

# An Interview with Author, Teacher, Mom, Coach (Whew!) S. L. Rottman

*Pamela Sissi Carroll*

**PSC:** Our readers will be eager to know: How you have managed to have a career as a teacher and then to add a career as a writer for young adults? I wonder: Have your jobs as a *teacher* and *coach* of teens informed what you do as a *writer* for teens? Can you think of any experiences or personalities from your teaching that have really stuck with the *writerly* you?

**SLR:** At the beginning of my first year of teaching, we had a district-wide English department meeting. We were paired up with other teachers and asked to introduce each other. Well, in my enthusiasm for what I was going to do with my life, I told my veteran partner my plan. And in introducing me, his voice was practically dripping with disdain as he said, "She, like all new young English teachers, has grand dreams of being a *novelist*." That hurt. So I stopped talking about my plans. I didn't want to be yet another average English teacher who let dreams of being a writer interfere with teaching. I decided I would focus on my teaching, be a real teacher, hopefully a good one, and save my writing for my retirement.

I began teaching. My first job was at a junior high school in southern Colorado Springs. And the joy and excitement I had felt as a coach quickly gave way to frustration. I discovered the vital difference between the two jobs: the willingness of the participants. When you're coaching, for the most part, the kids are there because they want to be. Often, when you're teaching, the kids are there only because they have to be. That was definitely the case in my school.

And it amazed me the number of students who wouldn't read—at all. They wouldn't read anything at home, and whined incessantly when we read in class. This is when I learned another important lesson: by the time students are in junior high or middle school, there are usually two factors that will keep them from reading: ability and interest. Now we all know that the way you get better at something is by practicing. And the way to get someone to practice is to get them interested.

So I set out with the goal of writing something that would capture my student's interest, but still have some literary meat to them. I hope one day to reach that goal.

**PSC:** Your novels feature teens who struggle with problems that extend far beyond issues that are the "garden variety" trouble spots for adolescents. I am thinking, for example, of Sean's alcoholic, abusive mother in *Hero* (2000), Scott's crusty uncle, his parents' death, and his troubled older brother in *Rough Waters* (2000), Skye's older brother Sunny, who has Down Syndrome, in *Head Above Water* (2003), and Stetson's alcoholic dad and previously unknown sister in *Stetson* (2002).

Might you discuss your choices, as an artist and as a person who is sensitive to adolescents' realities, as they are reflected in these characters and in the kinds of troubles the characters work through?

**SLR:** I have often said that if I were to write about my real life, my books would be favorites with people who suffer insomnia. I grew up in a very ordinary suburban area, with parents who are still married and one younger sister. I have encountered, either through friends, acquaintances, newspapers, or students, components of the family dynamics that I write about. (After my first two books, in which the parents are either abusive, dead-beat, or just dead, my parents did ask, with a great level of concern, if I had bad memories

of my childhood!)

While the situations my characters face often do "extend far beyond" typical trouble spots for teens, I think that they are situations that most teens could see themselves or a close friend experiencing. What I try to do in my writing is to take

what I know or have experienced, and twist it so it would be interesting or exciting to the readers. Sean (from *Hero*) is a combination of five students I had in my first year of teaching. For *Rough Waters*, I drew on my extensive rafting experiences, and wondered what it

would be like for someone who didn't have a choice about being on the river.

When I'm teaching, I like to use my students as my guinea pigs. I offer extra credit for anyone willing to read an unpublished manuscript and critique it. After completing the manuscript for *Stetson*, I had to put it on hold for a semester, because we had a student killed in a car accident, and I did not want to upset my students further.




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**PSC:** Your books include a lot of action (the rafting in *Rough Waters*, for example, and the swim meets in *Head Above Water*), as well as a lot of character development.

I am curious: When thinking about your work as a writer, what do *you* feel like are your strongest areas, and is there anything that you wish you could do better, and so on? How do you move from an idea into print? Have critics noticed anything about your writing that has come as a surprise to *you*?

**SLR:** I like to think that my character development and use of dialog are my strengths. My endings are frequently criticized for being too rushed, but I'm not sure that comes as a surprise to me. I would like to be able to wrap up my stories a little more smoothly.

