

Collaborating While Cohabiting: A Survivors Guide

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Can you write a book with your spouse and not end up in divorce court?

My husband, John, and I are often asked that question now that our first co-written novel, *Echoes of Titanic*, has finally been released. Some couples might rank such an endeavor right up there with getting joint root canals, but I'm here to say that not only can a marriage survive the co-writing of a novel, it can downright thrive from it. It just takes some ground rules, lots of love, and maybe a freak snowstorm.

More on that snowstorm in a bit.

I should start by explaining our particular situation. *Echoes of Titanic* is my 18th published book; it is my husband's very first. I'm a full time writer; he's a CPA and an attorney who works in the Christian nonprofit field. So how did we end up collaborating on a novel? Long story short, it was a combination of the right people on the right project at the right time.

Though not a writer himself, John has amazing skills in story-crafting, brainstorming, problem solving, pacing, and more. Must be the lawyer side of his brain at work. He's always been a tremendous help to me with each of my books, so much so that I've sometimes felt like his name should be on the cover next to mine. When my publisher approached me about doing a *Titanic*-related novel, I knew the time had come for John to be not just my helper but my co-author. Because he has been a lifelong *Titanic* buff, his full involvement would be integral to the success of this project.

Of course, the journey from that initial impulse to a completed work was filled with joys and challenges. But co-authoring with my husband ended up being a wonderful experience, one that allowed me to view the writing process with new eyes and taught me some valuable lessons about writing--and relationships--along the way. In that light, for anyone else who might be considering a similar endeavor,



I present here **John and Mindy's Eight Rules of Collaboration.**

1. Keep your work life separate from your home life.

Given the life that most writers lead—working from home, setting their own schedule, staying mentally connected with the project even during “off” hours—it's often difficult to establish the necessary boundaries between work time and leisure time. Throw in a spouse who's also a writer, and you've got two people in the same household facing the same challenge, which makes it twice as difficult. That's why it's vitally important that you never allow your co-authoring project to become all-consuming. Even if it's the most fun you've ever had, be sure to take time for work, then put that aside and take time for other things too.

For example, it's so tempting to eat at the computer as you keep going, or to forego your usual “date night” because you're already together anyway. Don't do it! A balanced life isn't just a healthy one, it's also a more creative one. Keep that in mind whenever the two of you are tempted to become “all book all the time.” It's simply not worth the cost.

2. In matters of ego vs. story, story wins.

This is a lesson I learned from my first co-author, Leslie Gould, who likes to say, *It's all about the story*. Opinions will differ between even the most harmonious of co-authors, and frustrations inevitably crop up during any book-writing process. But if differing opinions are always settled with an eye toward what's best for the book, rather than who's "right," then everyone wins in the end.

With a spouse, especially if you've raised children together, this shouldn't be all that hard to do. As parents, we naturally make decisions with regards to our kids' best interests, even if it means our own desires have to be put on hold. The sports car gets traded in to pay for braces, or lazy Saturday mornings are given over to endless soccer practices. By using that mentality with the book-writing process as well, it's easier to toss all matters of ego out the window and ask yourself, What's best for the book? Then do that.

3. Accept that passionate debate is good for a novel – as long as it begins and ends there.

It's a common belief that spouses simply can't co-author without hurting the marriage in the process. I've never shared that belief, and I was so determined to prove it wrong that I entered into this project with the intention of never arguing at all.

What I didn't realize, however, was that there's a difference between arguing and debating—and that there's nothing wrong with passionate debate when co-writing a book. Here's why: Every story choice that has to be defended becomes stronger and more well-thought-out because of it. When I write by myself, I have endless debates inside my own head—about character traits, plot twists, pacing issues, and more—but settling those matters internally sometimes allows "weaker" decisions to slip through the cracks. That, in turn, leads to heavy re-writing in subsequent drafts.

With *Echoes of Titanic*, however, we discussed and debated so many elements along the way that by the end, our first draft was more like a final draft. The story was strong because we'd had to fight for it every step of the way. The key was in not allowing those fights to follow us to the dinner table or the bedroom or anywhere else once the work day was done.

4. Early on, designate who has the final say in what.

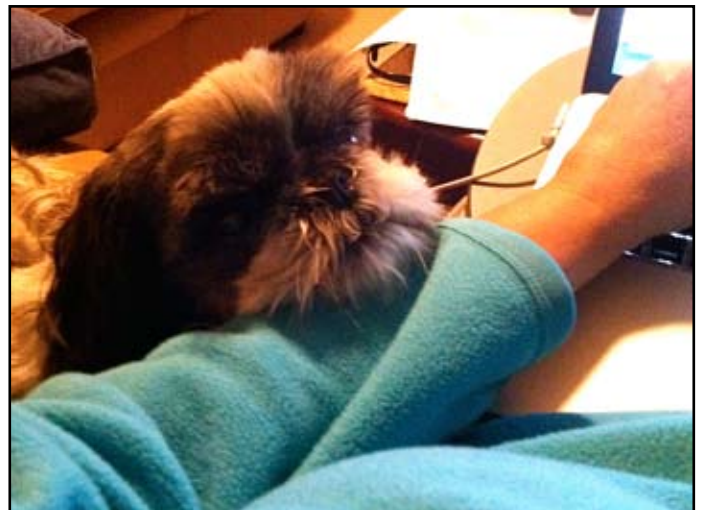
Throughout the book-writing process, John deferred to me for most writing-related decisions, such as how to show rather than tell or when to reveal and when to hold back. These are techniques I have been honing for many years.

