



Sharon M. Draper

**Author Program In-depth Interview
Insights Beyond the Movie**

Sharon M. Draper, interviewed in her home in Cincinnati, Ohio, June 19, 2007.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your first career was teaching. You taught high school and junior high school for more than thirty years. What drove you to want to teach?

SHARON M. DRAPER: It was a natural path for me. I was happy and successful in school. All my positive role models were teachers. When I was a little girl, I used to teach the kids next door. I used to teach my dolls. I thought about being a doctor, but I don't like blood. Teaching felt safe.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How would you characterize your teaching style?

SHARON M. DRAPER: At the very beginning of the year, students would be afraid of me. Students in my High School English class would say, "Oh, my goodness, we've got Draper. We've got to do the Draper Paper." But as they got to know me, they would say, "She's teaching us something." At the end of the year, most of them would say, "Thank you."

The students who find me years later say, "Thank you for giving me a solid background. Thank you for believing in me when nobody else did. Thank you for pushing me when I felt lazy." The thing that makes me feel good is that many of them even become teachers. I hope that they will become role models for the next generation.

TEACHINGBOOKS: In addition to being a classroom teacher, you have written two successful books about teaching, and in 1997 were selected by President Clinton to be National Teacher of the Year. From your perspective, what is the most important aspect of being a successful teacher?

SHARON M. DRAPER: A good teacher is a dreamer; somebody who can instill dreams in somebody else. So my job is to dream his future so that he can say, "Yes, I can graduate from high school. Yes, I can go to college. Yes, I can become somebody."

If an adult passes on knowledge or information or inspiration to that young person, that's teaching. Teaching happens anywhere, all the time. You don't have to stand in front of a classroom. You just have to make that connection.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your books have received numerous prizes and accolades. Five of them have been selected for Coretta Scott King awards or honors, which recognize outstanding books for young people by African American authors. How does the writing process relate to the teaching process for you?

SHARON M. DRAPER: I can't separate teaching from the writing. When I write, I am unconsciously teaching. I give a situation and I create fictional characters, and then I give them

problems. The choices they make may lead to more problems. My readers ask me, “What were you trying to teach me with this?” I say, “Whatever you got out of it was what I was trying to teach.”

TEACHINGBOOKS: Can you share how you first came to be published as a writer?

SHARON M. DRAPER: While I was a writing teacher, I would pass out applications to my students for writing contests and speeches. A young man said to me, “Why don’t you write something, Mrs. Draper?” He gave me an application for a short story contest.

At the grocery store that day, and I saw a woman screaming at a three-year-old boy. She said, “If you don’t sit your stinking, useless butt back down in that shopping cart, I swear I’ll bust your greasy face in.”

It really upset me. I wrote down what she had said, and from that line came a story. She takes him home and then leaves him there by himself. He finds a cigarette lighter and sets the house on fire. The story ends with the boy surrounded by flames, waiting for his mother.

I typed up the story and sent it in, and I won first prize. It was published in *Ebony* magazine in December of 1990. Now it is chapter one of my book *Forged by Fire*.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your first book, *Tears of a Tiger*, won many awards, including the Coretta Scott King John Steptoe Award for an outstanding new book. What audience did you have in mind while you were writing *Tears of a Tiger*, which opens the “Hazelwood High School” trilogy?

SHARON M. DRAPER: I was writing it for teachers, because I’m a teacher. I was writing for teenagers, because I was a mom with teenagers and I was teaching teenagers. The subject matter is positive and strong. And I was enjoying putting in symbolism, figurative language and metaphor and all of the things that, as a teacher, I would ask a student to find in a book.

TEACHINGBOOKS: The narrative voice and format within *Tears of a Tiger* vary throughout the book. Why did you write it this way?

SHARON M. DRAPER: I used to have a big sign in my classroom that said, “The B word is not allowed in here. I will not allow you to be ‘bored’.” Similarly, I won’t allow *me* to be boring. So there was always action and energy in my classroom, and I try to do that with my books.

I decided to write *Tears of a Tiger* in a multi-genre format—with diaries, letters, and conversations. That immediately erased the B factor so that readers are involved in the story, the plot, and the characters from the first page to the end. If you don’t like letters, you can read essays. If you don’t like essays, you can read poems.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What impact do you hope your books have on the teenagers who read them?

