



# Authorgraph No.127: Sharon Creech

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**Sharon Creech** interviewed by **Suzanne Manczuk**.

## Sharon Creech

interviewed by **Suzanne Manczuk** <!--break-->

There is a small town in western New York state called Salamanca; when Sharon Creech saw the name on a map, she was struck by its Native American sound and used it for one of her characters in the novel, **Walk Two Moons** : ?I love names, especially unusual ones, and I am intrigued by the way names suggest personalities.? Salamanca Tree Hiddle?s name also suggests Sal?s connection to the outdoors, tree climbing being one of Creech?s favourite childhood activities. Exploring the origins of just one of the names of Creech?s characters reveals much about this award winning author.

An intelligent, attractive, and energetic woman, Creech?s childhood experiences in rural Kentucky and Ohio ground her novels in reality. She often writes of a warm and boisterous family life, has an affinity to the natural world, and understands the adolescent?s search for identity. ?One place often visited (when I was a child) was Quincy, Kentucky, where my cousins lived (and still live) on a beautiful farm, with hills and trees and swimming hole and barn and hayloft.? This setting appears in Creech?s novels as Bybanks, Kentucky in **Walk Two Moons** and **Chasing Redbird** , and as Chocton in her next book, **Ruby Holler** . ?Place is important to me. I strongly believe it shapes people. Where we live affects who we are, much as our families and friends and teachers shape who we are. I once heard an educator say young people need and deserve beauty, and I believe this profoundly. We old(er) people need it, too. Perhaps that is why I choose beautiful settings, ones in which I?d like to spend long hours, and ones in which I think young readers would like to spend their time.?

Born and raised in South Euclid, Ohio, a suburb of Cleveland, Sharon Creech spent her youthful days as a part of a rambunctious, noisy family that included one sister and three brothers. The Creech home was often filled with friends and visiting relatives, and, according to Sharon, quietly speaking up at the kitchen table was simply not enough to guarantee that anybody would listen: ?I learned to exaggerate and embellish, because if you didn?t, your story was drowned out by someone else?s more exciting one.? So her affinity for storytelling developed early. The atmosphere in the novel **Absolutely Normal Chaos** derives directly from Sharon?s own family experiences.

Creech?s characters, like her own family, have known hardships and sometimes face personal losses in their lives, but they narrate their episodes of grief with a light, philosophical touch, even lashing their troubles with humour upon occasion. Characters may ?process? or work through a problem by embarking upon a journey, as Sophie does in **The Wanderer** or as Sal and her grandparents do in **Walk Two Moons** . In Creech?s childhood, her family took an annual summer car trip to Wisconsin or maybe Michigan or even, once, Idaho. Thirty years later, Creech recreated this Idaho trip in **Walk Two Moons** as the journey Sal and her grandparents take to find Sal?s mother. In **Chasing Redbird** , Zinny Taylor?s journey is one of walking an ancient trail, and her task of uncovering the path is a way for her to confront her grief over losing her beloved aunt and niece. Reflecting upon her teaching days at an American boarding school in the UK, Creech sad that it was sometimes her task to communicate news of family illnesses or even death to

her charges, comforting them and shepherding them through their emotional reactions. Once again, these real life interactions found their way into fictional stories ? as Creech characters Sophie, Zinny, Salamanca, and Phoebe face the loss of dear ones.

Each day, Creech reads over what she has written the day before, so that as the narrative builds, things surface: ?If you've read the first chapters of your novel over and over again, as a writer you begin to be aware of characters and events emerging with lives of their own.? The writing process is a fluid, back and forth, interconnected and messy one for Creech. She listens to her characters' voices and lets them spin their tales, usually not knowing or planning adventures in advance. ?I know that sounds unrealistic,? says Creech, ?but my characters really do take on a life of their own ? they lead me!?

Sitting in her third floor eyrie at the headmaster's charming house in the grounds of The Pennington School, New Jersey, Creech is surrounded by shelves filled with books and walls peppered with family photos, posters and art. The view is serene: a small lake bordered with shrubs and trees, a gently rolling lawn in the distance ? the back fields of the school's campus. The author sits at her horseshoe-shaped desk (?I cleaned up for the interview today!), a generous enough surface to accommodate a Macintosh computer and peripherals as well as stacks of mail from avid readers and heaps of papers and books scattered about.

?I've been an enthusiastic writer since elementary school and continued through college days,? says Creech. But it was not until her own children were quite grown up that she had the time to return to the writing that she so loved. Her first two works published were novels for adults ? **The Recital** and **Nickel Mally** ? printed in the UK and never marketed in the US. Her first young readers' book, **Absolutely Normal Chaos** , was definitely not designed for the adult market, but, Creech says, it was not consciously a children's book, either.

