

An Interview with Amy Krouse Rosenthal & Tom Lichtenheld, Creators of *Exclamation Mark*



Photo credit: Jim Darling

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- ★ “Punctuation with pizzazz.”
—*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review
- ★ “This one is a must-have!!!”
—*School Library Journal*, starred review

You each have a succession of bestsellers under your belt, but as a team, you’ve created such whimsical works as *Duck! Rabbit!* and *Wumpers*. How did your partnership begin?

Tom: I used to work in advertising, as did Amy. One day my boss said to me, “Hey, I worked with a woman who now writes books; you should meet her.” So I contacted Amy, and we met for lunch. I’ll never forget sitting with her in the park as she scribbled “OK” onto a napkin and showed me how, if you turn it sideways, it becomes a person. It was the perfect introduction to Amy’s creative genius—she finds new insights in things that are right in front of us.

Who came up with the idea of a story from the point of view of a punctuation mark?

Amy: About six years ago, the thought flashed through my mind: my son is an exclamation mark. And then I just followed that thought along. I worked on the book off and on for a bunch of years because while the essence was there, there were parts that were just not working as well as they needed to. Enter Tom. Once we started talking about the character and his journey, bumpy parts magically became smooth. Tom’s role in this book is critical and pivotal—just like Question Mark’s role with *Exclamation Mark!* Art imitating life. Or life imitating art? Perhaps both!

There’s a subtle lesson hidden in the book about the uses of punctuation. Can you explain how that ties in to the main theme of the story?

Tom: It’s a story of someone finding themselves, and how a stranger unwittingly inspires them along the way. It’s not until the question mark comes in and causes chaos that the exclamation mark discovers his true talent. Many stories have a “helper” to motivate the protagonist, but what I love about this one is that the question mark has no intention of helping anyone—he’s just being himself, which instigates the exclamation mark to do the same. The grammar lesson, obviously, is about the function of question marks and exclamation marks, but the bigger lesson is about finding and being true to yourself.

The main character—an exclamation mark—is searching for his place in the world. Is this a topic that you feel young children can relate to?

Amy: How many exclamation marks can I use to answer yes to this question?!!! :) While most children would not use the words “searching for my place in the world,” in my experience (as a mom, as someone who works directly with children, and as a former child myself) that is indeed what they are doing and thinking and feeling in a very real way from an early age on.

What’s next for you both? Any future pairings we should look for?

Amy: Oh we’re cooking up a little something. Stay tuned!