When I come up with a story idea, I usually let it stew and make my brain sort through as many of the plot components as I can before I start writing. The fun and infuriating part of actually writing is watching what the characters do with the situations I put them in. It's fun when they do what I was expecting, but it's infuriating when they lead to a plot twist that I'm not ready to deal with.

As for having action in my novels, it's necessary. Look at the way the world works. Kids expect action and entertainment from everything, including the classroom. Teachers now need to add a flair for dramatics to their lesson plans to keep the students involved. I want students to read, so I've got to meet some of their needs. Adding the character development and moral or philosophical issues is a way of meeting my own (and hopefully some other teachers') needs.

**PSC:** In this issue of *The ALAN Review*, author John H. Ritter addresses a question: Do writers of YA literature feel an obligation to provide hope for their readers?

How might you answer that question?

**SLR:** I wrestle with this question almost as much as I wrestle with the use of language in my books. As an American author, I believe that freedom of speech is incredibly important and censorship in any government form is wrong. Yet as a teacher, I know that there are stories and

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materials that, as much as I know they would have a valuable impact on my students, I simply cannot bring into the classroom. I've attempted to reach a happy medium with my writing; I know full well that the language I use in my books is very tame compared to what most students hear (and say!) everyday in the halls during passing period. But that doesn't necessarily mean they need to read them in the classroom too.

The need to provide hope to YA readers is just as sticky a question. For some of our readers, they'll call you on any kind happy ending, because the readers don't see happy endings in the world outside—and sometimes even inside—the school walls. I have a lot of rather bleak material in my books, and at least two of my books originally had very different endings than what was published. My editors did not want to books to be too depressing. Hope is important for teen readers, but most of them see a very different reality in their day to day lives. The trick is finding the balance between supplying enough hope and still making the story 'real'.

**PSC:** *Head Above Water* is the first of yours to feature a female protagonist.

Can you talk a bit about your decision to write a book that focuses on a female athlete?

**SLR:** The first outline I did for *Rough Waters* involved a female protagonist. My agent flat out refused to work with it. His comment was incredibly politically incorrect, but the bottom line was financial: it's easier to sell a male protagonist in YA literature, because although teen girls will read about boys or girls, teen boys will only read about boys. You get the bigger market when you write about boys.

When I did write *Head Above Water*, it was a very emotionally draining book. I'm not entirely sure why. But I do know that throughout the editing process, the comment that I kept getting was that it was a "girl's book." I kept wondering why that sounded like an insult. I'm a girl, lots of girls like to read, why is it a bad thing to write a girl's book?

Female athletes as protagonists are a natural reflection of today's society. There are a lot of girls out there who turn to sports for a safe physical and emotional release, and quite a few of them are also turning to their coaches for adult guidance that they don't find elsewhere. This is, obviously, not unique to girls—a lot of boys are in sports for the same reasons. But boys have the more visible, big fan-drawing, professional potential sports than girls do, and the high school female athlete has been ignored in literature for far too long.

The embarrassing flip side to this is the fact that of the six YA books I've either published or have under contract, only one is about a female athlete! I've got other completed manuscripts with female protagonists, but I've been unable to get contracts for them. For some reason, my male protagonists seem to come to life easily.

**PSC:** You have worked as a swimming coach for a girls' team. Are you still coaching?

**SLR:** Unfortunately, I'm not a coach at this time. We live on base outside of a relatively small city, and the opportunity for me to teach or coach doesn't exist at this time. I'm looking forward to moving and getting the chance to work with teens again!

**PSC:** How have your colleagues and former students responded to your success as a writer for adolescents? How have you responded to the awards and recognition? (Your first novel, *Hero*, was selected as an ALA Best Book for Young Adults, and your second, *Rough Waters*, was named as an ALA Quick Pick for Young Adults—quite an impressive—and perhaps daunting—start!)

**SLR:** I have been stunned by the student response and awards that my books have gotten so far. And I have to admit that I love it! My favorite awards, though, are the state awards that are student-driven. *Rough Waters* and *Stetson* have both been Colorado Blue Spruce Award nominees (1999, 2003), and *Hero* won the Nevada Young Readers Award (2001).

