

Author Spotlight: Melissa Thomson

Melissa Thomson is the author of the popular Keena Ford novels, including *Read to Them's One School*, *One Book* selections *Keena Ford and the Second-Grade Mix-Up* and *Keena Ford and the Field Trip Mix-Up*. Her middle-grade book, *Tito the Bonecrusher*, will be published in 2017.

Can you tell us about the origins of the Keena Ford character?

I got the idea for Keena when I was teaching an all-girl class of second graders in Washington, DC. My students were such creative thinkers and writers, and I loved the way their voices came through in their stories. Many of my students began reading early chapter books in second grade, and series books were so important to building their confidence and enthusiasm as chapter book readers. So I was really excited to write a chapter book series inspired by my fun, smart, wonderful students. (To be clear, all of charming aspects of Keena's personality are inspired by my students. Her mix-ups and foibles are all me.)

Why do you think she has struck such a chord with readers?

I love that she seems to have struck a chord with readers! I tried to make sure that Keena reacts with honesty in all situations, and I want any humor in the books to grow out of those honest reactions. And she really is trying her best at all times. She's just learning as she goes.

What has been the most rewarding part of finding an audience with these books?

It's rewarding to find an audience because I wrote them with my audience clearly in mind. I wanted to write books that my elementary school students would want to read! I also LOVE interacting with readers. It's always so much fun to visit schools, libraries, camps, and aftercare programs. But I also love virtual visits and hearing from readers on social media!

Were you a big reader as a child? Which books most inspired you in elementary school?

YES, absolutely. I was obsessed with the *Babysitters Club* books, the *Ramona* books, and anything by Judy Blume, especially *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing*. I read voraciously before people started telling me what I should or shouldn't read! There's a well-known line in *Ramona the Brave* where Ramona's sister Beezus tells her to grow up, and Ramona yells "Can't you see I'm trying?!" I think this aspect of Ramona's character is one of the things that stuck with me the most as I drew inspiration from my childhood favorites while writing about Keena.

How has your teaching experience influenced you as an author? Has your writing experience changed you as a teacher?

Oh my gosh, so many ways! In addition to the countless ways in which my students have inspired my writing, I think my teaching experience has helped me respond to readers' questions

and requests for advice. I find myself embedding teaching points in my answers to students when they ask about the writing or publishing process. And being a writer myself has definitely helped me better understand what it's like for students writing in class. We all get stuck, zone out, or feel otherwise frustrated! And we all know that a little encouragement and positive reinforcement can go a long way!

When you write stories for elementary school children, are there particular things you try to keep in mind? Is it important to you that your books provide lessons for young readers?

I tend to start with a particular problem or scenario that a character might face. I think more in terms of themes or questions rather than lessons. Like what does it mean to be a good friend? How do you react if something is unfair? What do you do if you make a mistake and it seems really hard or embarrassing to admit it? I also try to be mindful of the many ways in which my students' backgrounds are diverse. I try to make characters as specific as possible, even when not all of those details make it onto the page. There are lots of unused character details in files on my laptop!

What does the future hold for you and for Keena Ford?

My first middle grade book, *Tito the Bonecrusher*, will be published in early 2017, and I'm really excited about that! I would love to write more about Keena Ford. There aren't any additional *Keena* books forthcoming right now, but I definitely have ideas! For now, I'm just continuing to enjoy meeting *Keena* readers and talking to them about reading, writing, and any other fun things they are up to.