

# The BiblioFiles: Sharon Creech

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The Cotsen Children's Library at Princeton University Library presents The BiblioFiles.

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DR. DANA: Hi. This is Dr. Dana. My guest today is award winning author, Sharon Creech. In a career that has spanned more than 20 years, Sharon Creech has produced distinctive works of literature for children and teens. Her books include *Walk Two Moons*, which won the Newbery award in 1995, and inspired the companion novels, *Chasing Redbird* and *Bloomability*. *The Wanderer* was a finalist for the Newbery award in 2000, and *Ruby Holler* won the Carnegie Medal in 2002. Creech has also written books in verse, including *Love That Dog*, which was a finalist for the Carnegie Medal in 2001.

Powerful, emotional, humorous, gracious, sorrowful, scary, glorious, joyful, remarkable, playful, and heartfelt are words that describe the works of Sharon Creech. She excels at crafting stories that draw you in, make you think, make you feel, and make you a better person. Her newest book is *The Boy on the Porch*, the story of John and Marta, a young couple who find an unusual young boy on their porch. The boy can't speak, but eventually begins to communicate through his musical and artistic talents. John and Marta form a powerful bond with the boy, one that truly defines what love, trust, acceptance, and family mean.

Sharon Creech joins us from Maine. Welcome to the BiblioFiles.

SHARON CREECH: Thank you. I'm happy to be here today.

DR. DANA: I wonder if you'd tell us about the very first children's book you published. What were you doing at the time? And why did you decide to write a book?

SHARON CREECH: The very first children's book, or the very first book?

DR. DANA: Children's book.

SHARON CREECH: The very first children's book was *Absolutely Normal Chaos*. And it came after I had written two novels for adults. That's what I thought my career would be, you know, sort of living in an attic in Paris somewhere and making very little money and writing, you know, Hemingway, Fitzgerald type novels. So I had written these two novels and then, just as a departure, I heard this voice of a sort of younger child, a 13-year-old, more like my 12 or 13-year-old self. And it was a funnier book, *Absolutely Normal Chaos*.

And when I submitted that to my agent, who had placed the first two books with a publisher in England, she said, "Well, I think this is more a children's book." And I was a little puzzled, because I wasn't quite sure what a children's book was. I had been teaching English in high

school in an American school in England. And so I was teaching Shakespeare and Chaucer. And I was teaching American lit, Hemingway and Fitzgerald and Hawthorne. And even though I had raised two children and read books to them, I wasn't real clear on what would make a children's book a children's book, as opposed to an adult book.

And that summer, I attended a workshop in Chautauqua, New York, where we were living at the time. It was a children's literature workshop. And it was a gathering of writers and writers to be, talking about what makes a book a children's book. And it was great. Now Lois Lowry was there, James Cross Giblin, a lot of luminaries in the children's book world. And what I came away with was well, it's not much different than writing for adults, except that you just have a younger narrator.

And so that's how I came to write this book and feel comfortable writing it. And I had so much fun writing it. And it was taken by a publisher in England. And they asked for one more in that vein. And the next book in that vein was *Walk Two Moons*. And *Walk Two Moons* then was the first book of mine that came out in The States.

And when that won the Newbery the following February, no one was more surprised than I was. But it opened a door into that whole world of children's literature that was like a golden door opening. And I felt very happy there and welcomed and felt ready to explore all of that. So that's kind of how I came into that world.

DR. DANA: You have a distinctive narrative voice that enfolds readers in the book, allowing them to feel what the character is feeling. It makes for incredibly powerful reading. I am wondering if you would read one of my favorite passages from *The Wanderer*?

SHARON CREECH: Oh, sure.

DR. DANA: I'll introduce the passage by saying that the narrator is 13-year-old Sophie, who is on a long sailboat trip with her uncles and cousins. They're sailing from Connecticut to England to visit Sophie's grandfather, Bompie. Sophie is adopted. And one of the points of tension in the book is that her arrival into the adopted family was preceded by a traumatic event that occurred with her biological parents, a trauma that Sophie has yet to fully realize and face. In this scene, the sailboat has been caught in vicious storms for days. But the bad weather appears to be letting up.