When teaching, though, my colleagues and students simply see me as another teacher. When I'm in the middle of writing a story or editing one for print, papers occasionally are a little late in being graded. But the only time my writing directly affects my teaching is when I have to take leave to

attend a conference, or when I'm assigning a writing assignment to a class. It frequently goes something like this:

"I need you to write a two page—"

"Two pages!" they interrupt. "How can we write two pages?"

"Oh, come on you guys, two pages is easy! It's nothing—"

"Yeah, for you! You write books!"

**PSC:** Our readers would be interested in hearing about the kinds of letters or electronic messages that you might get from young readers. Can you share any of the memorable responses that you have received from readers?

**SLR:** I received an e-mail in April that gave me goosebumps. I asked her for permission to use it, and she agreed (I promised not to share her last name).

Dear Mrs. Rottman,

I wanted you to know what you have done for me. You came to our school (Newton) just about a few months ago and you changed my life. I always hated reading since I was about six years old. Coming into Newton, I knew about the AR [Accelerated Reader] system, and fought to find ways around it, yet finding nothing, I purely didn't get any points. When you visited our school, everyone was reading your books. I didn't get a chance until after you came, and the first book I read was *Head Above Water*. Usually, it took me weeks to read books, sometimes even months. I read your book in about one week flat. It was probably one of the best books I had ever read. That was how it started. I then read *Hero* and then *Stetson*. All in very short time periods, unlike the usual me. I am writing this email mostly to tell you that you have inspired me. Inspired me to read, and maybe even to write. I write mostly poems, but I do have stories in my mind for writing about, although I doubt I will ever get to

writing them. I have read many books since then and I read faster, and understand more now. I know have more points than I need for AR. I actually go home, wanting to read my book. So thank you. I also think that you should write sequels to many of your books, and I am awaiting you new book to come out. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Lera

(8th grade student from Newton)

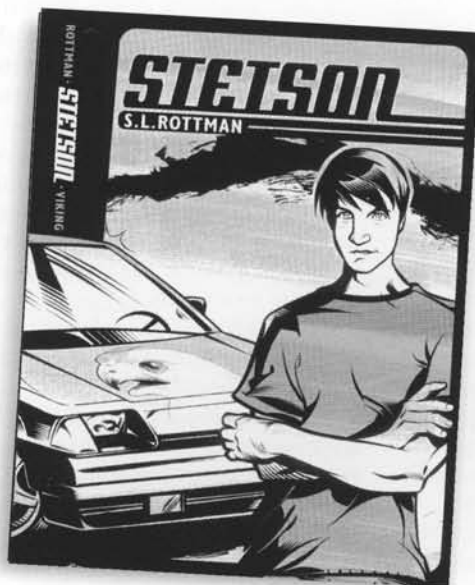
**PSC:** Can you give us any hints about projects that you are currently working on?

**SLR:** This is a tough question, mostly because there is usually a big difference between projects that I'm working on, and what's coming out next in print!

My next book is *Shadow of a Doubt*, and scheduled for a fall 2003 release (Peachtree). Shadow, a fifteen-year-old, is beginning high school and hoping for a fresh start. He's been a quiet loner for a while, primarily because his older brother broke his trust (and his heart) when he ran away eight years ago. When Shadow answers the phone during the first week of school, his world is once again violently shaken as he finds out that his brother is now facing homicide charges.

I also have a skiing YA book, currently untitled, with an anticipated 2005 release (Viking). Beyond that, I just finished a new YA manuscript, and am planning to do some editing on an adult manuscript that I wrote a few years ago and still hope to place. I'm also trying to break into the children's market, and have a children's book scheduled for a 2006 release.

I am a very lucky person because I love all of my jobs—being a mom, teaching, and writing. And all three of those jobs intertwine, influence, and support each other.



