

Travelling with Sharon Creech

Sharon Creech's books often involve a journey, often physical, sometimes internal. As a writer, too, she is the least static of authors. Collecting awards along the way, she has written in different forms, for different age ranges and across continents. Although she is American, it felt just right to meet her at an international school in England where she is visiting.

Because there was no creative writing at her school, she wrote her stories, plays and poetry at home and had to wait until she was at College before she had a tutor who said to her, "Write a novel." Just that. Where to start? She took something that actually happened, a family journey, changing the facts. Her tutor was encouraging about the result. Even then, it was not until several years and two children later that she went to graduate school and embarked on courses to teach writing. She wanted to be a teacher at that point and it was teaching that provided the opportunity for her to come to England, to the same international school she is re-visiting now.

She taught there for fifteen years, working with children from many countries, and discovering a great deal about how writing works. The point came, however, when she wanted to write her own books and *Absolutely Normal Chaos*, a family story, was her first children's novel. This was followed by *Walk Two Moons*, the story of Sal who undertakes a journey with her grandparents. As they travel, she tells the story of her friend Phoebe whose mother is missing. So, we learn, is Sal's. By the end of the journey, both the reader and Sal understand that 'walking in other people's moccasins' brings understanding. The book won the Newbery Medal and she says that "when the phone rang in February 1995, everything changed." She has since won the Carnegie and the Older section of the Federation of Children's Book Groups' award.

There is no fear that Sharon will write the same book over and over again. Several of her books are set in the great space of rural America and there can be links between them. Sal had come from Byebanks and *Chasing Redbird* is set on a farm there. This time, Zinny's journey is taken on an old trail near home but her interior journey is far longer. She gains independence without losing her family. But then came *Bloomability* and a complete change of location. Dinnie's family is always "starting over" in new places but never actually leaving their problems behind them. As the family complications become overwhelming, Dinnie is 'kidnapped' by her uncle and aunt (an exaggeration, says her mother, it is an



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opportunity) who whisk her away and plunge her into a new life in Switzerland, at an international school. Everything is different: her home, education, international friends. It is frightening but she blooms. Important things are said in a language that young readers can understand through the depiction of friendships and relationships and a stretching of horizons.

Then Sharon takes on a different challenge. Relationships are the bedrock of Sharon's books and they are worked out in a remarkably small space in *The Wanderer*. She achieves something astonishing in its intensity in the story of a small cast in a small boat. Sophie undertakes a crossing of the Atlantic with three uncles and two boy cousins in a "forty-five-foot sailboat". There is some mystery

about her origins and although one cousin simply accepts her, the other keeps needling. Add to this the boys' relationships with their fathers and the men with each other, there is tinder to light here. And all around is the Atlantic which does not care.

In a different genre, *The Castle Corona* recalls traditional stories with its royal family and the villagers outside the gates. She picked up a nineteenth century book in a bookshop and liked that different authorial tone so she experimented.

This exploration of approach also extends to form. Several of her books are written in what reads like effortless free verse. That it seems so is probably due to her sensitivity to how her books sound. She says that she needed a change after so many novels and *Love That Dog* literally "came out that way". It makes a good case for poetry in the classroom, is great fun and also moving as Jack discovers that sometimes poetry is about things that even boys think are important. Similarly, *Heartbeat* came first as a rhythm as Annie pounds through the town in her bare feet, working out as she runs what it is to grow up.

In all her books, she remains aware that she is writing for children, particularly liking to write for children around ten to twelve, those "on the cusp of growth". She sees their lively faces, open to potential. Adults, she feels, lose an essential spark somehow but she always has adult characters in her books.

This brings us to a very important element in books by this author: the relationships between the younger and older characters. She says she begins with a character and the questions "who are the

people around this character? Who will have an effect on their journey?" What is striking is that there is, between adults and children in these books, a mutual respect. Not necessarily always agreement, but respect. This is beautifully traced in *Granny Torrelli Makes Soup* which is really the trajectory of a small girl's journey from being indignantly 'right' to reconsidering her position and saving a precious friendship, all done by listening while Granny makes the soup. She says that she discovered how older people are shaped by the young as well as the other way about while writing and teaching and is discovering it again with her grandchildren. In *Ruby Holler*, the elderly couple who take on the sparky orphans, Dallas and Florida, need them as much as the children need a loving home. Both the children and the older folk grow in understanding together.

