



Sharon Creech: a writer who takes risks

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Sharon Creech talks to **Julia Eccleshare** about her latest book.

Sharon Creech is an outstandingly talented and original writer, the *only* winner of both the prestigious Newbery and Carnegie Medals, but although she has a huge following in the US through schools and libraries, she is ridiculously little known in the UK. **Julia Eccleshare** hopes her latest book will help to change this.

'I keep saying to myself, 'Why can't I write a simple book which can be easily explained?'' says Sharon Creech. When pushed, she expresses mild but resigned surprise that there was no publicity following her Carnegie win for **Ruby Holler** given that 'you can't get out of the glare' when you win the Newbery.

But primarily Sharon is not well known because she never writes the same or even a similar book twice. She is not an author who can be pigeon-holed. She always takes risks, as with **Love that Dog**, a novel in verse. And her new novel, **The Unfinished Angel**, isn't easy to categorise either.

Looking for our mission

Following her opening remark I asked Sharon to explain the book to me simply. 'In a sentence I'd say: 'it's the story of an angel with attitude who meets a young girl who helps the angel find her mission. It concerns the fact that we are all looking for what our mission is. The Angel typifies that it is often a child who helps us to find it and who can help you to get rejuvenated.'? And so it is. But it is also very much more than that. Revolving around the delicious creation of a not-quite-completed angel, the book has plenty of playful humour. It is written in a barbarous mixture of languages, real and invented, making it full of malapropisms and verbal jokes. But just under the humour and not at all obscured by it, **The Unfinished Angel** is also a big hearted story about caring for those around you ' in this case a group of starving orphans.

Sharon's original inspiration for the book came from her granddaughter who told her a story that went like this: 'Once upon a time in Spain there was an angel, and the angel was me. The end.' When Sharon asked her what happened next, she said she didn't know. That set Sharon thinking: 'I'm hyper-aware of children's incredible imagination and this seemed to be a perfect example of it. I thought about what an angel is, where Spain is and how could I tell such a story. I wanted to know what happened next and my granddaughter couldn't tell me.'

Sharon tried to set the story in Spain but it didn't work. Then, accompanying her husband to his new job at a school in Switzerland, she arrived at a busy school with a tower which set her imagination spinning. 'When I saw the tower I knew that was where the story could be set. I knew it was perfect for an angel. And I wanted readers to know what it felt like to live in a tower.'

The angel's language

Switzerland also inspired the wonderful, mixed up language that the angel uses. 'A school is a very busy place with

loads of disruption. I was hearing so many languages that I became confused about language myself. Being in the middle of all of that inspired the strange speech of the angel; the wonderful blend of European languages that make her capricious and child-like.?

Once she had a language for the Angel, Sharon realised that, not having been brought up religious, she knew little about angels in general so she set about doing research. ?I found out that angels were originally thought of as warlike ? they were defenders.? That didn?t fit in with how Sharon thought of her angel but it did give her a sense of angels as robust, forceful creatures rather than anything insipid or airy fairy. She also discovered that the wings are symbolic, suggesting other worldly aspects.

Sharon rejected what she couldn?t use of her research and decided that her angel needed to be more human. ?I wanted to have an angel who was like a 12- or 13-year-old so she could have some mature views on childhood but could also behave like a selfish teenager.? The result is a petulant but joyful creature with a big heart who indulges in frequent displays of bad behaviour. Befriended by a child, the Angel finds a way to do something special. But Sharon isn?t writing a book with a message. The most weight she?ll give it is to say, ?There?s a serious thread here with a lighter thread around it?. Sharon wrote this as a book of fun. ?I wanted to express the feelings of happiness I had about being in Switzerland,? she said. ?I wanted to celebrate the happiness without being sappy. I found it very funny to write. I laughed and laughed at it.?

Luckily for the readers, Sharon will make them laugh too. Let?s hope the UK notices this time.

The Unfinished Angel is published by Andersen Press (978 1 84939 081 1, £10.99 hbk).

Julia Eccleshare is the children?s book editor of the **Guardian** and the co-director of CLPE (The Centre for Literacy in Primary Education).

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