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Q & A with Paris Rosenthal and Holly Hatam

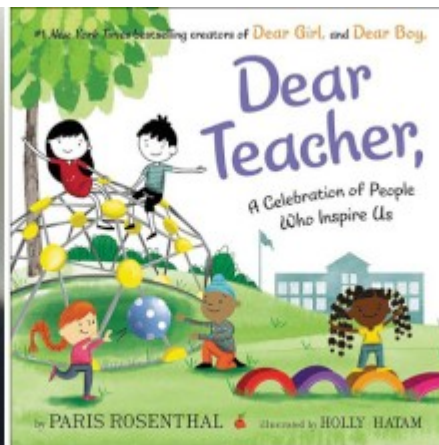
By Patricia J. Murphy | May 24, 2021

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Paris Rosenthal (l.) and Holly Hatam.

Paris Rosenthal and Holly Hatam are the author/illustrator team behind Dear Girl (with Rosenthal's late mother, Amy Krouse Rosenthal), Dear Boy (with Rosenthal's father, Jason Rosenthal),

and Dear Baby. Their latest picture book, Dear Teacher: A Celebration of People Who Inspire Us, came out in March, in time for this month's Teacher Appreciation celebrations. PW spoke with Rosenthal and Hatam about their new collaboration, the people who have had an impact on their lives and career paths, and the actions they hope readers will take to show greater appreciation for the teachers (and others) who have inspired them.

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Can you tell us how your love letter to teachers told in the voice of a child found its way onto the page?

Paris Rosenthal: As a kid, I was always writing lists, practicing my handwriting, creating poems, making up stories—and writing letters to people. I think I was better at writing than I was at speaking at first! I guess that I thought I was better

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at putting my feelings into writing and felt more confident doing that. So, you could say that our series are love letters or letters of appreciation that can be traced back to my letters as a kid.

I started putting pen to paper to write *Dear Teacher* because I have had countless teachers who have meaningfully impacted my life and who encouraged me to do things I never thought I could do. Then the pandemic hit. Now, I think the messages inside the book are even more timely than we could ever have imagined. Because I know that teachers have had to do a lot of shifting from in-person teaching to remote learning while trying to maintain connections with their students, dealing with their personal lives, and continuing to show up. Ideally, teachers should *always* be thanked just for doing what they do, but never more so than right now.



Rosenthal's favorite illustration from *Dear Teacher*.

The fun, challenging parts of writing it were deciding which messages to include. I began by making a list of all of my favorite teachers or the ones who taught me something, and thought about those lessons. I tried to include as many of those that

I could. I also thought about coaches because I've always been an athlete, and have had many coaches who have really inspired me and helped me become the person that I am today. Our book is inclusive of all kinds of teachers.

Holly Hatam: When I received Paris's manuscript, I thought *Dear Teacher* was so appropriate, especially for the time that we are in now, and a great book in which to end the series. I credit my success as an artist in part to my high school art teacher, Mrs. Doran.

Like I have done with each of our books, I started by reading the manuscript once through fluidly, and teary-eyed because I was so moved, without stopping. Next, I stopped for a minute to see how I was feeling, then I read it again and I jotted down notes for each spread—anything that first came to my brain. Then, I started the sketch phase. And, during that time, I was very aware of what color palette I was going to use.

The color palette drives my artwork from start to finish because I create a lot of my emotions that way. I'm also very aware of adding diverse characters with every spread. This is very important to me. My background is Iranian but I was born in the U.S., and now live in Canada. While I have my foot in three worlds, I have never really felt like I've belonged to any of them. So, I try to shine a light on anyone who might feel that way, to help them feel that they belong.

Can you tell us how your first teachers—your mothers—have inspired you growing up, and on your career paths? How do they still inspire you?

Rosenthal: Ever since I started writing as a kid, I received a great deal of support in doing so. As I'm sure you know, my writing for children all started with the book, *Dear Girl*, that I wrote with my mom, Amy Krouse Rosenthal. She definitely helped pave the way for me. Because I loved writing and because my mom wrote lots of books and wrote from home most of the time, I got to be around her while she was writing, and sometimes she would ask me to help her. She asked me to write *Dear Girl* with her, and sadly passed away before it came out. Then, I wrote *Dear Boy* with my father, and *Dear Baby* on my own. I've always loved writing, and, now, writing books for children, too.

I could write a whole book on the ways my mom has inspired me. I think that with all that I'm doing now as a children's author, I'm constantly thinking of her. Growing up, I'd see her busy writing and doing school visits—the things that I am doing now—and I remember all of the times I witnessed these things, and I channel all of it into what I am doing today.