SHARON CREECH: "Chapter 49, Spinning. Cody and Uncle Dock and I went on watch at about one in the morning. It seemed as if the weather had started to let up, and we were hoping that by the end of our watch, we'd be able to turn *The Wanderer* over to Uncle Mo, and Brian, and Uncle Stew in calmer seas.

'Smite the sounding furrows!' Uncle Dock yelled.

'More poetry?' I said.

'Yep,' he said.

We'd been on watch about an hour when Cody shouted to me: 'Sierra-Oscar! Your Highness -- where is it?'

My head was so numb. My ears were plugged. What was he saying?

He shouted again, tugging at his belt. 'Your Highness.'

I tapped my head, as if there were a crown there, and curtsied. I thought he was playing some kind of game.

He left his post and dashed below deck, and when he came up, he was holding my safety harness. Oh. He'd been saying *harness*. I felt so stupid. Cody fastened it for me and said, 'You've got to wear this, Sophie. You've got to.'

'Aw,' I said, 'weather's letting up; we're okay.'

'We're not okay, Sophie. Wear this.'

But the seas did seem to settle for an hour or so, and the wind eased. I watched Cody as he moved about the deck. One minute he was trimming a sail; the next minute he was fastening a line, scooping up a loose cushion, stowing it, returning to the sails. Dock was doing the same things on the other side of the deck. They moved with seeming ease in those choppy seas, and it seemed as if this were a play and their movements were gracefully choreographed.

Around three thirty in the morning, about a half hour before the end of our watch, the wind and waves picked up again. Uncle Dock was in the cockpit, Cody was at the wheel, and I was sitting next to the hatch that covers the cabin, watching the waves coming up behind us, in order to warn Cody and Dock when a big one was on its way.

As each wave started to build, it made me weak and queasy, not so much from the motion, but from the fear that this wave would be too big, that this one would roll us over. Off in the distance, I saw a wave that looked different from all the others. It was much bigger, at least fifty feet high, it seemed, and not dark like the others. It was white -- all white -- and the entire wave was foam, as if it had just broken. I stared at it for a couple of seconds, trying to figure out what was up with it, and by that time, it was right behind us, growing bigger and bigger, still covered with foam.

I shouted a warning to Cody: 'Cody! Look behind--'

He turned, looked quickly, and then turned back around, crouched down and braced himself. Most of the waves that break behind us roll under the stern, the foam sometimes coming up over the sides of the cockpit. But this wave was unlike any other. It had a curl, a distinct, high curl. I watched it growing up behind us, higher and higher, and then it curled over *The Wanderer*, thousands of gallons of water, white and lashing.

'Cody! Dock!' I yelled.

And then I saw it hit Cody like a million bricks on his head and shoulders. I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, and covered my head.

I was inside the wave, floating, spinning, thrown this way and that. I remember thinking *Hold that breath, Sophie*, and then wondering if my breath would last. Such intense force was pushing me; it didn't seem like it could possibly be water -- soft, gentle water -- that was doing this.

I couldn't remember about the harness. I didn't feel attached to anything. Was it on or not?

I was going overboard; I was sure of it. Underwater forever, twisting and turning, scrunched in a little ball. Was this the ocean? Was I over the side and in the sea? Was I four years old? In my head, a child's voice was screaming, 'Mommy! Daddy!'

And then I heard, 'Sophie!'

I think I will be sick now, writing about it."

DR. DANA: Thank you.

SHARON CREECH: You're welcome.

DR. DANA: Tell us about your narrative voice. Do you feel it was always there? Or is it something that developed slowly?

SHARON CREECH: I think it developed slowly. And it was something that really took a turn when I was in graduate school, and I took a course, I think it was maybe writing for teachers of English, for them to teach writing. And in the course, one of the first things the professor had us do was free writing. And most people are not familiar with that term. But it's an exercise where you write very fast, fast as you can, just trying to capture whatever thoughts are tumbling around in your head. And you don't stop to correct any words, or stop for grammar, or whatever. You just sort of let it all unroll.

And I had such an amazing experience with that in that once I started to do that, these really wonderful voices started to connect, or rhythms, I should say. And it was something much more free than any other writing I'd ever done. And what I realized the more I did that, I started to then write stories in that way, writing the rough draft in this kind of free writing exercise, and then going back to polish it later.

