

S.E. Hinton

While most high school students were reading young adult fiction, Susan Eloise Hinton was writing it. Fed up with the fiction available for teenage readers, Hinton took matters into her own hands. At age fifteen, she began writing her own adolescent novel, "The Outsiders" (1967). The content of her novel provided young readers with something real, something honest and something that no one else had seen before. Teens finally had a book that they could relate to. Hinton's novel became an overnight success, and continues to be a favorite among readers today.

Early Years

Susan Eloise Hinton was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma, on July 22, 1948 and has resided there for most of her life. Hinton claims that she knew even at a young age that she wanted to be a writer. Enthralled by cowboys and horses, she credits her love of reading for her success as a writer. Feeling that she had read all that was available on her two favorite subjects, she began to write her own reading material. Two books were written on cowboys and horses, but only for the eyes of young Hinton. This was, at any rate, an indication of her great gift and talent as a writer.

Hinton attended Will Rogers High School in Tulsa, Oklahoma, which became the setting for her first novel, "The Outsiders." Up until this time, young adult fiction had been the focus of traditional, sugarcoated fables. Hinton broke this taboo by dealing with real problems that young people were actually facing. The perceptive Hinton observed the people and environment that surrounded her. A school divided by two social groups, The Greasers and the Socs (the Socialites), became the underlying theme for her novel. The narrator of "The Outsiders" is a fifteen-year-old boy named Ponyboy Curtis, who is being raised by his older brothers after the death of their parents. There are no adults in the book and Hinton describes the struggles that the young boys face as uneasy interactions take place between the groups. This "coming of age" book captures the transition that teenagers, such as Ponyboy, experience as they go through adolescence.

Success as a Writer

"The Outsiders" was published after Hinton showed her creation to a friend's mother. An author herself, she showed the copy to a literary agent, who immediately purchased it. Viking Publishing loved it and agreed to market the book right away. Hinton was only seventeen at the time, and did not know what an agent was (She has had the same agent throughout her life). Hinton was only fifteen at the time she wrote the novel, but admits she tells people that she was sixteen, because no one ever believes her. It's also hard to imagine that she was still just a high school student when she wrote the book. Hinton revengefully admits that she received a D in a creative writing class at the time she was working on her novel.

After graduating from high school, Hinton entered the University of Tulsa, with plans of becoming a teacher. "The Outsiders" was published during her freshman year at college under the name of S. E. Hinton. The initials were her publishers' idea, intended to disguise her identity, particularly because her main character was a fifteen-year-old boy. Hinton was fine with the idea, and admits, she enjoyed having a separate identity from her writing.

Due to the overwhelming popularity of "The Outsiders," and the idea that writing was now her profession, Hinton experienced writer's block that lasted for three years. Her boyfriend, David Inhofe, whom she met in college, gave Hinton an incentive to write. In order for him to take her out at night, she had to have written at least two pages during the day. Inhofe's plan worked, and within four months, "That Was Then, This Is Now," was finished. The book was published in 1971, the year after Hinton and Inhofe were married.

Hinton's third book was taken in part from a short story that she had written for the University of Tulsa's Alumni Magazine, in its 1968 edition. "Rumble Fish" was published in 1975, and was given mixed reviews. Despite the critics' reactions, the American Library Association (ALA) donned it one of the Best Books for Young Adults. "Rumble Fish" was Hinton's shortest piece of fiction. Her longest book came four years later in 1979 when she published the story, "Tex." This book was inspired by a picture of a boy on a motorcycle, from

a magazine that she had kept since she was seventeen. Critics highly praised the book, noting a more mature voice and writing style.

Starting a Family

Virtually all of Hinton's books were made into movies, and all within a few years of each other. In 1982, "Tex" caught the attention of Walt Disney, and the studio turned Hinton's words into a feature film, starring Matt Dillon. Since then, Dillon has appeared in two more of Hinton's movies, and the two have become good friends. In March of the following year, "The Outsiders" was released on the big screen. It starred many up and coming stars, such as Tom Cruise, Emilio Estevez, and Patrick Swayze. Just a few months following the release in August of 1983, Hinton gave birth to a son. She named him Nicholas David. In October of the same year, the film version of "Rumble Fish" was created, and in 1985, "That Was Then, This Is Now," was released.

After the birth of her son, Hinton's writing style changed a bit. For instance, her fifth book, "Taming the Star Runner" (1988) was the first book in which she wrote in the third person. She has remarked that it was hard for her to become another person, while caring for her son. Motherhood kept her busy, and it was seven years before she wrote her next book. In the meantime, she did write advertisements and screenplays, but she admits, she couldn't think of a tale to tell.

At last, in 1995, an idea came to her inspired by her son, Nicholas. "Big David, Little David" was her first work of children's literature. This picture book was intended for the kindergarten level. Her son's influence stayed with her in her next book, "The Puppy Sister." Written for the elementary school age, Hinton got the idea from a light-hearted attention rivalry that took place between Nick and the family dog.

Recognition

Hinton has been recognized as one of the most influential young adult authors of all time. In 1975, "The Outsiders" was awarded a Media and Methods Maxi Award. Her books have continuously appeared on the ALA's list of the best young adult fiction. In 1988, she was the first recipient of the Margaret A. Edwards Award given by the Young Adult Series Division (YASD) of the ALA and the School Library Journal (SLJ). The award is given to authors whose books inspire and continue to touch the lives of those who read them.

Susan Eloise Hinton Inhofe presently lives in Tulsa, Oklahoma with her husband and son. Along with being an author, she finds happiness in being a wife and a mother. She enjoys riding her horses and being involved in her son's activities. She continues to write and takes classes for pleasure. She also finds satisfaction in reading; amongst her favorite authors are Jane Austen and F. Scott Fitzgerald.

Hinton has proven to be one of the most influential storytellers of all time. She broke down barriers and changed young adult fiction to become what the genre is today. She gave young readers something that they could actually relate to; and as a result, her readers continue to take her stories with them through life. Hinton's ability to render characters and situations has continually made her one of the most popular authors among young readers.

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By Veronica Loveday

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