

The BiblioFiles: S.E. Hinton

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DR. DANA: The Cotsen Children's Library at Princeton University Library presents the BiblioFiles.

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Hi, this is Dr. Dana. Today my guest is S.E. Hinton, author of *The Outsiders*, *That Was Then, This Is Now*, *Tex*, *Rumble Fish*, and *Taming the Star Runner*. In 1967, a new voice entered the world of children's publishing. It was the tough, unfiltered, empathetic and frank voice of Ponyboy Curtis, the main character in Hinton's groundbreaking and genre-creating novel, *The Outsiders*.

14-year-old Ponyboy lives with his big brothers, Sodapop and Darry. They are orphans and Darry has set aside his dreams of college in order to shoulder the responsibilities of providing for his younger brothers. Ponyboy, his brothers, and his friends are greasers. They grow their hair long, wear leather jackets, drive old, souped-up cars, and rove in gangs. They also clash often very violently with the Socs, the upper class teens from the West side, who seem to have it all. When the violence results in a death, Ponyboy and his friend, Johnny, must go on the run or face the judgment of a system that is already stacked against them.

Hinton's characters navigate confusing, turbulent, bleak, intense and often unfair worlds that were previously unheard of in children's literature. The raw truth of Hinton's novels ushered in a new category of children's literature, young adult fiction. In 1988, she was the recipient of the American Library Association's first annual Margaret A. Edwards Award, an award that honors authors whose books, quote, "have been accepted by young adults as an authentic voice that continues to illuminate their experiences and emotions, giving insight into their lives." End quote.

It's important to add that while gritty, Hinton's books also carry with them messages of understanding, acceptance, choice, family, forgiveness, strength, and hope. They are both heartbreaking and illuminating, desolate and thought-provoking, frightening and beautiful. In addition to her YA books, Hinton also has a chapter book for younger readers called *The Puppy Sister* and a picture book called *Big David, Little David*. S.E. Hinton, welcome to the BiblioFiles.

S.E. HINTON: Thank you.

DR. DANA: Many people are surprised when they learn that you wrote *The Outsiders* when you were 16 years old. What compelled you to write the book?

S.E. HINTON: Three things. One, first one, is I just like to write. I'd been writing for eight years. And actually it wasn't the first novel I wrote. It was the first one I ever tried to get published. But I'd been writing constantly since grade school, since I learned how. It's something I just enjoyed.

Two, I was mad about the social situation in my high school. I went to Will Rogers High in Tulsa, Oklahoma, very large school. Senior class, graduating class, was the smallest. And it had over 1,000 students. So you can imagine what a-- you know, this was a baby boomer school. It was packed. That didn't mean you could have a lot of friends. As soon as you got to school, you got in your little group, and you stayed in your little group. And you stayed away from all the other groups, which I thought was idiotic.

And when a friend of mine who was a greaser-- I grew up in a greaser neighborhood. I got put in what they call college track classes, like Ponyboy did. So I had friends on both sides. But when a friend of mine got beaten up on his way home from school one day, I became mad and wrote a short story about it. It ended about 40 pages long single spaced, typed. But I kept going back over it and over it and just really enjoyed writing it.

And the third reason I wrote it was I wanted to read it. When I was in high school, there was nothing being written for the teenagers except Mary Jane goes to the prom and she wants to go with the football hero, but she ends up with the quiet boy next door, and has a good time anyway. Well, I'd been to a couple of proms by then and the big plot was, who got killed in the parking lot? The subplot was who brought the booze and how did they get it in? So I just couldn't find anything that dealt realistically with what I saw teenage life was like in high school. So that's another reason why I wrote it. I've learned that a good reason to write anything is because you want to read it.

DR. DANA: What was the initial reception for *The Outsiders* like?

S.E. HINTON: Usually it was pretty favorable. It wasn't an overnight bestseller, anything like that. I went to New York and did a little bit of publicity for it, radio shows and newspaper interviews. And then I came home and went took up my real life thing, you know, went to college and all that. But I didn't have to deal with the pressures. The media wasn't globbing onto everything that could look like it could fill up a few empty spots.

And the money built very, very gradually. I think my first royalty check was for \$10. I wasn't overwhelmed with that, wasn't overwhelmed with fame. I had a lot of years as the book gained more and more followers, mostly from word of mouth and from teachers, bless their hearts, who found they could get nonreaders to read with it.

And it's a great book for teaching. It's got themes. It's got characters. It's got dialogue. It's got foreshadowing.