SHARON M. DRAPER: I try to make sure the characters are balanced and reflect what young people might do in a particular situation, so that readers see something of themselves in my characters. The issues in the “Hazelwood High School” books are minor compared to what real kids face. I want readers to see that they have the choice to make positive decisions in their lives.

I have learned that kids have to handle issues that their parents either are afraid to admit exist or don't want to talk about. So I give young people the opportunity to talk about them. I write about fictional characters that have problems. Take, for example, the girl who is going out with a boy who's way too old for her. Or kids who live in an abusive home. One little girl wrote to me and said, "I read your book. I called that toll-free number in the back of the book, for the National Child Abuse Hotline, and you saved my life." Another little girl said, "I was at a party and my friends were drinking, and I had started reading your book. I called my mom and asked her to come pick me up. My friends were in an accident that night. So you saved my life."

TEACHINGBOOKS: The second book in the trilogy, *Forged by Fire*, was the 1998 Coretta Scott King Author Award Winner. Why does the action in *Forged by Fire* pre-date the events in *Tears of a Tiger*?

SHARON M. DRAPER: I would have written the books in chronological order if I had known I was going to write a trilogy. *Tears of a Tiger* was extremely successful, and when I was asked to write a sequel, I said, "Okay, I want to do something else with these young people at Hazelwood High School." I knew I had this short story about this three-year-old boy. Gerald, a minor character in *Tears of a Tiger*, lives in an abusive situation. That little boy became Gerald, and I took that short story and made it chapter one of *Forged by Fire*.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What is the role of adult characters in your "Hazelwood High" books?

SHARON M. DRAPER: The parents tend to be minor characters, but their problems impact the teenagers. For example, Monique, the mother in *Forged by Fire*, is damaged. She loves her kids, but she doesn't know how to be a good mother. There are a lot of mothers like that. Monique wasn't a bad person. But nobody had taught her how to be a good mother, and she made bad decisions.

TEACHINGBOOKS: The three books in the trilogy are written from different points of view. What made you decide to mix up the narrative voice?

SHARON M. DRAPER: *Tears of a Tiger* uses the multi-genre format, but I didn't want to repeat that. So *Forged by Fire* takes a more traditional third-person approach, with the author sitting back telling the story. *Darkness Before Dawn*, the last book in the trilogy, is in the first person, so it's easier to get involved in what's going on in the girl's head and her life that way.

The teacher in me is saying, "Some books are written in first person, some in third person. You can get the story from different types of points of view." Teachers appreciate it as well.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Two of your newer books, *The Battle of Jericho* and *November Blues*, both Coretta Scott King Honor books, are part of a second trilogy that is also about high school kids. In what ways does the new trilogy differ from the earlier one?

SHARON M. DRAPER: In the "Jericho" books, I deal with subjects that are more controversial and on the edge, like teen pregnancy and depression in teenagers. The "Jericho" books might be more appropriate for eighth and ninth grade, though I have seen lots of pregnant seventh- and sixth-graders, and it's so sad. I pushed the edges a little bit more with each book, but always within good taste.

The Battle of Jericho involves an ordinary boy who is like an every man. He wants a girlfriend who looks really good. He wants the approval of his peers. But that wouldn't make a good story, so extraordinary things have to happen to him. He is asked to join a club called the Warriors of Distinction, which will ensure a very positive peer group. It has secret rites and ceremonies. Once he gets into it, it's extremely hard to get out. He's caught by peer pressure to do things that he doesn't feel comfortable doing, but he doesn't know how to escape.

Young people have had wonderful discussions about this book concerning whether to do what's right or what's cool, and that's kind of where Jericho is.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Most of your characters are African American. How is this relevant to your writing?

SHARON M. DRAPER: I don't write about black teenagers. I write about teenagers who happen to be African American. There's a very important distinction. When I teach, I teach whoever shows up, and it has nothing to do with their race, weight, height, or anything. Whoever picks up my book, that's who I'm writing for. Yes, most of my characters are African American, but not all of them. Some of them don't have a racial description at all. The character of Eddie in *The Battle of Jericho* is hard and tough, and nowhere do I say what race he is. Eddie's cruelty and difficult life situation are important. Jericho makes a stupid decision, and it had nothing to do with his race. The issues in the story are teenage-based and are the same kinds of mistakes that any teenager of any race or culture could make.

