

Talking with Linda Sue Park

The author of *A Single Shard* talks about historical fiction, the real-life inspirations behind her books, and the writing process. **By Monika Schröder**

Winner of numerous awards for her works of fiction, picture books, and poetry for children, Linda Sue Park became a published writer at the tender age of nine. However, it wasn't until almost 30 years later that she realized her calling as a children's author. Since then the books and the accolades, including a Newbery Medal for the historical novel *A Single Shard*, haven't stopped, culminating with 2010's *A Long Walk to Water* and even an installment in the fast-paced 39 Clues series. When Park visited

my school in New Delhi for 10 days last year, I had a chance to talk with her about the inspiration behind some of her most popular books and her writing process.

BKL: *You have published books in different genres, but most of your novels are historical fiction. What draws you to this genre?*

PARK: I think historical fiction provides a great opportunity to explore the question of what it means to be human. Daily life changes. Values change. Traditions fade away. So what is it that stays the same? What do people from long ago and far away have in common with us here and now? Could those commonalities define humanity? These are big questions, and historical fiction can help young readers begin seeking the answers for themselves.

BKL: *One of my personal favorites among your books is Seesaw Girl. How did you conceive of Jade Blossom's story?*

PARK: I knew of the Korean tradition hundreds of years ago of keeping aristocratic women shut up in their homes for most of their lives. But Korean women no longer live that way. Why not? What happened to change that practice? There must have been some girls and women who chafed against it. I think big changes in society are always preceded by tiny steps. Most of us might feel that we are not destined to become world-famous movers and shakers, but all of us can do little things aimed at making the world a better place. I wanted to write about a girl who takes one of those tiny steps.

BKL: *You wrote poetry for adults before you became a children's writer. Now you also have published poetry for*



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young readers. What are the challenges of writing children's poetry?

PARK: Poetry makes you carefully consider the importance of every single word. That holds true for both children's and adult poetry; the only difference for me is subject matter. The limitations of formal poetry are a goad to creativity. When I'm trying to fit a thought or an idea or an image into a set number of lines or syllables or a rhyme scheme, it really pushes me to explore as many possibilities as I can in terms of word choice.

BKL: When My Name Was Keoko was inspired by your parents' experience of living in Japanese-occupied Korea during World War II. How did they react when they read the novel?

PARK: My mom didn't think it was a good idea for a book at first. I guess her experiences didn't seem like literary material to her! Perhaps our own lives never do. But I think they were both pleased with the book in the end, and besides, they're my biggest fans—they're proud of everything I write.

BKL: Your new book, A Long Walk to Water, is set in Sudan. Could you tell us a little bit about the genesis of the book?


PARK: Salva Dut, the subject of *A Long Walk to Water*, is a family friend. My husband got to know him first. Salva's life story is extraordinary; it's so moving and inspiring that I wanted to tell it to everyone I knew. I kept talking to people about it, and finally it dawned on me that the best way to tell a whole lot of people at once would be to write about him.

BKL: In addition to visiting my school in India, you are planning to visit other international schools and you also speak at conferences. How do you fit your writing into a traveling schedule?

PARK: Ouch, sore spot. The short answer is I don't. I don't write when I'm on the road; I think this is because despite the fact that I've done hundreds of presentations, I still need to give them a ton of mental and emotional attention. So when I'm traveling, I'm focused on my presentations and the audiences—I try to give them everything I've got. For the most part, I arrange my schedule to have several weeks in a row at home. That's when the writing gets done.

BKL: Finally, do you have a certain writing routine you adhere to? Can you elaborate on your writing process?

PARK: My process varies depending on what I'm working on. For a picture book or poetry, the work is constantly on my mind. When I'm driving or doing the dishes or—especially—when I am in bed at night, I go over the words again and again, trying to pick the best possible words and put them in the best order.

For a novel, I try to write two pages a day. Then I start the next day by editing what I wrote the day before. Sometimes that means throwing the whole two pages away. Once in a while I'll get into a groove and write 10 or 20 pages in one sitting, but that doesn't happen often. It's a very dogged process, but achieving my goal of two pages makes me feel like I've accomplished something every day. Even if they're two bad pages, at least, like Thomas Edison said, I'm finding out what doesn't work. 

Monika Schröder is the elementary school librarian at the American Embassy School in New Delhi, India. Her second novel, *Saraswati's Way*, was published in 2010.

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