DR. DANA: It's got complexities.

S.E. HINTON: Yeah. But it's on a simple enough level that any kid can grasp what's there. So teachers love it. Thank God they did. I tried teaching. I couldn't do it. I don't have the nerves for it. So anything I could do to help teachers. They're my heroes. I'm glad it worked out for both of us.

DR. DANA: Your books played a major part in sparking a new genre of children's literature, young adult fiction. When you published your first few books, did you realize you were on the cusp of something groundbreaking?

S.E. HINTON: No, but I knew there wasn't anything out there that I wanted to read as a teenager. And I just want something realistic out there. And when it was originally in paperback, just published as a drugstore paperback, where it kept coming back, you know, in boxes, because nobody was buying it. And somebody just happened to look at the sales and realized it was selling really well in one section, which was the teachers using it for classrooms, teenagers.

So that started a whole marketing niche for what they called young adult books. And I think Dell's first printing, especially for that genre, was called Laura Lees. And then they had a lot of really good writers come along and write for that genre. So it did-- there are plenty of books published before, that nowadays, we might think of as young adult even Huckleberry Finn might be categorized as young adult, *Catcher in the Rye*. But all of a sudden they realized there was a separate market aimed at these particular buyers. And it did start that.

DR. DANA: Horses feature in many of your books. *Sodapop* is attached to a horse called Mickey Mouse. Dally jockeys. Tex and his brother, Mason, they both ride. Travis works in a stable. Can you describe the role horses play in your books?

S.E. HINTON: Well, I'm a horse nut. I've always been a horse nut. I had to wait until I was an adult to buy one, because my family's, oh, you'll outgrow it. We couldn't afford it anyway, to tell you the truth so. I just quit riding a year ago because of back surgery. Every time I slung my leg over my horse, I'd think I'd outgrow it.

But I took my last \$75 out of the bank when I was 20 and bought a thoroughbred colt and raised him from a four-month-old until he died in my arms at the age of 23. And I've never been without a horse since. I still have three. It's kind of sad because I don't get to ride them anymore, but I still enjoy them. So horses have always played a really big part in my life, really big. I mean, I don't know what I could have written if I had quit showing the year I was writing *Taming of the Star Runner* devoted myself to more books. So you know, it's nice to work them in.

DR. DANA: You've said that *Tex* is your favorite young adult book. Why is that?

S.E. HINTON: Right. I have to become my narrator when I'm writing a book. It's like an actor. They know the whole screenplay. But while they're doing the movie, they have to be a person, which is always the way I've written. And the book before that was *Rusty James and Rumble Fish* and, oh, God, I felt like I'd been banging my head against the wall for a year, writing that book. And I actually started *Tex*, when I was still working on the galleys of *Rumble Fish*. I just wanted to be somebody fun for a change.

And he is the least tough, but the strongest, of all my YA characters. You know, it was really great to have that generous heart for a while. And it was just a very pleasant person to be, even

though he was having his trials and tribulations. And I think it's a really good character study. I mean, Tex is my favorite character besides being my favorite book.

DR. DANA: Can you share a couple of things you've done to immerse yourself in your characters' world, sort of like an actor preparing for a role?

S.E. HINTON: Well, you know I usually start off by knowing everything about my characters, their astrology signs, what they like eat for breakfast. It doesn't matter if it shows up in the book or not. But I know the details. And then I go in to being that person. That's the only way I could describe it.

It's one thing I loved about reading from the beginning. You could be so many different people. You could go to so many different places. You could bungee jump into the future. You could go back to the ancient times. I mean, sometimes people say, well, what writer really influenced you? And it wasn't a writer. It was the act of reading that influenced me.

DR. DANA: So your protagonists are all male. Why do you prefer to write from that perspective?

S.E. HINTON: Well, I grew up with guys as friends. My cousin, Jimmy, who *The Outsiders* is dedicated to, he and I, we're not quite a year apart and we were raised more like brother and sister than cousins. And I hung around with his friends. I couldn't identify with anything in the female culture then. You got your status from what kind of car your boyfriend drove. I didn't care about my boyfriend or didn't even have one for a long time. I wanted the cool car myself.

DR. DANA: [LAUGHTER] Right, exactly.

S.E. HINTON: And to this day my close male friends outnumber my close female friends about-- I've got twice as many close guy friends as I do close female friends. I like hanging out with guys. There's no undercurrent of-- I don't know. There's so many things about the female culture I don't get that-- but you know guys are quite a bit less complicated.