All of Charles Dickens' characters were white and British. I read them because I was interested in the characters, and I didn't care what color they were. Nobody asks a white author why their characters are white. But when you are African American, you get asked why your characters are African American. It's not right or wrong or good or bad. It just is.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Why did you decide to write about the topic of teenage pregnancy in *November Blues*?

SHARON M. DRAPER: I got letters from young girls who told me, "You ought to write about how hard it is to be pregnant and be in high school. You ought to write about the real deal." So I said, "I've got to face this."

TEACHINGBOOKS: *Romiette and Julio* is a modern-day version of *Romeo and Juliette*, one of the most famous love story of all times. What made you want to take on Shakespeare?

SHARON M. DRAPER: I've taught *Romeo and Juliet* 9,462 times, I'm sure, and I acted in a stage production of *Romeo and Juliet*. I wanted to write a story that showed that Shakespearean themes are universal. I also wanted to make Shakespeare accessible for today's teenagers, and have them say, "Wow, that's a cool story, with the whole idea of mismatched love and star-crossed lovers." *Romiette and Julio* takes place today, and they meet on the Internet. Many teachers use it as either an introduction to *Romeo and Juliet* or a follow-up just for fun after they have read it.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your book *Double Dutch* is written for a younger audience, from fourth to sixth grade. What were your inspirations for writing it?

SHARON M. DRAPER: After the Columbine shootings, I was shocked and couldn't write for six months. I knew I couldn't write about school shootings, but I could write something about how fear and the rumors go on in schools, especially in middle school. The other thing was that I saw these kids on television doing Double Dutch, and they were just fantastic, jumping nine zillion beats a minute as they went through those ropes. I started doing some research on Double Dutch. I went to Double Dutch practices and teams. I jumped. So the two ideas came together-- one of talented young people doing a sport that's not well known but very popular and builds self-esteem, and the other, of what can happen in a school when rumors and fear take over.

Another issue in *Double Dutch* concerns young people who can't read. When you're in the second grade, it's okay to say, "I can't read." When you're in the fifth grade, it's okay to say, "I'm having difficulty here." By eighth grade, you cover it up.

TEACHINGBOOKS: The "Ziggy and the Black Dinosaurs" series is made up of chapter books for young readers, and the protagonist is a fun-loving ten-year-old. What are your ambitions for these books?

SHARON M. DRAPER: There are four little boys in the "Ziggy" stories, and they're best friends. They're out to have fun. They're just little boys getting into little-boy trouble and having adventures. They solve neighborhood mysteries, always with a sense of *joie de vivre*.

In each book I focus on a different learning curve, whether it's about history, science, or the importance of art and music. Ziggy is just fun for me. The reading level is second grade, third grade, fourth grade, fifth grade. I'm just really proud of them.

TEACHINGBOOKS: *Copper Sun*, which won the 2007 Coretta Scott King Award, is a departure from your other books. It is a historical novel focusing on the harrowing journey of Amari, an African girl who is sold into slavery. What led you to write this book?

SHARON M. DRAPER: It took me ten years to write *Copper Sun*. I think that everything I had written up to this point was leading to it. It started when I went to Africa for the first time. When I got there, I felt like I belonged. I visited remote villages in Ghana and went to the castles on the coast, which are not castles at all. They're prisons, forts, and people call them "slave castles." Many people say that they feel the spirits of the people who had been through that place. I did. I believe where great trauma has occurred, something resounds. If you go to Auschwitz, you can feel it. In these forts, I sensed the spirit of the people. I felt the walls on either side of me that had been rubbed smooth by the thousands of bodies that had been pushed through there. I said, "I've got to tell this story."

I decided to tell the story of one person, a 15-year-old girl. Ultimately, she is the same as all my other characters. She's a plain old ordinary girl who has extraordinary circumstances thrust upon her and just wants to spend time with her boyfriend. And all of a sudden, her family is killed. Her home and her village are destroyed. She's taken away as a prisoner by people that she does not understand. She's mistreated and abused, and she finds strength within herself.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you hope teachers and students draw from the experience of Amari?