And what I realized was that I was tapping into something a little more subconscious, you know, a little less intellectual. And it was-- these were rhythms that were somehow resonating in me, or appealing to me. And so that's then, I turned to that. And then when I started writing novels, where I would see usually-- would have an image in my mind of a person and a place. This is pretty much true with all my books.

I get an image in my mind of a person and a place. I don't always know where that comes from. Sometimes I do. Sometimes I don't. But once that person and place is in my mind, I listen for a

voice. And when I hear the voice of the main character, and I start to write out, maybe the person talking to someone or whatever, when I catch the rhythm.

Then I go with that. And I know that I'll be able to immerse into that character. That will lead me into the whole narrative voice for the whole story. Sometimes it's a playful voice. Sometimes it's a very lyrical voice, or a serious voice. Or whatever it is, that first voice that grabs me is the one that's going to dictate the tone and the style, even the content for the whole book.

DR. DANA: Many of your characters are quirky and a little different from the average person. Tiller and Sairy from *Ruby Holler* immediately come to mind, as do Gramps and Gran from *Walk Two Moons*, and Leo from *Replay*. Have you known someone like these characters?

SHARON CREECH: Yes, I suppose so. I think I have a very wacky family. And I think I draw upon brothers and sisters and aunts and uncles and cousins and just people I observe. I'm drawn to people who are a little quirky and a little unusual, but always with a sort of humorous vein. So I'm particularly drawn to people like I think ones in my family are. They're very loving people. But they are not sappy. There's kind of a little edge, a little wacky, quirky edge to it, you know. They'll tease you. Or you know, they won't let you get away with anything.

But-- so Tiller and Sairy and Gram and Gramps, I think those characters particularly come out of a real mishmash of, for instance, my grandparents to my parents to my sisters and brothers and their spouses. And so many of them have this relationship of again, very loving, but also this teasing kind of thing that goes on, like between Gram and Gramps, you know. Gram is always kind of putting Gramps back in his place. But he's all, 'Gooseberry.'

The same with Tiller and Sairy. You know, she's always trying to get him to calm down now, 'Tiller. It's going to be OK.' And he's all flustered with these kids. And so that's kind of like the men in my family, needing the soft touch of a woman to kind of ease the edges, I guess.

And Leo, people like Leo and some of the younger narrators are probably more like there's always a part of me that is strong in them. And it's maybe me plus what I've seen in my own children, or students I've taught. With Leo, for instance, I had in mind the Walter Mitty character from that story, "Walter Mitty." That was an adult character who's sort of daydreams his life.

But the reason that story had always resonated with me was that I'm very much like that. You know, I'll be in a situation. Maybe I'll be in a committee, an English committee, department committee, you know. And my mind is just way far away from that committee room. And maybe I'm sailing the seven seas, or whatever, or doing something particularly heroic and lovely. And so that's sort of where Leo came out of that sort of wanting to explore the imagination of a child like that.

People like Salamanca in *Walk Two Moons*, she's very much a mishmash of me, my daughter-- me and my daughter particularly, I think, just in a way kind of very sensitive to the world, and quiet, and an observer, but also with this little edge of humor in her. And Phoebe, people often ask, well where did Phoebe Winterbottom come from in *Walk Two Moons*.

She's completely unlike Sal. And that's true. She is unlike Sal. But she's-- that's another part of me too, is this sort of, oh, the part-- the imaginative part that overreacts to something. You know, if someone says something I'll imagine the worst scene, or the most frightful scene. And I can't go to sleep at night, that kind of thing.

DR. DANA: I love Phoebe. [LAUGHTER]

SHARON CREECH: Me too. So it's always fun for me to have a character, parallel character, like that who, if the narrator is more sensitive, serious type, then I almost need to have someone like a Phoebe to balance that, to have a place to have fun with it. And to also take the-- so that the main character doesn't come off as sappy, and kind of call the main character on some of the things that might become that way.

DR. DANA: In *Love That Dog*, you used a real person, the poet, Walter Dean Myers, as a character. Do you know him? What made you decide to include him?

SHARON CREECH: Well, I know him now [LAUGHS] This was another of those strange things in that I had a poem posted on my bulletin board that had been on a card a librarian had sent me. For several years, this had been on my bulletin board. And it's the first stanza of Walter Dean Myers' poem, "Love That Boy." I didn't know it was written by Walter Dean Myers. I just had that first stanza. And it was there on my bulletin board, because I loved it so much.

