

Author Spotlight

Sharon Draper, a recipient of the National Teacher of the Year award, is the author of more than 20 novels for young readers. Her novel, *Out of my Mind*, is a **OSOB** selection and spent two years on the New York Bestsellers list. In 2015 she was honored by the American Library Association as the recipient of the Margaret A. Edwards Award for lifetime literary achievement.

What interests you about writing for younger readers?

I love writing for young people because they are honest — they have a world reality that is sometimes difficult and they love reading about a fictional character who overcomes. And young readers are hungry. Hungry for books that consume them, that inspire them, that enthrall them, books that grab them from page one and won't let them go. They inspire me to write.

You are an educator as well as a writer. How does your teaching background inform your writing?

I'm a teacher — I teach wherever I go, whether I'm talking to a small group of teenagers informally or giving a formal instruction in a college class. Sharing knowledge is what I do. It just comes natural. And I'm a writer. That, too, comes natural to me. When I sit down to write, the words just seem to flow easily. I consider both to be a blessing — the ability to take what is inside oneself and share it effectively with others.

My students, some of whom didn't like to read the assigned texts, were my inspirations. I wanted to write something that young people could read that would be contemporary and exciting, yet have a solid literary base for teachers to use. I had been working on a novel for young people, so I decided to see if I could get it published. *Tears of a Tiger* is written for high school students – on their level, in their style, about their world. I sent it to 25 publishing companies and got 24 rejection notices. The very last letter I almost threw away (rejection can be depressing!), but I opened it and enclosed was a letter of acceptance from Simon and Schuster. My students walked with me through the entire publication process – the edits and rewrites and corrections. We learned together how a book gets from idea to draft to bookstore. It was a monumental experience for all of us.

***Out of my Mind*, a *One School, One Book* selection, has reached readers around the world. Why do you think the book has struck a chord with so many people? What inspired you to write about Melody, a brilliant child who cannot speak, walk or write?**

The fictional Melody was born from many, many real children like her who needed a voice. Feedback has been powerful and overwhelming, almost from the first day it came out. Teachers, students, librarians, parents have all sent me letters and emails talking about the book's power. A letter from a grandmother in England: "Your book tells my granddaughter's story so well. We all read it together and laughed and cried."

From a woman with cerebral palsy in Texas: "Thanks for letting people know what it's like to be me. Your book brought back so many memories — both good and bad -- from my childhood."

From a teacher: "My entire class of fourth-graders read your book and we all think differently now about people who face life with obstacles."

From a ninth-grade girl: "I read *Out of my Mind* and I think me and my friends were a little like Molly and Claire, even though we didn't think we were being mean. But this book has changed my outlook, and this summer I'm going to work with disabled kids at a camp near me. Thanks for opening my eyes."

I have hundreds more like these. It is a blessing.

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

I get hundreds of emails and letters from students during the year. They are frank, sometimes funny, and always honest. "I have to do a report on you. Tell me everything you know about yourself. My report is due tomorrow, so please reply quickly."

Lots of them get very involved in the lives of the characters in the books – they want to know more about them – almost like they are friends by the time they finish them. That's one reason why I write trilogies. What was just one book, becomes two, and then becomes three – mostly because of letters and inquiries from student readers. One girl asked me for the home phone number of one of the characters in *Tears of a Tiger*. She wrote me, "That girl has some serious issues, but I think I can help her!"

Many students tell me, "I never liked to read" or "I've never read a whole book before" but "I read your book in one night and I couldn't wait to read the others." They like the reality and the honesty of the stories and locations and characters. Some of the letters are very touching. Sometimes they tell me that reading one of the books changed their lives. I had a student tell me she called the child abuse hotline in the back of *Forged by Fire*. She wrote me to thank me for saving her life. Another student wrote that he was depressed and was thinking of taking his life, but after reading *Tears of a Tiger*, he decided to live. I counseled him to talk to someone he trusted, and he wrote me back that he had. Another student said she was reading *Tears of a Tiger* in class and that weekend some of her friends were drinking at a party. She thought about BJ in the book (who doesn't drink), so she called her mother to come and pick her up. Her friends were killed that night in an automobile accident. It's an awesome responsibility to have so much response to what I've written. That's why I try so hard to make every single book ring true and honest and why I try to be available to them. I try to answer every single email and every single letter that I receive.

One ninth-grade student who was interviewing for the school paper asked me what I thought about the powerful effect my books have on kids all over the country. I told her, "The proper answer is 'It's very gratifying,' but the real answer is 'way cool!'"

What has been your experience with Read to Them's *One School, One Book* program?

I love it when one community comes together for one book. The story becomes a shared experience for everyone. Discussions and projects emerge. Understanding abounds. Conversations that might not have occurred before become natural. I always enjoy coming to those communities to join in the discussions of the book.

Were you a big reader as a child? Which books most inspired you growing up?

I was a reader as a child. I'd check out ten books at a time from our local library, gobble those and check out ten more. I read every single book on the children's side of our local branch by the time I was eleven years old. So the librarians (who knew me VERY well) allowed me to take out books from the adult side. They tended to direct me to the classics, but eventually they let me roam unhindered, and I inhaled hundreds, maybe thousands of books by the time I graduated from high school. So I have no favorite. My only rule was that the book had to be GOOD. I wasn't aware of writing styles at the time, but I'm sure the better writers held my attention, while writers who had no style of command of the language got set aside. There were too many great books to read.

How do you think you have evolved as a writer since your first novel, *Tears of a Tiger*?

I think I am a better writer because I have learned and grown and developed. My editor encourages me to make each book better than the last. And I try very hard to do that. I strive for higher goals with each new book. Robert Browning said, "A man's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's a Heaven for?" I'm aiming for heavenly results with each book.