Editor’s Note: In this piece, bestselling middle grades authors and first time collaborators Wendy Mass and Rebecca Stead share about their process in writing their newest novel, Bob, which will be released in May 2018.

Who is Livy, and who is Bob?

WM: I wrote Bob’s sections. Bob is a small, green creature who doesn’t need to eat much (though he enjoys a salty snack now and again) and doesn’t need to sleep much (although who doesn’t love a nice nap on occasion?). He doesn’t remember where he came from, and he doesn’t know how to get home. He’s been waiting for the return of his old friend Livy for a LONG time, but when she finally shows up, she’s not the Livy he remembered.

RS: And I wrote the chapters from Livy’s point of view (aka the “odd chapters”—pun possibly intended). Livy is a ten-year-old girl from Massachusetts who hasn’t been to her grandmother’s house near Melbourne since she was five. She has a new baby sister and a new fear of sleeping over at friends’ houses. She’s lost much of the confidence she had when she was a little kid and believed she could do anything, but she hasn’t yet understood all the new ways in which her abilities are blossoming. It’s a stage of life I remember pretty well.

As you were writing BOB, how did you share your chapters? What advice would you give to teachers who are interested in asking students to collaborate in pairs?

WM: When we first talked about doing a book together, we knew it would be one where the two main characters would trade off points of view. We’d both written books on our own that had done this, and it seemed the natural fit for a collaboration. This way we’d each get to create our own voice for our character, while also getting to write the other person’s character when they appeared in our sections. That sounds confusing, but it really wasn’t. It took us a year or so to land on an idea that felt right. Rebecca started off with Livy’s chapter and essentially lobbed me a zombie! The last line of her chapter revealed Bob, who, to Livy, looked like a zombie with his loose clothes and green skin. She’d hidden him in a closet for five years, and it would be up to me to figure out why. The chapter came with a quick note that said, “Not sure if there’s something here, but see what you think.” And we were off and running! A few weeks later, I sent her Bob’s first chapter, and we agreed we had something worth exploring here. And, a mere seven years from our first conversation, we had a book. Our book could be a second grader!

The rule was that we didn’t edit the other person’s chapters, only wrote our own and sent the whole thing back. There were times when life, kids, other book commitments, would take over and months would go by while one of us waited for the next chapter. We might subtly nudge each other, but unless I’ve blocked it out, neither of us gave the other a hard time, likely because
we knew the next delay might be our fault! The longest was the eight months I made Rebecca wait while finishing up the sequel to *The Candymakers*. Sorry, Rebecca! xo. Once we had typed THE END and celebrated a bit, we got down to the hard task of stitching the chapters together and editing the piece as a whole. The revision stage is my favorite part of the writing process, so I loved really digging in there and seeing what parts we needed to strengthen and what threads we needed to pull. It was gratifying when Rebecca would find the same things and exhilarating when she would see things I had missed. Then when we had real editors reading the book, they’d spot things we were too close to see, and that made everything truly come together.

When I talk to young writers I always tell them how much fun it is to write together and how rewarding it can be. Now with modern technology it’s a lot easier if they don’t want to pass a notebook back and forth like I did with friends in middle school. Sharing a Google Doc is a great way to keep a story alive. Knowing someone is waiting for your chapter, or your input on their chapter, is a great motivator that could really help young writers finish a project. Rebecca and I didn’t set a standard goal for how long each of our chapters should be, but for those starting out I would recommend setting some kind of estimate for the number of words or pages each person is responsible for ahead of time. It keeps each person accountable and we all know kids like having structure (even though they pretend they don’t).

**WM:** The ideas for my books almost always start with plot (What if the meaning of life was in a box? What if people lived inside dark matter? Or a candy factory?). Then I find the right character to tell the story. Then research, research, research until the storyline starts coming together. I look at it like each book is a house, and I build it from the ground-up—my outline is like a very detailed blueprint, then I build layer after layer up from there. I edit as I write it, so I don’t do as many drafts as I used to. I have always sought input from others on a work-in-progress, whether it’s getting feedback in a traditional writers group, from my English-teacher husband, or my eleven-year-old daughter who earns a dollar for every chapter she edits (I know, she needs a raise)! I also used to be an editor for a decade, so I love that part of the process. It only took one conversation to realize that Rebecca’s process is much different, much more organic, and that we would need to compromise. She agreed to one full day of brainstorming (the notes for which we both lost and could never fully reconstruct!) and would always be happy to talk me through a plot point that I was stuck on, but she felt it was really important for each of us to protect our own chapters and our character, to be free to make them purely our own. I admit I had to literally sit on my hands to keep from writing comments or suggestions as we went along, and when I couldn’t restrain myself from attaching possible future plot points to the ends of my chapters, Rebecca was always very lovely about not calling me out on it.

Eventually I adjusted to the new order of things and often found it very liberating. Terrifying, but freeing at the same time. And when I’d expect Rebecca to zig, she would zag, sometimes taking the story in a completely new direction that would leave me laughing and shaking my head. Basically she just kept lobbing those zombies and breathing life into the story by making it unpredictable, even to her co-writer. But I always trusted her and eventually was able to give myself over to this less-structured process. (But I went back to my outline for the next book.)

**RS:** When I write a book, I usually begin with something very small in hand—a voice, a character, a sense of mystery I want to explore. I try to pin whatever it is to the page with a short description or a short scene. Once I get that down, I sort of work away at the edges of it until I discover the next thing about the story. That “next thing” might be...
a new character (oh, that weird kid upstairs has a little sister?) or a setting (oh, we’re going to see the kitchen at the restaurant where Dad works!) or even a question (hmm, where did the wild parrots of Brooklyn come from?). And I just keep at it, writing scenes and discovering the territory of the book little by little, until I think I’ve created a book-sized amount of material.