And one day, again several years after I'd first put up there, as I was looking at it, I started to wonder about that boy in the poem. And I thought, well if he's so loved, then maybe he too loves something, maybe a dog, maybe also his teacher. And then just really quickly, I saw in my mind an image of a boy who was sitting at his desk. He was looking at a poem. And he did not look happy. And out poured this story.

And it was in the very early stages of writing this that I looked closer at that poem and I saw in very small letters at the bottom, it said by Walter Dean Myers. At I thought, oh, I met him once. I had met him once at HarperCollins dinner. He was seated next to me. And he had the most beautiful voice, very low and deep and resonant. And it just sort of wrapped everybody in this big hug. And he also had this wonderful laugh, this very again, low, booming laugh. He is a very big man. And it just, there was just something wonderful emanating from this person.

But I only had spent maybe that two hours with him. And so as I'm writing the story, I was not thinking consciously that Walter Dean Myers would become a character. But as it began to seem that the boy in the book, Jack, would-- he's very concerned that maybe boys don't write poetry. Maybe it's only a girl thing. I thought, well, the teacher would offer him poems by male poets to counterbalance that thought of his.

And I thought, well of course she'll offer him Walter Dean Myers. And then it just seemed natural since I get so many letters from kids saying, will you please come to my school, that they would want him to come to the school. And so I thought well, I can't use real Walter Dean Myers. But for now, I'm just going to put him in here and then later I'll change it probably to a

fictional author. So Walter Dean Myers entered the story. And he was perfect in the story. Of course he needed to be there.

So I finished and then I thought well, I can't do that, can I? I kind of put it away. And my editor, meanwhile, had been saying, what are you working on? What are you working on? And I said, oh, you know. I don't know, this thing. Uh, it's not really-- I don't know. Finally, she got me to tell her a little bit about it. And I said, well, the problem is it has a real person in it. And she said, just send it to me and I'll get back to you.

I sent it to her like on a Friday, or Thursday or Friday. On Monday morning, she calls me and says, love this book. So I was like, oh, great. But what about Walter Dean Myers? And she said, look, I'm going to send it to Walter. And we'll just see how he feels about it. And I said, good. Because if he has any objections whatsoever, we have to take him out. And I have to do something different. She was fine with that. And the editor was fine. She sent it to Walter. And he was very touched and very gracious about it. And gave his full permission to be used as a character in the book.

Since then, I met him many times. And we've done some dual readings of this book together. And he is just a lovely man. And he now gets letters-- he said he can always tell when they've read *Love That Dog*, because he gets letters that are addressed to him the way Jack does in the book, dear Mr. Walter Dean Myers. And so very, very cute.

DR. DANA: Do you have a favorite poem from the book?

SHARON CREECH: I do. I especially love his poem. I don't have all the stanzas of his poem handy, but I do have that first stanza. Would you like me to read that?

DR. DANA: I would love it.

SHARON CREECH: OK. This is "Love That Boy," by Walter Dean Myers, the first stanza. "Love that boy like a rabbit loves to run. I said, I love that boy like a rabbit loves to run. Love to call him in the morning. Love to call him hey there, son." Isn't that lovely?

DR. DANA: Yes.

SHARON CREECH: There's just such a wonderful, happy rhythm about it, and so much love right there.

DR. DANA: Over your long career, I'm sure you've encountered negative criticism of your work. How do you deal with it?

SHARON CREECH: Well, negative criticism. Fortunately, it's rare. Especially because you're writing for young people, you hear a lot from them. They'll write you letters. And they're so gracious. And they're so loving and so wonderful. And so you get hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of letters of positive criticism.

But having said that, you encounter negative criticism along the way, from the very first when you send it into your editor. Fortunately my editor and I have an agreement where she will first tell me the things that she likes. She'll first give me the positive comments. And then she will tell me the things that she thinks need work, which would fall under the negative criticism type things. And it's much easier to take that way. I expect it. I hope for it, because I know that a book is not going to be perfect when I hand it in. It's the best I can make it. But I need that negative criticism so that I can spot then the weak areas that I've not been able to spot until someone else has looked at them.