Since my mom passed away, the world has come to know her as the creator of the *Modern Love* essay, her children's books, memoirs, and short films. And while that's certainly great, and I'm happy that people are discovering her work and talking about her, I like to remind people that in addition to being a prolific author and an incredible person, Amy Krouse Rosenthal was an amazing mom! I never want that to get lost. She continues to inspire me every single day.



© Jason Rosenthal

Paris and her mother, Amy Krouse Rosenthal.

Hatam: While some parents may deter their children from following their dreams, my parents did just the opposite. Because from a very young age, four or five years old, I loved to draw, and I was always drawing, and my parents always pushed me to follow my heart: to do art.



© Mike Hatam

Childhood photo of Holly and her mother, Parvin Hatam.

particular, my high school basketball coach, had a great impact on me. When I was in high school, our girls' team got canceled one year because we didn't have enough players. So, I petitioned the school to let me play on the boys' basketball team—and it worked! It was a really cool position to be in, playing on the boys' team, but also tough as the only girl. My coach supported me throughout the whole process. His support gave me confidence to believe in my talents and myself. Not only did he influence me at that time, but I can still hear him cheering me on in my head until this very day.

And, to this very day, my dear mother cannot get enough copies of my books, and wants all of them signed. She has all of them displayed on a special shelf in her house. She continues to support my work, encourages me with her love, and inspires me with her strength. Recently, she has had some health issues, and she is so strong in dealing with them. She is more concerned about how this all affects me.

In addition to your mothers, which other teachers, coaches, etc., have inspired, encouraged, and cheered you on along the way?

Rosenthal: When I think of many of the teachers that I have had, I'd say those during my formative years helped me build the foundation of my values, the way I am, and how I see the world. I have also had many coaches who have inspired and helped me become the person that I am today. But one in

Hatam: As I mentioned, it was Mrs. Doran, my high school art teacher. Sometime between 10th and 11th grade, I wanted to drop my art elective class and take Spanish instead. I still don't know what I was thinking or recall the reason why, but I remember that when she found out, she wouldn't let me. She was adamant about this, and told me that I had to go down to the counselor's office and change my elective from Spanish back to art. So I did. Art was always my number one passion ever since I was a little girl. I often wonder what would have happened if she didn't do what she did, if I would have stayed on the art path.

Looking back, it was a long road to becoming a children's illustrator. The journey was filled with jobs that I hated, getting fired, taking graphic design coursework, and working as a graphic designer—which I didn't like, but did because I didn't have the confidence at the time to study illustration—and living paycheck to paycheck. I never gave up the dream that brought me here, and I refused to take “no” for an answer until I got where I needed to go. My teachers taught me these things—and they have stayed with me.

What do you hope readers and teachers will take away from reading your book?

Hatam: First, I hope that every teacher receives this book and that they know how much they do for children. I think it is the most important job. What would we do without teachers? They have helped shape every single human being on Earth.

And then you have to think about what they have gone through during this pandemic! We are in our third lockdown in Canada right now, and my son is back home doing school again. It's just amazing how the teachers are handling it. On top of this, there are so many children for whom school is a safe haven from home, and these teachers act more like parents and give them things that they are not getting from home. They are the true superheroes!



Hatam said, "My art teacher, Mrs. Doran always told me to 'dream big.'"

I also hope that this book encourages readers to sit and reflect about the teachers in their lives who have taught them and inspired them to do and to be better. Because when I do this, I will forever remember my teachers who taught me lessons that I didn't

understand in the moment. Even now, I can hear the words my art teacher said and wrote on my report cards: “You have to put more of you in your art....” These words impact my work to this very day. Now, readers gravitate towards that in my work—they say that it appears genuine and they can see the joy in my art. So, Mrs. Doran, I did it!

Rosenthal: Adding to what Holly said, one of my hopes with this book is that everyone can think of a teacher, or teachers, in their lives who has meaningfully impacted them and is then inspired to express more gratitude towards them. Maybe, they could even pick up a pen and paper to write their own *Dear Teacher* letters!

I truly believe that teachers, coaches, mentors, etc., do what they do for nothing in return, which is part of what makes them so wonderful. But, even if they aren't expecting anything in return, I think it's nice to be recognized for what you do—especially people who are in such selfless roles, and committed to devoting their lives and energies to helping others. Our book is our way of giving back to our teachers. It is all about gratitude, gratitude, gratitude.

Dear Teacher: A Celebration of People Who Inspire Us by Paris Rosenthal, illus. by Holly Hatam. HarperCollins, \$18.99 Mar. ISBN 978-0-06-301274-5

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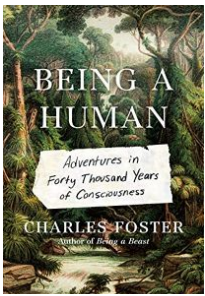
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