

Sharon M. Draper:

Reaching Reluctant Readers

I first met Sharon M. Draper about five years ago when I was a doctoral student at Ohio State University. At the time, Ohio State held an annual children’s literature conference, and the year I met Ms. Draper I was chosen to be her assistant. My responsibilities were few, but the rewards were great. While I tried to make sure she arrived at various locations on time, we chatted about teaching and writing. Always the teacher, she mentored me, offering advice about everything from pursuing goals to writing fiction of my own.

Since our initial meeting, I have followed her career, read all of her work, and shared much of it with my students and my own son. I have heard her speak numerous times, and I have always appreciated hearing the story of how she went from teaching students face-to-face at Walnut Hills High School in Cincinnati, Ohio, to teaching students all around the world through her novels. An accomplished English language arts teacher—she was honored as National Teacher of the Year in 1997—Draper had never considered being a writer herself until one of her students confronted her with a challenge: “You think you so bad—why don’t YOU write something!” The student urged as he handed her an application for a writing contest sponsored by *Ebony* magazine. Reluctantly, Draper accepted the application. That afternoon she went to the grocery store and was moved by something she saw:

I was pushing my cart down an aisle, when a woman came toward me from the other direction. In her cart was a chubby, almost cherubic-looking three-year-old, standing amidst the food items his mother had selected. He was grinning and

reaching for her. Just as I passed them, instead of reaching for her son, I heard her say to him, “If you don’t sit your stinkin’, useless butt back down in that shopping cart, I swear I’ll bust your greasy face in!” (Draper 53)

Draper continued,

Shocked, I looked at her sharply, but I said nothing. The child sat down heavily, his smile gone. She rushed past me and headed to the checkout lane. I found the spaghetti sauce and pasta I was looking for, but I was no longer hungry. I couldn’t get the face of that child out of my mind. What kind of life must he have at home? If she treats him like this in public, what might she do in private? (Draper 53)

Inspired, Draper went home and wrote what became the 1990 Gertrude Johnson Williams Literary Contest winning entry, “One Small Torch.” Since then, Draper has written ten novels: *The Hazelwood High Trilogy: Tears of a Tiger* (1994), *Forged by Fire* (1997), and *Darkness Before Dawn* (2001); *Romiette and Julio* (1999), *Jazzimagination: A Journal to Read and Write* (1999), *Double Dutch* (2002), *The Battle of Jericho* (2003), its companion novel, *November Blues* (2007); *Copper Sun* (2006), and *Fire from the Rock* (2007).

In 2005, she co-wrote a biography for young adults titled *We Beat the Street: How a Friendship Led to Success*, which appeared on the *New York Times* bestseller list. She has also self-published two books of poetry, *Let the Circle Be Unbroken: Collected Poetry for Children and Young Adults* (1997) and *Buttered Bones* (1997); written two nonfiction books for teachers, *Teaching from the Heart: Reflections, Encouragement, and Inspiration* (2000) and *Not Quite Burned Out but Crispy around the Edges: Inspiration, Laughter, and Encouragement for Teachers* (2001); and devel-

oped a series for upper elementary/lower middle school readers called Ziggy and the Black Dinosaurs—*The Buried Bones Mystery* (1994); *Lost in the Tunnel of Time* (1996); *Shadows of Caesar's Creek* (1997); *The Space Mission Mystery* (2006); *The Backyard Animal Show* (2006); *Stars and Sparks on Stage* (2007).

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over one hundred teachers at the 2006 National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) conference about how the book came to fruition, I decided to sit down and talk to Draper about her career as a teacher and writer.¹ Upon accepting her invitation to attend the 38th Annual Coretta Scott King Award breakfast held in Washington, DC, where she was being honored for *Copper Sun*, I listened attentively as she gave her acceptance speech before we sat down in the Renaissance Hotel to talk about her work. This article is intended to discuss Draper's first historical fiction book and how she strives to reach reluctant readers.

Draper has visited Africa several times. In 1998, for example, she attended a conference and visited schools in West Africa, and in 2001 she visited Ghana, where she taught English literature at Mawuli School. She also visited the slave castles, which proved to be an inspirational experience for her. In March she said, "When I went to the slave castles, one is called Cape Coast Castle and one is called Elmina Castle, I was physically affected. It was spiritual; it was emotional. It was like someone tapped me on my shoulder and said, 'You have to tell my story.' It really was almost a spiritual kind of thing." Later, in her speech at the Coretta Scott King breakfast in June of 2007, Draper said, "It was like I was chosen to write this book. I was tapped on the shoulders by the ancestors. I really believe that. The first time I went to Africa I had no plans to write a book about slavery, but the dusty red

In 2006, after over ten years of writing contemporary realistic fiction, Draper published her debut historical fiction book, *Copper Sun*. The novel focuses on a fifteen-year-old girl's struggle to survive the Middle Passage and slavery during the 1700s. After reading and reviewing *Copper Sun* and listening to Draper talk to

dirt and the warmth of the air and the bright, copper sun of Ghana had different ideas. . . . I think Amari tapped me on the shoulder when I was crawling on my hands and knees through that door of no return, and she whispered in my ear. She said, 'Tell my story. Write my life. Help me live forever. Don't let me be forgotten.'"

