écrire à quatre mains et en deux langues*, in a French magazine in Quebec in the near future.

Andrew Katz is an author and teacher at Dawson College in Montreal. His areas of specialization include children's literature, and in 2013, he won his college's Director General's Award for Teaching Excellence. *How to Catch a Bear Who Loves to Read*, co-authored with Juliana Léveillé-Trudel, is his first published work.

Born in Montreal in 1985, Juliana Léveillé-Trudel writes in multiple genres, including as a novelist (*Nirliit*, 2015), picture book author (*How to Catch a Bear Who Loves to Read*, 2018, co-written with Andrew Katz), blogger and playwright. She has performed several of her theatrical and literary works on stage, and since 2017, she has been the director of *Enfabulation*, an oral storytelling show in French. She has organized several cultural mediation projects and is also the founder of the Productions de brousse theatre company.