Then I start stage two of the work, which is to think analytically about what kind of book it will be, what shape it should take. There’s a lot of “redistribution of weight” at this stage—invariably, I have written too much about certain characters or questions and left others undeveloped. Sometimes I discover that certain aspects of the story don’t belong in the book at all, and I have to take them out, bit by bit. I think of this stage as a kind of gardening—encouraging growth here, killing something there, pruning, pruning, pruning. Keep in mind that I have never actually had a garden, so I don’t know what I’m talking about. But writing feels that way to me most of the time, too—as if I have no idea what I’m doing, I mean. And I have grasped this not-knowing as my method.

This is probably the biggest difference between the way I write and the way Wendy writes. Like many of the writers I admire most, Wendy usually plots her stories before she writes them. Like many of the writers I admire most, Wendy usually plots her stories before she writes them. I have never been able to plot ahead of time. I think I’m actually a little afraid that if I did plan ahead, I would be unable to write the book. And so I more or less begged Wendy to walk with me on my much-less-efficient path. For me, a big part of the magic of writing this story together, chapter by chapter, was being surprised by where each of us would take it next. Whenever I read Wendy’s latest chapter, ideas would spring to my mind, and I’d start taking notes for my next chapter. I loved being free to do that, to read her scenes and think—oh, I know how to use that detail she just threw in! I also loved mailing off a chapter and wondering what would come back. But it’s not the fastest way to write a book, and I confess there have been many times in my writing life when I wished I had even a sketchy road map.

Wendy, you frequently visit classrooms and meet an array of young readers. As you were writing BOB, did you have a particular kind of reader in mind? What do you believe are the appeals of dual-narrator stories?

WM: I was trying to add up the other day how many kids I speak to in a year, and it must be close to twenty-five thousand over the course of around thirty school visits. I love, love, love meeting the kids who are the age of my characters, and now that I have books for readers as young as first grade and as old as eighth, I’m guaranteed to be inspired by whatever group I’m speaking to. When I start thinking about a new book, I don’t think so much in terms of what kind of reader might be drawn to it. Rather, I hope that each reader can walk away with whatever they need to take from it. From what I know about kids, especially the ones who are in the middle grade range, it’s often hard for them to step outside themselves, to see how others might think or feel. It takes them much longer to build up empathy than I would have thought, and this stage of egocentricity is a totally normal developmental phase. That said, by giving them stories where they get to read about events from different points of view, I hope I’m doing some small part toward helping them develop that sense of empathy and compassion, along with gaining a greater understanding of the effect our words and choices have on those around us. With BOB, our goal wasn’t so much to show how differently Livy and Bob saw the world, but more to build a bridge between their two worlds, to show how their friendship improved both of their lives, and how embracing their own individual power made them stronger together.

BOB takes place in Australia. Have you ever visited? Why did you and Rebecca choose to set your story there?

WM: I’ve never been but have always been enamored of it. In one of my books (13 Gifts) I had an Australian character, and even put a glossary at the end of the book to define the slang the character used. I had a lot of fun with that one! They have some very colorful language Down Under, and I was excited when Rebecca chose Australia as a setting.
RS: I've been to Australia, once, for a library conference. I met a lot of wonderful writers and librarians and spent a night in a town a couple of hours from Melbourne so that I could talk to kids who lived too far away to make it to the program in the city. I loved being there. I always love the way travel allows you to see your own life from a different angle. I wrote the first chapter of BOB on the plane ride home.

Rebecca, though your previous books have had some fantastical elements, BOB sits solidly in the fantasy genre. Was this your intention when you first started writing BOB? Do you agree with that label, or would you call BOB something else?

RS: I'm pretty terrible at genre labels. I think I called my first novel "contemporary science fiction," and maybe I'd call this a contemporary fairy tale. I rarely start a book with any intentions at all—or maybe I should say that my intention is only ever to get down [whatever it is I have in my fist] before it escapes.

When I wrote chapter one of Bob, I was thinking about how we forget, throughout life, the people we used to be. The book opens with Livy's Australian grandmother showing her a number of things she loved to play with at her house when she was five years old. And Livy, who's now ten, can't remember any of them. I vaguely knew I was getting at a bigger issue, which is that along with the stuffed elephant and the chipped chess pieces, Livy has forgotten some of the confidence she had when she was younger. She's accumulated a few worries, as we sometimes do. And she's forgotten some of her sense of power, as sometimes we do. I also knew, writing chapter one, that Livy had forgotten a mysterious creature who was waiting for her (impatiently) upstairs in her grandmother's closet. Over time, I understood that rediscovering this creature would lead her back to belief in herself. But I didn't know that right away. I didn't even know at first whether the creature, aka Bob, was real or imaginary. At the end of chapter one, Livy opens the closet and sees Bob standing on a dictionary with a Lego pirate in one hand. He looks real . . .

And then it was Wendy's turn.

As the story progressed, I thought a lot about fairy tales, and about stories like Sylvester and the Magic Pebble, which, for me, contain a sort of fairy-tale quality. I re-read my old Brothers Grimm collection, The Juniper Tree (illustrated by the amazing Maurice Sendak). Fairy tales were like a faint light in the distance that I groped toward as I wrote my chapters. And at some point when we were pretty deep in, I also wrote myself a note that was sort of my mantra for this story, which was: Bob is powerful. So is Livy.