DR. DANA: In *Taming the Star Runner*, Travis is 16 when his book is accepted for publication. And in the last chapter, he's editing his work. He's mostly doing technical and uncreative things. And so you write here that for him the quote, "novelty of the editor's marks had worn off." End quote. And he just wants the book to be done. He's not living the book anymore - he wants it to be done. And I thought this was an incredibly interesting glimpse at the less glamorous realities of writing. And I was wondering if you could talk to our listeners a little bit about what it's like to work with an editor at a publishing house and how it's changed for you over time.

S.E. HINTON: Well, I was lucky enough to only have one bad editing experience and I'm not even going to go into that because it doesn't even have anything to do with the books we're talking about. But I've learned so much. My first editor was Velma Varner of Viking Press, another legend I got to work with. And her notes were so great.

She sent me about three pages. And they were very specific, which is like, page such and such. All of sudden, Dallas has a gun. Can we put it in the earlier that he has a gun so we're not all surprised he has a gun? Yeah. And it was mostly like, you do not need to describe these guys every couple of pages. You've done that real well. Just leave out descriptions. And on page such and such, this doesn't tie in with this. I mean, very, very easy.

It was three pages of notes. But they were easy to follow, easy for me to correct. It wasn't rewriting me. Some people go, oh well, her teachers must have wrote that book for her. There's not a word in *The Outsiders* that I didn't write and none of my editors have written a line in my books. But I prefer that specific kind of editing to a very vague, well, I don't know. It's kind of missing something. Great, it's missing something. Tell me. Tell me what it's missing. Tell me what I need to go do, which I've had both those kinds. I much prefer--

Now back then I wrote two pages a day. I was dealing with writer's block after *The Outsiders* and I was very careful about each sentence I put on the page, trying to correct everything that at the age of 20, when I re-read *The Outsiders*, I was very, very critical of it. Now I've learned to love it for what it is. But at that time I was going, oh, god. So I was trying to correct every mistake I made in *The Outsiders*. But when I sent it to my publisher, they said, well, we're glad to see that college education hasn't ruined your spelling. And nobody offered another word of advice on editing. I had already edited as I worked on it.

DR. DANA: That's interesting that you think *The Outsiders* is flawed.

S.E. HINTON: Oh, yeah.

DR. DANA: I think it's nearly perfect.

S.E. HINTON: As an adult writer, I see tons of things wrong with it. But I wrote it at the right time. That's why I get so frustrated with people nagging me to do a sequel. I couldn't-- even by the time I wrote *That Was Then*, I couldn't have written *The Outsiders*. I wrote it at the right time in my life. I wasn't expecting anybody to read it. I wrote with the emotions of a teenager, you know, the absolutely naive, idealistic frame of mind that they all have. And I mean, I've talked to some of the toughest schools in America, and I haven't found one yet that didn't have found glimmer of idealism, which is one of the main characteristics of *The Outsiders*.

So I'm glad I wrote it when I did. I'm very proud of the effect it's had, not just on America, but all over the world. I get letters all the time like, well, I never enjoyed reading, but I really liked your book, which is great. But the letters I get, your book changed my life. I'm looking at life a lot differently. I'm studying my own behavior differently. I'm behaving differently. I'm looking at my fellow man differently.

I mean, that kind of response scares me. Because who am I to change anybody's life? But I've come to the conclusion that the others are well written. I'm proud of them all. But *The Outsiders* was meant to be written, and I got chosen the write it. That's the only way I can deal with it.

DR. DANA: These days, it's almost inevitable that a popular, bestselling book will be made into a movie. But in the 1970s and '80s, it wasn't so common. There's a really interesting story as to how *The Outsiders* became a movie, which was directed, I might add, by Francis Ford Coppola. It's a testament to the fierce loyalty readers feel for this book. Could you tell us the story?

S.E. HINTON: Well, Francis got a letter from a school in Lone Star, California from some kids saying, this is our favorite book and you're a great director and could you make it into a movie for us, which kind of got him interested. He loves kids. And at first it was bought just for a property, for Zoetrope to be developed for the studio.

On an airplane, Francis read it himself and decided he wanted to do it himself. And came to Tulsa and I met him. We scouted locations together and auditioned some actors together and really hit it off, really, really hit it off. And he said, well, I'm going to shoot it here and can you help me with stuff and I said, sure. So I helped him scout locations, with wardrobe. I had my finger in about every piece of pie there was on that.