Once the book goes out into the world, there's a very scary time right before the first reviews come out, or about the time the first reviews come out, and that's when your little baby is out in the world being judged by people, and sometimes judged very harshly and sometimes misread, and least you feel somebody has misread the book, or has some agenda that they're coming at the book from sort of hostile attitude. And those can be very difficult to read.

However, I've learned that I read them. And then I put them away. And then I try not to give any more credence to the negative ones than to the positive ones. But I will come back to the negative ones and try to evaluate when I've calmed down a bit. Because it's hurtful sometimes to read something like that when you put your heart and soul into a book. But I'm able to distance myself after a time.

And I come back always with the intention of OK, what can I learn from that. Is that valid, or is that just one person's skewed opinion? Should I pay attention to that? Is there a point there that I need to look at? And so that's pretty much how I handle it. It's funny though, that you could receive 100 letters and 99 of them might be glowing. But if one is sort of mean, you will remember the mean one. And it's just so bizarre that that happens.

There was a-- when Ruby Holler was up for the Carnegie Medal in England, which is their version of the Newbery, they post short list. And then they have schools weigh in and students give their opinions of the books before the final voting process. And they are so candid, these kids. And a lot of comments are positive. But a lot are negative for all the books, not just mine. And there was one boy who said, "If I were given a choice between reading this book again, and cleaning my teeth with sulfuric acid, I would choose the acid." [LAUGHTER]

DR. DANA: And you're like, I can arrange that. [LAUGHTER]

SHARON CREECH: At first you're like, oh my god. But it was so funny also to me that I have remembered that comment. It's been 10 years probably since. I remember that negative comment. But I don't I don't take it. That's not really negative criticism, so much as just, I don't know what. But-- [LAUGHTER] oh.

DR. DANA: Of all the books you've written, do you have a favorite?

SHARON CREECH: I don't. Because it's like you'll hear so many others say, it's like your children. And I have 19 children here. And each one represents a whole year at least of my life, and a whole year of thought and care. And so much went into the making of that, but it's like a

part of me is in that book. Like that's my left foot. This is my right arm, you know. And it's just-- it would be too hard to choose their favorites for different reasons.

Having said that, I often do you say that the most recent book is usually slightly favored, because it's like the new baby in the family. And you are little more careful of it. You're wanting to let it go out gently into the world, hope people will be kind to it. So right now that's *The Boy on the Porch*, which is just tenderly out there.

DR. DANA: So tell us a little bit more about *The Boy on the Porch*.

SHARON CREECH: *The Boy on the Porch*, this is how it came me. I woke up one morning and I heard these words in my head, the boy on the porch, just that little phrase. I didn't think too much of it. But the next morning, I heard the same words, very distinct, right when I woke up, the boy on the porch. I thought, I think I heard that yesterday. And then same day after a nap, I heard-- I woke and heard this, the boy on the porch. And I thought, all right. What's going on here. There's something here that wants to be told.

And usually I've learned to follow up on these instincts. And so I thought I better find out who this boy on the porch is. And so I began the story of the boy on the porch trying to find out who was this boy who was left on the porch. And that's how it unfolded. And the boy on the porch, like so many characters, this actual boy arrived without being able to speak.

Now really metaphorically, all characters enter my mind that way, unable to speak. And it's not until they speak that I understand them. And I thought well, what if this boy doesn't speak at all? How will I know and how will the reader know what he's like, or what would this present for the reader and for the people who are caring for him. And so that became the sort of forward movement of the story was trying to find out if the boy doesn't speak, how do you find out about him? And how does the relationship grow between the older couple and the boy?

And as I was writing, I could feel parallels between that and say, *Ruby Holler*, with Tiller and Sairy, and the two children they take on, Florida and Dallas, and that the older couple is shaping the child and the children as much as the reverse is happening. The child or children are shaping the adult.

I realized now, I think I come back to that in many of my books. It's even true in *Walk Two Moons* with Gram and Gramps and Sal, this notion of this older generation and the younger generation, and what they have to offer each other, probably because my own grandparents and aunts and uncles were influential in my life. Not something I realized really growing up, but now I can more clearly recognize that all of that sort of shaped who I am today.

DR. DANA: Sharon Creech, thank you so much for coming on the BiblioFiles.

SHARON CREECH: Thank you for having me. It was a wonderful morning's conversation.

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