SHARON M. DRAPER: None of us knows what strengths we have until we're faced with some kind of difficulty. Amari develops strengths that she was not aware of. People help her along the

way. She meets Afi on the ship. She meets Teenie on the plantation. Even Mrs. Derby is helpful to her as she goes along her path learning how to be more self-resilient.

Amari's strength and courage are things that a lot of people can gain from. Man is still inhumane to other men, and the horrors of one group of people mistreating another are still happening today. Teachers and students can have very open discussions about what happened during slavery and move on to discussing modern-day slavery, which still exists. Young girls are still being sold into prostitution. We need to fix that.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What does *Copper Sun* mean to you personally?

SHARON M. DRAPER: This book is very significant to me because it shows the strength of African American women throughout history, the women who did not die on the slave ships or the plantations, who suffered and survived so that I and other African American women could be here. It took an enormous amount of personal strength for these women to make a life in a country where they were reviled. I'm very proud of my heritage and of the women who paved the way. I don't know who Amari really was, but there was someone like her.

TEACHINGBOOKS: The main character in *Fire from the Rock* is also a 15-year-old girl, a young person who happens to be caught up in the battle over school integration in the South. Will you talk about the background for this story?

SHARON M. DRAPER: In *Fire from the Rock*, the rock is Little Rock, Arkansas, and the book deals with the integration of Central High School in 1957. The book was published in 2007, the 50th anniversary of that event. The protagonist is a girl who is asked to be on the list of children to integrate Central High School.

To be asked to be the first African American children to go into this school had to be terrifying. Not everybody in the community was in favor of integration. There were African Americans who said, "Uh-uh. Let's just keep to ourselves and not make any waves." Many of the whites in the neighborhood said, "Uh-uh. We don't want you."

150 kids were on that original list, and the number was whittled down to nine. They chose to take themselves off the list or were put off the list for various reasons. At Central High School, they couldn't play on sports teams or be in any plays. They couldn't go to the school dances or participate in extracurricular activities. There was intimidation. Kids were told, "If you stay on that list, your dad's going to lose his job." Sylvia's on that list, but isn't one of the final nine. How she gets off the list, and how it feels to be 15 and to have to make these terrible kinds of decisions, is what the book is about.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What are your personal memories of that time?

SHARON M. DRAPER: When I was a little girl, I remember watching this on my little television with my family and being stunned by the fact that kids could not go to the school that they wanted to go to. I sat and watched the police and armed guards and soldiers surrounding kids who just wanted to go to school.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Can you share a bit about the two books you have written for teachers?

SHARON M. DRAPER: *Teaching from the Heart* and *Not Quite Burned Out but Crispy around the Edges* are both books of short essays that offer inspiration and encouragement to teachers when the day gets very, very long. They're funny, they're lighthearted, and they remind us of why we teach.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What was it like being National Teacher of the Year, in 1997?

SHARON M. DRAPER: It was an absolutely marvelous year. I went to the White House and met Bill Clinton. They took me out of the classroom for a year, so that I didn't teach. But in fact, I was teaching everywhere. My classroom became much larger. I traveled all over the world and spoke to teachers. I was their advocate.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What does it mean to you to have received so much recognition from the Coretta Scott King committee?

SHARON M. DRAPER: The Coretta Scott King Award is a tremendous honor and is something about which, as an African American author, I'm very proud. It's validating that I am recognized by that particular peer group for achieving excellence in that category.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Can you please share a bit about your writing process?

SHARON M. DRAPER: On a typical writing day, I get up at 4:00 in the morning and write nonstop until about 7:00. I feel very fresh first thing in the morning and I can get a lot done. I'll stop and have breakfast. And then I'll go back and I will write all day long. I'll work until *Jeopardy!* comes on, and then that's enough. I'll get a good night's sleep, and I'll get up the next morning and do the same thing.

My ideal writing time is a whole week with no interruptions at all, no trips to the store, the mall, the post office. The second day I go back, I'll revise what I wrote the first day. The third day I'll revise more, so I'm kind of self-editing as I go. And I'll add new characters, and I may add bits and pieces from the various chapters. If I can do that for a whole month, I've got a pretty good hunk of writing done.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you do when you get stuck?

SHARON M. DRAPER: I very rarely get stuck, but when I do, I go shopping.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you like to tell teachers when you speak to them?