On her website Draper explains what she hopes young readers will learn while reading *Copper Sun*: "I want young readers to ask themselves, 'What if that had been me? How would I have coped as a fifteen-year-old slave?'" When First Lady Laura Bush invited Draper to the National Book Festival in 2007, Draper actually asked adolescents in the audience to think deeply about the slave experience by using teen volunteers to recreate a scene from the novel.

Since *Copper Sun* was Draper's first work of historical fiction, I asked, "What propelled you to write historical fiction?"

Sharon M. Draper: I didn't like history during childhood, but I loved historical fiction. (She laughs.) I read lots of historical fiction when I was in elementary school and middle school. If I wanted to know about the middle ages, I read historical fiction.

I learned the history, but it was fun because I was caught up in the character as well as the time period I was reading about.

KH: Do you have plans to write in any other genre?

Sharon M. Draper: I want to write a picture book.

KH: What type of research did you do before writing *Copper Sun*?

Sharon M. Draper: I went to Africa three times; I went to the remote villages as well as the big cities. I also went to South Carolina and Florida. I went to all of the places that Amari goes to. It took ten years to write *Copper Sun*. I would work on it for a little while and then I'd go to Africa, and learn something new. It was a work in progress for a long time. I wrote three or four other books while I was working on it. It was a very slow process because when I write I feel like I have to immerse myself in the subject matter.

KH: “Ten years?”

Sharon M. Draper: The original version of *Copper Sun* is so different from the final version it is almost like they are two different books; it was a work in progress all along. I would change huge sections of it, delete, and update as I learned more. I said that’s not going to work, and I would take out huge chunks and start over.

At the NCTE conference mentioned earlier, Draper said that writing historical fiction for an audience that looked to her for fast paced books about current issues and topics was challenging. “How was I going to get kids to care about what happened in 1738?” she wondered. In her Coretta Scott King award acceptance speech she quips, “I write about lockers, and homework, and teachers, and librarians; I write for 21st century kids. They can’t make it without their cell phones, and their I-pods, and their computers. They have learned to trust me and depend on me to write something that is relevant to their lives, and I’m going to take them back to 1738? Yeah, right.” She finally solved this problem by appealing to the reluctant reader’s craving for compelling characterization. “What I ended up doing is not focusing on dates and castles and kings, but on characters because that’s what they [her readers] care about,” she explained.

KH: “Does the reluctant reader demand something different from a historical piece than they do from a contemporary fiction piece?”

Sharon M. Draper: I think that in order to grab a reluctant reader, regardless of the genre, the writer has to find what it is that will grab them. In fiction, I think it’s character because reluctant readers need action, and they need a character they can care about. When I talk to kids about *Copper Sun*, they tell me, ‘I don’t care anything about historical fiction, but I cared about Amari. I was worried about her; I cared what happened to her; I kept reading because I wanted to know if she was going to be OK. I grab them, I think, by creating caring characters. Writers also have to have a plot that pulls them in.

Draper began writing novels and poetry for the

reluctant readers in her classroom. When her students would not read the poetry in their anthology, she wrote poetry, and when students told her they were nonreaders and proud of it, she promised them she would write a book they would enjoy reading. The numerous e-mails she receives daily suggest that Draper made good on her promise. Here are three that exemplify how most of her readers feel about her work:

I have never read a book in my life until i pick up one of your books i love every single one of books i am a big fan!! you really dont understand how much i love you and your books i love them from tears of an tiger to forged by fire god know s what i been through in im only 15 in your book forged by fire really touch because i knew what that character went through you probably dont care but i think and hope you do because i support you in all ways in i dont care if it’s my last dime i will spend it just to get one of your books.

Thank you!!

Sincerely Yours, Anthony

My name is Adler and im a senior at Golden Gate High School and i was introduced to one of your books i think it was The Battle of Jericho doing my junior year and i loved it embarassed to say that was the first book ever read ever since I’ve read two more of your books Tears of A Tiger and Forged by Fire. I writting you this mail to think you because you’ve inspired me to read something i really hated doing, because of your great writting i can now say i enjoy reading Thank you Maddam Draper.

My mom used to bug me so much about reading, every day she would be asking if I had gotten a book out from the library recently. I didnt like reading that much. I could never concentrate on the words on the page, I would think about something that happened in school or something I was planning on doing later. My best friend started reading your books, we would be on the phone and I wouldnt know if she was there or not, Sometimes I had to scream her name into the reciever a million times and she would finally respond with, “Hold up, I gotta finish this book!” So I decided I would try reading your books. I started reading Tears of a Tiger, and my eyes were glued to the page! I even brought it to the hairdressers with me to read! It took me two days to finish it, the first day I brought it to the hairdressers and read before bed, the next day I read all day until I finished. I just had to know what was going to happen next! [Unsigned.]