In turn, I deferred to him for most story-related decisions, such as where the characters went and what they did and said, and why. Not only is he especially gifted at plotting, but the storyline for this book was *his* baby, one that he thought up in the first place. Thus, we each had our area of expertise in this project, and we agreed to give each other authority over any final decisions that had to be made in those areas.

Designating who's the boss of what—and making sure the division is fairly equal—shows respect for each other's strengths and makes use of their best skills and knowledge. It can also go a long way in helping to keep the peace.

5. Prepare for your loved ones to feel ignored, even the dog.

John and I have always "tag-teamed" through life, picking up each other's slack whenever one of us faces something important that requires extra attention. That means when I'm on a book deadline, he can be found doing more than his share of housekeeping and kid-tending, and then I do the same in return when he's dealing with some big project or issue at the office. As busy professionals, we're used to covering for each other, but when our joint book deadline began



Who could resist such a sweet little face?

to loom, we quickly realized there was no one left to pick up our slack. Thank goodness we didn't try to co-write while our two daughters were still living at home!

Beyond the unmopped floors, the empty fridge, and the unreturned phone calls, someone did pay the price for our negligence, however: our dog Belle, who got so tired of being ignored that she finally started laying herself across my computer keyboard and whimpering until I would give her some undivided attention.

Once we added dog-walking story conferences into our day, we solved that problem. But whatever the other responsibilities in life, co-writing spouses need to prepare their loved ones for what lies ahead—and find workarounds, such as grocery delivery services, for those chores that simply can't be ignored.

Remember: No character on a page, no matter how beloved, is more important than the living beings around you.

6. Bathe it all in prayer, beginning to end.

Prayer is always an important part of marriage, but we found it to be especially so during the co-writing process. Praying over this book helped us to keep our priorities straight and our perspectives in line. Seeking God's direction for our story made the process much smoother, and the core themes and spiritual truths we wanted convey with our tale became much more evident as we surrendered our efforts to His will.

Whether writing for the Christian or the secular market, never forget to bathe the process in prayer—especially when working as a co-author!

7. Give each other lots of affection and affirmation.

Writing is an emotional process; only by tapping into our own deepest feelings can we show truth on the page. The rejection and exposure of being a published author brings in even more vulnerability.

When just one spouse is going through these things, the other spouse can make a point of showing a little extra tender love and care as needed. But when both spouses are going through the same things at the same time, who's left to do the comforting?

We found that mutual commiseration, so to speak, was a key component to the success of this project. If something with the book made one of us frustrated or depressed or sad, we had to assume the other one was feeling these things as well. Thus,

we tried very hard to show extra love and support throughout—especially near the end, when we had to endure the sinking of Titanic through our characters' eyes, a truly heartbreaking process. It wasn't easy, but surprisingly, the toughest times ended up being some of the most rewarding, simply because we shared the burdens and found incredible comfort in the process.



8. Take time to play.

We learned this lesson by accident. Play? Who had time to play? We had a book due, much of it still to be written, and a clock that wouldn't stop ticking.

Then came the freak snowstorm of October 2011. We have a vacation house up in the Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania, and that's where we were when the snow started falling. We kept on working, but once there was a foot and a half of white stuff outside, the power began to flicker, and all was lost. Short of pencil and paper, the modern writer can't do much once their laptop battery dies.

And so we went outside. For the first time in days, we simply played. We laughed, we made snowmen, and in a wonderful burst of inspiration,

we even staged a fabulous Titanic-related photo, as shown below.

Most importantly, when the lights came back on and we got back to work, we found that the brief break had done wonders—for our physical well-being, of course, but also for our morale and our creativity! Thank goodness this lesson was forced upon us: Take time to play. You and your book will be better for it.



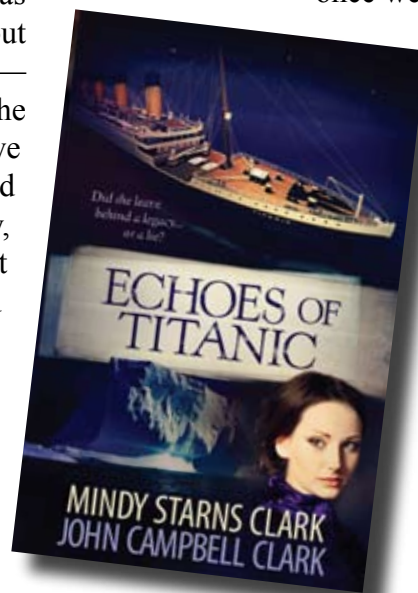
into amazing young women, after all. If our book does just one hundredth as well, it'll be a huge hit. Thus, as we have done with our kids, we've had to say of this novel, "We did our best and trust God with the rest."

Divorce court? No way! Writing with my spouse was one of the most exciting, challenging, and rewarding things I've ever done. It was so

In a way, writing this novel together was kind of like having a baby. The process took about nine months, after all, and after much anticipation—not to mention a little anxiety—we finally held the new arrival in our hands. Gazing at it lovingly, we marveled at God's faithfulness and the ways we had grown together as a couple during the process. Sadly, however, just as with our real children, we knew that as much as we loved this book and the time we'd been given with it, the point had come to send it out into the world. We had to set it free. What happened to it next was no longer under our control.

What's a parent to do? We began by consoling ourselves with the knowledge that at least we have a pretty good track record here. Our two daughters, both in college now, have grown

rewarding, in fact, that we've already decided that once we get our home back in shape and our dog sufficiently loved, we just might be ready to do it all over again. ❖



**Echoes of Titanic
is available
wherever books
are sold.**

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