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Kietlinski.*

## S. L. Rottmans' *Stetson*

Pamela Sissi Carroll

S.L. Rottman must be an acrobat. I don't know whether she can walk on a tight rope, or even if she can jump into the air then do a couple of flips and twists before landing on the ground again. But she is an acrobatic writer, one who writes equally compelling fiction using the first person voices of female and male characters. Two recent novels, *Head above Water* (Peachtree, 1999) and *Stetson* (Viking of Penguin Putnam, 2002), demonstrate her talent for telling stories from the perspective of teens in desperate situations. Of the four novels she has published for teen readers, *Head Above Water* is the one that features a female protagonist, a talented swimmer named Skye. Skye struggles to balance training rigorously for the state championships, caring for a brother who has Down syndrome, and pleasing her demanding new boyfriend. Finally, Skye sees that her family is more important to her than her racing or the pushy boyfriend. Rottman's experience as a swimming coach shines through the scenes of tough practices, tired swimmers, and elusive goals.

*Stetson*, her latest novel, is told from the first person voice of its eponymous character. It is a fast-paced novel with threatening characters that attract the reader to the page like a moth is attracted to flames. *Stetson*, the 17-year old son of a man he describes as a "drunken slob" (p. 27), tells readers about his life. His dad works at the mill, and expects his son to quit school in order to join him—and most of the town's male population—there. Stet's mother walked out on her husband when Stet was three, leaving her son with unanswered questions about why and how she could abandon a baby, leaving him with such a poor excuse for a father.

Both father and son are nasty characters when the novel opens. For example, Dad, a former rodeo champion, berates his son for not having a full time job, and repeatedly encourages him to move out of the trailer. He also hurts his son by telling him that Stet's mom left because, "She saw what a lousy brat you were turning into, and decided she didn't want you around to rub off on the next baby!" (p. 35). Early in the novel, *Stetson* seems to be his father's son. He agrees to do pranks at school when his classmates promise to pay him cash for them, but the pranks sometimes get ugly. In a particularly painful scene, he embarrasses a teacher by suggesting that her white pants are revealing that she is having her menstrual period. He coolly collects \$10 from a classmate who'd ask him to distract the teacher so that she would not give a quiz, then moves on to the school office, where he tells the principal's secretary that he is suspending himself for two days.

But there are two people in *Stetson's* life who provide him with relief and hope for a better future: Jason is a

Vietnam veteran who lost an eye in the war; he runs a glorified junk yard and allows *Stetson* to work there, offering him money and spare parts, when they are available. *Stetson's* primary goal, in addition to beating the odds against his graduating from high school, is to rebuild an old car—one he has been working on for two years—until it is perfect. The other person is Kayla, his 13-year-old sister, whom he learns about and meets when he is 17. Kayla appears at the trailer one day, looking for the father she had never met, with nowhere else to go. Stet tries his best to be a big brother to her, despite repeated disappointments that she gives him, including her decision to drink beers before school, to dress in tight shirts and micro-mini-skirts, and to party with his older friends at the local bar.

Finally, Stet and Kayla begin to form a bond and his crusty shell begins to fall away. He allows Kayla to help him finish the paint job on his prize possession, the car, because she has a talent for drawing. He decorates the exterior with an airbrushed design that Kayla creates. He enjoys the attention that his remarkable car draws when he drives it to school. Then *Stetson* is faced with a mountain of misfortunes. He cannot cut school any more if he hopes to graduate, but without cutting he can only work evenings and weekends, thereby barely making enough money to buy food for himself, Kayla, and their father. He learns that Jason is terribly ill and eventually that he is dying of cancer. While Stet is staying at Jason's to care for him one night, Dad calls the trailer, and insists that Kayla drive Stet's prized car to pick him up from the bar. She refuses at first, but when her drunken dad demands that she come, she does—then she crashes the car and ends up in a coma for over a week. At that same time, Jason is checking into a veteran's hospital where he knows he will die. Through all the turmoil that this situation produces for *Stetson*, he does learn some things about his mother's and his father's love for him. As readers, we even become a bit more sympathetic toward the despicable father when we begin to consider the losses he has experienced over the years. *Stetson* is finally able to break free of the town with new dreams for himself and, upon her recovery, for his little sister, too.

Rottman convincingly tells this story of family disputes, cars, bars, and troubled, troublesome teen sisters from the male's perspective. It is a book that will appeal to male and female readers...and one that they will find themselves wanting to move through quickly, as they learn more and more about the enigmatic protagonist and narrator. That Rottman can make readers care about a character who seemed so nasty, when we first met him, is itself an acrobatic feat of world-class proportions.