SHARON M. DRAPER: I tell teachers that what they do is important. Nobody tells them enough that they're doing a wonderful job. They get yelled at because test scores aren't high enough and the kids are misbehaving. So I say, "Look at what your students didn't know in September and look what they know in June. You did that." I try to give them inspiration and encouragement.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you like to tell students?

SHARON M. DRAPER: I tell them to find their passion, and then find work doing that. If they have a talent or a skill or ability, I say, "There are opportunities for you. If you are a dancer, you can go to college for free on a dance scholarship. You can get a scholarship because you're good on the trumpet." I try to give them specific ways to achieve their goals.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you convey to young people who want to write?

SHARON M. DRAPER: If someone comes to me and says, "I am 13 years old and I have written a 456-page book," I tell him or her, "That's wonderful. But when you're 15, you'll be a better writer. Learn your skill. Get really, really good at it. Read every single book in the library and write every single day." What kids need to do at 13 and 15 is to learn the necessary skills so that when they're 23 and 25 that they can get published. They should read good writers and emulate what they do, and read bad writers so they know not to do that.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Have you considered writing novels for adults?

SHARON M. DRAPER: I tried to write an adult book and it was just horrible. I wasn't interested in the mother or the father in the story. I ended up being interested in their young girl. I heard the same question asked of Virginia Hamilton. She said, "My pediatrician takes care of children--that's his specialty. I'm a pediatrician of writing. That's my specialty." So I took that to heart. That's what I do. And I'm not very good at anything else.

Books by SHARON M. DRAPER (as of March 2008)

- FIRE FROM THE ROCK, Dutton Children's Books / an imprint Penguin Young Readers Group, 2007
- NOVEMBER BLUES, Atheneum Books for Young Readers / an imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing, 2007
- STARS AND SPARKS ON STAGE (ZIGGY AND THE BLACK DINOSAURS BOOK 6), (illustrated by Jesse Joshua Watson), Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing, 2007
- BACKYARD ANIMAL SHOW, THE (ZIGGY AND THE BLACK DINOSAURS BOOK 5), (illustrated by Jesse Joshua Watson), Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing, 2006
- COPPER SUN, Atheneum Books for Young Readers (an imprint of Simon & Schuster), 2006
- SPACE MISSION ADVENTURE, THE (ZIGGY AND THE BLACK DINOSAURS BOOK 4), (illustrated by Jesse Joshua Watson), Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing, 2006
- WE BEAT THE STREET: HOW A FRIENDSHIP PACT LED TO SUCCESS, (written with The Three Doctors [Sampson Davis, George Jenkins, and Rameck Hunt]), Dutton Children's Books / an imprint Penguin Young Readers Group, 2005
- BATTLE OF JERICHO, THE, Atheneum Books for Young Readers / an imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing, 2003
- DOUBLE DUTCH, Atheneum Books for Young Readers / an imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing, 2002
- DARKNESS BEFORE DAWN, Atheneum Books for Young Readers / an imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing, 2001
- NOT QUITE BURNED OUT BUT CRISPY AROUND THE EDGES: INSPIRATION, LAUGHTER, AND ENCOURAGEMENT FOR TEACHERS, Heinemann, 2001

- TEACHING FROM THE HEART: REFLECTIONS, ENCOURAGEMENT, AND INSPIRATION, Heinemann, 2000
- JAZZIMAGINATION: A JOURNAL TO READ AND WRITE, Scholastic Press, 1999
- ROMIETTE AND JULIO, Atheneum Books for Young Readers / an imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing, 1999
- FORGED BY FIRE, Atheneum Books for Young Readers / an imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing, 1997
- SHADOWS OF CAESAR'S CREEK (ZIGGY AND THE BLACK DINOSAURS BOOK 3), (illustrated by Jesse Joshua Watson), Just Us Books, 1997
- LOST IN THE TUNNEL OF TIME (ZIGGY AND THE BLACK DINOSAURS BOOK 2), (illustrated by Jesse Joshua Watson), Just Us Books, 1996
- BURIED BONES MYSTERY, THE (ZIGGY AND THE BLACK DINOSAURS BOOK 1), (illustrated by Jesse Joshua Watson), Just Us Books, 1994
- TEARS OF A TIGER, Atheneum Books for Young Readers / an imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing, 1994

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