This novel, a journal of a thirteen-year-old girl's summer in Easton, Ohio, introduces readers to Mary Lou Finney. It is a coming of age story with a dash of first love and a smattering of school life. Mary Lou also delves into classical literature, often finding parallels in Shakespeare or Homer to her own life.

Creech found that she was not finished with Mary Lou and she continued her adventures when she began writing the story of Phoebe Winterbottom. When she submitted this new manuscript, it was suggested that Phoebe's voice was not very sympathetic. ?Humph!? thought Sharon. ?I've just spent two years of my life on this novel and I find Phoebe a fascinating narrator.? Unwilling to jettison the story, Creech then happened upon a fortune cookie that contained the message, ?Don't judge a man until you've walked two moons in his moccasins.? At the same time, Sharon's children were off at college and she was missing them; while musing, a girl's voice popped into her head, saying ?Gramps says I am a country girl at heart? and Salaman Tree Hiddle's story began to emerge. Sal's narrative gradually took shape, and Creech wove the three girls' lives into **Walk Two Moons** , building on the parallels in their families and using the fortune cookie message's Native American proverb as one of her themes. **Walk Two Moons** also contains two of Creech's most endearing characters ? Sal's grandparents ? who lovingly dub Sal ?chickabiddy. ?I was surprised,? said Creech, ?that so many readers wrote to me about Grandma and Grandpa Hiddle ? that these characters became so beloved by readers.? This book was to win the prestigious Newbery Medal.

It was while she was teaching in Thorpe, England, at an American school, TASIS, that Sharon, now divorced, met and married Lyle Rigg, who later became the headmaster of the school. Soon the family was transferred to the TASIS branch in Switzerland, spending two years there before returning to Thorpe. The two years in Switzerland provided the backdrop for Creech's novel, **Bloomability** , in which an American girl reluctantly attends a Swiss boarding school.

Creech's most recent novel, **The Wanderer** , connects to a sailing trip her daughter took after college. Sharon thought she would allay her fears about the trip by learning to sail herself; but this meant she truly understood what it meant to travel across the Atlantic in a forty-five foot boat. With a crew of college friends and their fathers, her daughter set sail, midway radioing a message that all was going well. Two weeks later, Sharon received a phone call that explained that the boat had arrived in England, but that the sailing crew had experienced a massive storm that wiped out their communications equipment and left them without sails for three days. Creech used her daughter's journal kept during

the voyage as the basis for Sophie's journal in **The Wanderer** . After writing the first five chapters of this novel, she found that the story needed another perspective: Enter Cody, Sophie's cousin, and the parallel voice that describes this journey of discovery. Each of Sophie's uncles, Cody, and Sophie herself have both interior and exterior reasons for signing on for this sea voyage. Sophie, in particular, is drawn to this trip in order to face something about herself and her past. The reader gradually discovers why Sophie is an orphan, and what her adoptive family means to her.

And the future? Unusually for Creech, she is currently working on two new novels ? **Ruby Holler** , set in her cherished Kentucky and told by twins (a boy and a girl), and **Love That Dog** , a story narrated by a young boy.

After writing novels, Creech's passions include the theatre (?we attended often when Lyle and I were in London?), and art (?I have no talent, just an interest?). A yearly summer retreat to New York State is a time of renewal for Sharon ? kayaking, biking, swimming, walking ? this is her interlude of rest and leisure activity, although it is also a dream time. ?I don't write in the summer.? But we know that ideas are always percolating, moving in and out of conscious thought for this active outdoors woman, for, after all, didn't Salamanca Tree Hiddle spring from New York State?

Photograph courtesy of Macmillan Children's Books.

**Suzanne Manczuk** is a past Chair of the national committee of the American Library Association and has recently retired from her job as a school librarian.

## The Books

(published by Macmillan Children's Books)

*For younger readers:*

**The Ghost of Uncle Arvie** , 0 330 34212 6, £2.99

*For older readers ? all priced at £4.99:*

**The Wanderer** , 0 330 39292 1

**Absolutely Normal Chaos** , 0 330 39781 8

**Walk Two Moons** , 0 330 39783 4 (winner of the Newbery Medal)

**Chasing Redbird** , 0 330 39782 6

**Bloomability** , 0 330 39784 2

Sharon Creech's web-site is [www.sharoncreech.com](http://www.sharoncreech.com) [3]

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