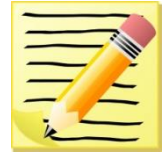


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If you ANNOTATE, complete the following several times throughout the text:

- Summarize main ideas and label them MI, then underline their supporting details.
- Circle words you do not know or key words (the most important words for this article's topic) and use context clues to define them
- Connect it to the unit we are studying using evidence from the text



AoW6: "S.E. Hinton on *The Outsiders*' Success: 'It Gave Me Writer's Block for Four Years' "

By Isabella Biedenharn, posted on APRIL 24, 2017 AT 11:59AM EDT

It's hard to believe, but *The Outsiders*, the teen tale of greasers and Socs that Francis Ford Coppola made into a memorable 1983 movie, turns 50 this year. We caught up with author S.E. Hinton, who was just a teen herself — 16 — when the book was first published, for her thoughts on the book's legacy, her struggle with writer's block, and which famous movie star still calls her "Mom."

ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY: Happy 50th anniversary to *The Outsiders*! Can you believe it's been this long?
S.E. HINTON: No, I can't. I can't believe I'm this old!

You started writing the book when you were only 15, so you're not actually that old.

Well, yeah. But I have taken to saying I wrote it when I was 6. [Laughs]

How did this book come about?

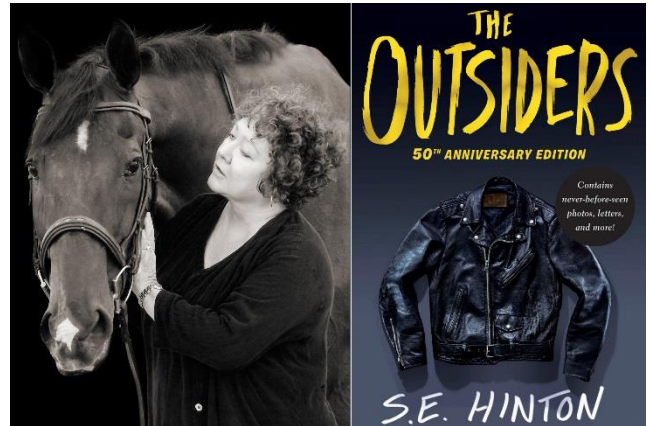
A few reasons. The first is I just like to write. I've been writing practically since I learned to read. So by the time I wrote *The Outsiders*, I'd been writing for about eight years. It wasn't like, "Oh, all of a sudden I'm 15 years old and started writing a book." It was actually the third book I'd written. It's just the first one I ever tried to get published.

Wait, what were the first two books?

Oh, somewhere in the sixth grade, I think, I wrote one about the Civil War. I have *no* idea what I thought I knew about the Civil War. And when I was in ninth grade, I wrote one about some kids working on a dude ranch, and that wasn't too bad, but not anything I'd want published.

Okay, back to *The Outsiders*. What sparked the idea for it?

I was mad about the social situation at my high school, which was basically the Socs versus the Greasers like it is in the book. I grew up in a Greaser neighborhood, and I got put in what would be called today AP classes with Socs — so I could see kind of both sides. Then when a friend of mine got beaten up on his way home from school, I got mad and began a short story about a kid who got beaten up going home from the movies. That story turned out to be about 40 pages long, single-spaced type. And I just kept going back over it and adding more



details and flashbacks and so forth. The draft the publisher saw was about the third draft I'd done.

So you had done a lot of self-editing.

Yeah. But another reason why I wrote it is that I wanted to read it. There was nothing realistic being written for teens at that time. It was all, like, "Mary Jane Goes to the Prom." And I'd been to a few proms, and that was not what was happening. I really wanted to read a book that dealt realistically with teenage life as I was seeing it.

What was your writing process like when you were 15? Were you working on it after school?

Yes. Some kids liked to play tennis, I liked to write. I wasn't out hanging out or doing a lot of stuff teens were doing because what I liked to do was be in my room and type. I taught myself to type when I was in the 6th grade, actually, because I realized I couldn't read my own handwriting.

