

# Ame Dyckman talks with

# Julie Falatko

Two riotously funny authors discuss humor and illustration in children's books—with a few interruptions from their characters!

BY CAMERON GILLESPIE

**When kids are asked why they love a book,** the most common answer is “Because it’s funny!” Humor is individual—one child might love slapstick, while another revels in the absurd—and there’s no one formula to generate laughter, so we asked two of our favorite comic authors, Ame Dyckman and Julie Falatko, to discuss their latest books and their writing process.

Dyckman’s picture book, *Misunderstood Shark*, follows an attention-seeking great white shark as he attempts to clear his bloodthirsty reputation for an underwater TV audience. In Falatko’s chapter book, *Two Dogs in a Trench Coat Go to School*, “good dogs” Waldo and Sassy disguise themselves as a human student to save their boy, Stewart, from the evils of school.

We learned a lot about Dyckman’s and Falatko’s inspirations, collaborations with illustrators, and, most of all, senses of humor as the two authors sat for the interview, with their mischievous characters in tow!

**Julie:** We tried to leave them behind! We had a sitter for Waldo, Sassy, and Shark!

**Ame:** But we loaded my car, came back to say “bye”... and the sitter was gone!

**Shark:** **BURP!**

**Julie:** It’ll be fine! How much trouble could just three book characters get into?

**Waldo and Sassy whiz by in a chair propelled by Shark: “Woof-Woof-Woof!” (Translated from Doggish: “Spinning chairs are fun. But we smell snacks. Where are the snacks?”)**

**Ame and Julie:** Quick! Let’s start!

**Ame:** So, Julie, your *Two Dogs in a Trench Coat Go to School* is a riot—I could read *Two Dogs escapades* forever! Why is having a humorous premise so important in a chapter book series?



**Julie:** I think if you come up with the right humorous premise, and the right characters, you can insert them into almost any scenario and make a story out of it. Two dogs in a trench coat go to the fair! Two dogs in a trench coat go to Mars! Two dogs in a trench coat report for jury duty!

**Ame:** Jury duty!

**Julie:** Right? Two dogs in judge robes bang a gavel! For you, does the humor come first in your stories, or does the story structure come first and you insert more funny things later?

**Ame:** [sheepish] My characters just tell me what they’d say, and then do! And they get impatient if I don’t write their stories immediately, before doing anything else. Shark has swallowed my TV remote more than once!

**CRASH!**

**Ame:** We will ignore that.

**Julie:** Yes. We will ignore that.

**Ame:** My favorite scene in *Two Dogs* is when Waldo licks the classroom science skeleton—I laughed all day! What was your favorite scene to write?

**Julie:** I loved writing the chaotic scene at the end where Stewart has to present his big project to his class. It was like a puzzle to keep piling on all the elements—Stewart’s nervousness, his lack of preparation, a live squirrel—and figure out how to make it work logically.

I love the escalating scenarios in *Misunderstood Shark*, too. I was screaming with laughter as things ramped up. Were there originally any other ways that Shark was misunderstood?

**Ame:** We did cut one “misunderstood” scene: a goof on all the cage diver-and-shark memes. Our editor suggested we save the human interaction ’til the Big Beach Scene near the end. (Even Shark had to admit it turned out much better this way!)

## BIGGER CRASH!

**Ame:** I heard nothing.

**Julie:** Exactly what I was thinking! ‘Cause I heard nothing, too!

**Ame:** What did you think when you first saw Colin Jack’s hysterical sketches of Waldo and Sassy?

**Julie:** They are the best! Colin did such an incredible job of capturing the energy of the story. The way he draws the dogs’ facial expressions makes me laugh every time.

Now let’s talk about Scott Magoon: He’s such a perfect illustrator for *Misunderstood Shark*. I love his colorful palette and the life he infused in Shark, Bob Jellyfish, and the Squids. Which is your favorite?

**Ame:** Agreed—Scott did an amazing job. I can’t choose between our briny book babies! Of course, I especially adore Shark, and cute Baby Seal, and how Bob Jellyfish looks like his “inspiration character” (Les Nessman from *WKRP in Cincinnati*).

You have two dogs at home besides Waldo and Sassy. Did your other two dogs inspire *Two Dogs*’ two dogs?

**Julie:** Yes! Anyone who has a pet does that thing where you narrate what you think your pet is saying. *Two Dogs*’ dialogue is mostly the dialogue of my own dogs, given to Waldo and Sassy, with a wacky plot.

**Ame:** That’s a great writing tip for kid authors, too! And how are Waldo and Sassy getting along with your other characters, like Snapsy the Alligator and Bert the Chicken, from your Snapsy series?

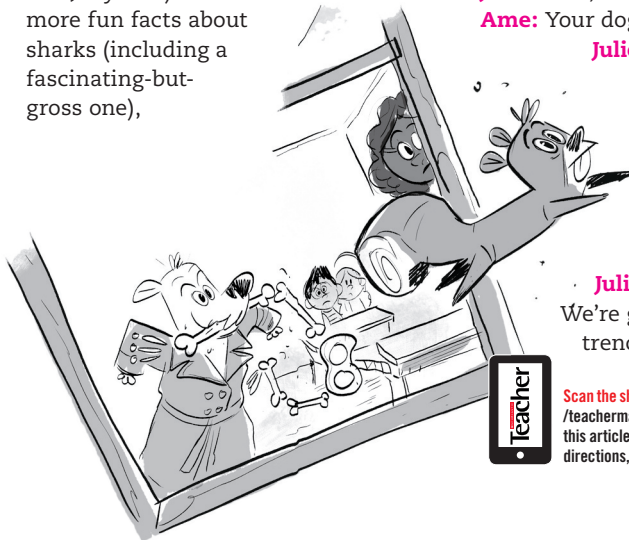
**Julie:** I feel like all my characters do is raid the kitchen and then sit on the floor behind my office chair alternating between cheering me on and rolling their eyes. Which is to say, they all get along.

**Ame:** [laughing] Good, that’s important! And what can we expect from the next *Two Dogs* adventure?

**Julie:** The second book is called *Two Dogs in a Trench Coat Start a Club by Accident*. [Their boy], Stewart, joins an office supply enthusiasts club, but the dogs don’t like it because there aren’t any snacks. They wait for Stewart in the cafeteria and end up creating a club without even knowing it.

There’s another *Misunderstood Shark* tale coming our way, too. What happens next for Shark?

**Ame:** In book two, Shark must deal with the consequences of his...impulsive action at the end of book one (and an understandably irate and slimy Bob Jellyfish!). There are more fun facts about sharks (including a fascinating-but-gross one),



more jokes from the Squids, more feelings and friendship...and I can’t wait to reveal the title!

**Ame:** So here comes my Silly Question! Am I correctly remembering your other two dogs (not Waldo and Sassy) starring in their own in-a-trench-coat video?

**Julie:** Yes, you are! The first thing I did after I got the book deal was to go buy a trench coat at the thrift store and try to stack up my own dogs. They were... not into it. The video is on my website.

**Ame:** Whoa! You win the research award.

## Biggest CRASH! of them all

**Ame and Julie:** Our characters!

**Ame and Julie, in the Scholastic break room, surveying the damage.**

**Julie:** Well, it is called a *break room*.

**Ame:** Your dogs ate the beef jerky!

**Julie:** Your shark ate the Goldfish crackers. And the vending machine!

**Ame:** Quick! Before (surprised) magazine editor gets back...let’s sneak outta here!

**Julie:** [eyeing Shark]

We’re gonna need a bigger trench coat.... □

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