When the boys came to town Francis was having some problems. He was on the phone a lot. And he'd say, OK, can you go run lines with the boys. And I said sure. So I got-- met all my *Outsiders* boys, I'm very close to even today. And oh, god, they were fun kids. They were so sweet. They inspired me a lot for Travis in *Taming the Star Runner* in that off camera, they were just goofy teenagers. They were always scaring the hell out of me, running around, jumping down stairs with their switchblades open and stuff like that.

But when they got in front of the camera, they turned into serious actors. And it was an amazing transformation to watch, because they were talented artists, and they were goofy teenagers, which I tried to capture in Travis quite a bit.

DR. DANA: Was it strange to see these actors portraying your characters? And I'll add that these aren't just any actors. They include C. Thomas Howell, Matt Dillon, Ralph Macchio, Patrick Swayze, Rob Lowe, Emilio Estevez, Tom Cruise, Diane Lane.

S.E. HINTON: Well, no, because they weren't stars yet. I still feel so lucky that I got to know them before they were. You know, they had no defenses up. Matt was the only one that had any kind of a reputation. Oh, god, did we know Cruise was going to be big though. He had a very small part but he made the most of it. When we're doing improv, he would just be over the wall. And when they were doing stunts, he was absolutely fearless, even then. Yeah, we all knew.

But he had the best manners, so polite. My husband still remembers him mostly for what great manners. We had them over to our house. They shot pool and ate pizza and stuff. So, yeah, we are all-- they all bonded with each other too, which was nice. There was no backstabbing. There was no falling into the different camps or anything. They were just so gung ho about everything. I can't describe how great they were. It was amazing.

DR. DANA: What are some of your most memorable letters from fans?

S.E. HINTON: Well, they're the ones that I'm most protective of because, you know, I get them from prison. I get them from all over the world. I get them from people who grew up in circumstances like *The Outsiders* boys did. I get them from people who-- Indonesia, which you think would have no corresponding society to identify with, but they do. It's the ones that say you changed my life. It's overwhelming. I mean, I'm going, I didn't change your life, the book changed your life. Just like I said, the only way I can deal with it.

DR. DANA: I'd like to end by asking you a question about the Robert Frost poem that appears in *The Outsiders*.

S.E. HINTON: OK.

DR. DANA: In the midst of the chaos of the book, this beautiful poem is recited by Ponyboy. To me, it was a real surprise. In the book, he's a really tough kid. And up until this point in the book, we've mostly heard him speak in slang. So there's no preamble or grand buildup. There's absolutely no pretension. It's just a smart kid with a tough life who's dropping his guard for a moment, and letting his mind shine out. And I'd like to recite the poem and then have you talk about why you decided to include it in the book.

This is "Nothing Gold Can Stay" by Robert Frost.

Nature's first green is gold,

Her hardest hue to hold.

Her early leaf's a flower;

But only so an hour.

Then leaf subsides to leaf.

So Eden sank to grief, So dawn goes down to day.

Nothing gold can stay.

S.E. HINTON: Well, I was wandering around in my creative writing class, and they had magazines out there. And I picked it up, and I found that poem. I thought, well, this is trying to say what I'm trying to say in the book, although I couldn't give you a description of what I was trying to say in the book. So I went home and wrote it into the book.

But as you know, Ponyboy's a reader. I don't think it would be totally unheard of for him to have come across that poem and remembered it, because he said when he first recited it to Johnny, he said, I never forgot it because I couldn't quite figure out what he meant. But it stayed with me, haunted me for something. And that's the way I felt about the poem.

So I went home and I was thinking, now this has something to do with what I'm trying to say in this book. So I wrote it in. And you gotta remember, I was 16 when I wrote it. I actually began it when I was 15. But then my junior year in high school was also the year I flunked creative writing. That was the year I was writing it. [LAUGHTER]

But, you know, it just struck me. So I wrote it in. I wasn't taking how to structure a novel. I came across something that I thought fit in the book. I had to go home and write it in the book. Like the kid who dissects his worm with a switch blade. I mean, OK. We'll just have Ponyboy do that. But it's gotten to the point where people think I wrote the poem, which I can tell you, is not the worst thing that can ever happen to a writer.

DR. DANA: [LAUGHTER] Do you just sagely nod your head?

S.E. HINTON: I go, no, that was Robert Frost.

DR. DANA: S.E. Hinton, thank you so much for coming on the BiblioFiles today.

S.E. HINTON: Oh, you're welcome. Thanks for having me.

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