Sometimes the reluctant reader needs help visualizing what he or she reads, so Draper says included vivid descriptions of Africa to help readers visualize the country and the time period.

Sharon M. Draper: [Students] have never been to Africa in 1738, so I had to explain what the air smells like, what the dirt looked like, what the trees looked like, so that [they] could be there with me.

KH: Did you read any particular books about slavery before writing *Copper Sun*?

Sharon M. Draper: Hundreds. (She laughs.) I have so many books on slavery: the slave trade, the middle passage, and African kingdoms. I read more than I needed to know, but I didn't know what I didn't need to know until I'd gone through it [the actual writing of *Copper Sun*].

I wanted to hear about specific titles so I pried, "Were there any particular titles that stood out for you?"

Sharon M. Draper: *Africans in America: America's Journey through Slavery* by Charles Johnson and Patricia Smith; that's the one PBS did, and there is a video that goes with it. That one was particularly good. *To Make Our World Anew: A History of African Americans* edited by Robin D. G. Kelly and Earl Lewis, and I read slave narratives. I was really influenced by Tom Feelings' *Middle Passage: White Ships/Black Cargo* because the pictures are so powerful.

KH: Your reading of Alex Haley's *Roots* influenced your teaching and perspectives on American slavery, did you reread it in order to prepare to write *Copper Sun*?

Sharon M. Draper: No, I did not go back and reread *Roots*. I did not want to be influenced by his writing. Of course it's in my head some place, but I did not reread *Roots* as a part of my writing process for *Copper Sun*.

We still have much to accomplish, taking care of each other on a global scale. The reason why we need to specifically study the African slave trade of the American past is to understand some of the social, economic, and political realities of the present. The past is a teacher from which we can learn much.

KH: Why is slavery a relevant topic in the twenty-first century?

Sharon M. Draper: Slavery is a relevant topic for the 21st century because it still exists. Girls (and boys as well) from third-world countries are still being exploited as sex slaves all over the world. Human beings are still subjugating other humans for profit. We still have much to accomplish, taking care of each other on a global scale. The reason why we need to specifically study the African slave trade of the American past is to understand some of the social, economic, and political realities of the present. The past is a teacher from which we can learn much.

KH: What advice do you have for teachers who wish to use books like *Copper Sun* to teach about slavery?

Sharon M. Draper: Students will absorb and learn a surprising amount of history through fiction. I have provided maps and photos and timelines and questions and websites for further study on my website (www.sharondraper.com) by clicking on the tab *Copper Sun* Resources. I tried to provide plenty of resources so the historical information is available to merge with the fictional story.

KH: Would you tell me about winning the Coretta Scott King award for *Copper Sun*?

Sharon M. Draper: I was sick the night before, and I had taken NyQuil. I woke up groggy, so when I got the call, 'I'm going what? Who?' I told them yesterday—we had a luncheon—that they must have thought I was drunk or something. It was six o'clock in the morning, and I wasn't expecting the call at six o'clock in the morning because it took place in Seattle, Washington. I was really excited

because *Copper Sun* is so special to me. So it is meaningful to receive the Coretta Scott King award for *Copper Sun* because of what it is and what it represents.

When I asked Draper what she thought teachers could do to help reluctant readers, she responded, “First, they have to believe in them. They have to believe the kids can read; then they have to find the right book. Teachers have to read widely so they can find just the right book to encourage a child to read. If you’re going to teach reading on a young adult level, you have to read [young adult books].”

Young Adult Novels

Tears of a Tiger. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994.
Forged by Fire. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997.
Jazzimagination. New York: Scholastic, 1999.
Romiette and Julio. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999.
Darkness Before Dawn. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001.
Double Dutch. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002.
The Battle of Jericho. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003.
Copper Sun. New York: Atheneum, 2006.
Fire from the Rock. New York: Penguin, 2007.
November Blues. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007.

Select Book Awards

Tears of a Tiger (1995 Coretta Scott King Genesis Award)
Forged by Fire (1998 Coretta Scott King Award)
The Battle of Jericho (2004 Coretta Scott King Honor Book)
Copper Sun (2007 Coretta Scott King Book Award; 2007 Ohioana Literary Award)
November Blues (2008 Coretta Scott King Honor Book)

Books for Teachers

Teaching from the Heart: Reflections, Encouragement, and Inspiration. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2000.

Not Quite Burned Out but Crispy around the Edges: Inspiration, Laughter, and *Encouragement for Teachers*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2001.

Essays

Draper, Sharon M. “Alex Haley, Me, and a Kid Named Kyrus.” *Obsidian III* 3, no. 1 Spring-Summer 2001: 26-35.

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Note

¹ The undocumented quotes here come from numerous telephone, e-mail, and face-to-face conversations I have had with Ms. Draper.

Works Cited

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