Sharon Creech's approach is often subtle and gentle but big events happen, tragedies even, hard decisions have to be made. She is realistic and is not afraid to present her readers with ethical or moral dilemmas but she chooses not to leave her young readers bereft.

What then draws her readers in? Is it inevitable that a writer needs physical action and shocking events to 'hook' readers, especially boys? Sharon has taught both boys and girls, finding that boys can like thoughtful books. She talks particularly about Jack in *Love That Dog* because she says that boys have "taken to Jack like crazy". She feels her characters are her 'hooks'. Jack starts by stating frankly that "boys don't write poetry" and her readers tell her that *they are* Jack. They feel the same and clearly many make the same journey to the discovery that a poem can sometimes express what we never thought we could put into words. The book also shows a good teacher at work and Sharon points out that boys might not be programmed to reach for a compassionate book so might need the mediation of a teacher or librarian. She has read so many interviews with writers who say they remember being lured into books by someone reading aloud to them. Children may not be able to read like that themselves but they get a taste of what it could be like.

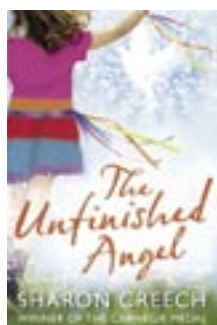
Now, in her most recent book, *The Unfinished Angel*, Sharon is presenting her readers with something new once more: a character that is not quite of this world. She knows the precise genesis of this book. One day her two-year-old grand-daughter said, "Once upon a time, there was an Angel in Spain." And that was it. If her grandmother wanted to know more about this angel, she would have to find out for herself. Several years later, Sharon went to an international school in the Italian-speaking region of Switzerland and there was an old villa and a tower. Just where an angel would live. Their

own house was high up, affording an overview of the little town – the kind of view an angel might well have. Sharon was relearning Italian and experienced the kind of language dislocation familiar to everyone who becomes absorbed into another language. Maybe, she thought, that would be an angel's problem, too, so it became part of the character. The result is an arresting difference in the angel's speech, something not of this world but perfectly understandable. Sharon's ability to have fun with language is evident throughout her books. There is the orphan Florida's need to use strong language without shocking her elderly carers and her invented 'expletives' are impressive! The children in *Bloomability* who speak many languages often achieve wonderful blends.

In *The Unfinished Angel*, Zola's father is about to establish an international school in the old villa and not all the neighbours are pleased. Zola is not likely to be fazed by that and begins with a sturdy acceptance of the angel in the tower, expecting it to pull its weight. She is an independent character, wearing layers of colourful clothes and having layers of intentions for her new neighbourhood. She discovers a sad little bunch of children; frightened, homeless, stateless. By the end of the book, the disgruntled neighbours are changing and even looking forward to their new, rather exciting future and the angel may have a headache but is happy too. "Sometimes," it says, "old peoples need young peoples and young peoples need old peoples." And sometimes an angel needs someone like Zola who is indomitable in her belief that the world can be a better place.

The book combines two strong threads that run through all of Sharon Creech's books. Both clearly mean a lot to her, in fact as well as in her fiction. She demonstrates in her stories the solace of family and friends. She also believes in bringing people together internationally. She has seen it work personally and expresses those values in her books. Of course, books must "tell it how it is." Sharon Creech books do that but they also do something equally important. They tell it how it can be.

Pat Thomson



The Unfinished Angel Andersen £5.99 ISBN: 978-1849390835
2 more books follow, in 2011 and 2012)

Published by Macmillan. All priced £5.99:

Absolutely Normal Chaos ISBN: 978-0330397810
Walk Two Moons ISBN: 978-0330397834
Chasing Redbird ISBN: 978-0330397827
Bloomability ISBN: 978-0330397841
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