What was your relationship with your editor like?

I had a great rapport with my editor. Nobody changed a word I wrote. They asked me to cut descriptions once in a while. They corrected my spelling, thank god. And [they gave] the most helpful editorial comments I'd ever had, or have ever had since. At one point, the editor said, "Well, all of a sudden Dallas has a gun. You better establish that earlier in the book." I said, "Great idea!" I mean, I wasn't going in there thinking I knew it all. I was going in there glad for every kind of help they wanted to

give me, but willing to stand up a little bit here and there if I thought my way was better.

How do you think it affected your career to have success so young?

My success was slow. My first royalty check was for \$10. So I wasn't thinking, "Oh, I've got it made for the rest of my life." The only thing that overwhelmed me was the realization that there was an audience out there.

Was that a good realization?

No, it gave me writer's block for four years. My husband, bless his heart, he was my boyfriend at the time. He said, "You've got to get over this. I'm tired of you being dreary and gloomy and depressed. Just write two pages a day. Nobody ever died of two pages." Which is spoken like a true non-writer. But he'd come over to take me out, and if I hadn't done two pages, he'd just start reading the newspaper. So that was my big motive for my second book — I wanted to go out.

You said your success was slow, but do you remember the moment you realized the book was sticking around?

Well, I was very surprised it made it to 20 years, but after that, I wasn't surprised at all. I'm still getting the same letters, the same responses. I get so many letters from people saying, "You changed my life." That scares me. I love getting letters saying, "I never liked to read, but I read your book, and now I'm going on to read other books." But the "You changed my life" stuff is scary, because who am I to change anybody's life? But I've learned to deal with it by thinking, *The Outsiders* was meant to be written, and I got chosen to write it. The rest of 'em, I just wrote, but *The Outsiders* was supposed to be there.

How do you feel about people crediting *The Outsiders* for creating the whole genre of YA?

It's basically true. There'd certainly been books before that were written by teenage protagonists — *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. Great books, but they were all published as adult books. But with *The Outsiders*, when it first came out, it was a drugstore paperback, the kind of thing you'd see in those spinning racks at drugstores. The publisher happened to notice it was selling real well in a certain market, and they explored it and found teachers were using it in classrooms and kids were passing it along by word of mouth. All of a sudden it was like, "Oh, there is a market we can specifically tap into there."

Obviously, we know how teens around the world reacted to the book, but how did the real Greasers and Socs react in Tulsa?

Oh, well the Greasers loved it. Absolutely loved it. And a lot of the Socs took a second look at themselves. I

remember I was doing a screening of the "complete novel" edition of the DVD in Tulsa, and Ralph Macchio [who played Johnny] and Tommy Howell [who played Ponyboy] were there with me. We had a question and answer thing going on afterward, and this guy gets up and he looks like he's about 65 or something, my age, and says, "This is the way it was, and this is the *truth*. I was there." And he'd been a Greaser.

How did you come up with some of the names? Did people really have names like Sodapop and Ponyboy?

No. People ask me that all the time, and I say, "I don't remember how I came up with those names, but I do know I wasn't drinking at the time." But now I love it because you can recognize the references [to the book] so easily. Like when on *My Name Is Earl*, the guy goes, "Well I had this hideout in the woods, Ponyboy style," you knew exactly what he was talking about. Or when Veronica Mars said, "Stay cool, Sodapop." If I'd named them Jim and Bill, all this wouldn't have happened.

Something you said last time I interviewed you has stuck with me. You said, "I could never be that unselfconscious again." What exactly did you mean by that?

I mean, like, when I was 16, that was the year I was doing my major work on *The Outsiders*. I wasn't thinking about any kind of audience for it. I wasn't thinking about a whole lot of stuff that, you know, of course, afterwards you kind of have to think about. An adult writer I think [would say], "Gosh, it's emotionally over-the-top. It's so dramatic." But that's the way you feel when you're that age. And that's one reason why it's stayed so long—people are like, "Yes, I felt like this!" I could never do that again. It's one of the reasons I'll never write a sequel.