

Interview with MG Novelist Shelley Tougas

by Chazda Albright -

<http://greatstorybook.com/interview-with-mg-novelist-shelley-tougas/>

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Novelist Shelley Tougas writes wonderful fiction and non-fiction books for kids in middle-grade.

Read about her fascinating career, her newest release, her coming releases and her sources of help and inspiration.

I first discovered Shelley Tougas entirely by accident. I was researching, looking for what I expect will be some of the best [storybooks of 2016](#).

In clicking on a book, I scrolled down for more detail and found one of Shelley's books in the recommended list - The **Those Who Bought *This* Also Bought *These Things*** List. There she was - or rather, there was one of her MG novels ([MG novels](#) are for kids in 3rd-5th grades - or roughly 8-12 years old), [Finders Keepers](#).

[Finders Keepers](#), I knew at a glance, was a book I had to get. This would be one of those rare, un-put-downable books. So I got it. Then I checked out Shelley Tougas' website and sent her an email. The rest is as you read here.

Introducing Shelley Tougas

Pink is her favorite color. She readily declares that she'd eat nothing but pizza and donuts - if only she could get away with it. Diet sodas are slowly and with effort being replaced with water, so that she can become a "full-time water drinker."

When she isn't writing at the dining table, Shelley Tougas is a woman who writes snuggled in a quiet office - in fact, a converted closet, her "Cloffice," with a sunbox lamp at her side and slippers on her feet.

Her nonfiction topics are compelling and prolific, reaching into directions you wouldn't generally expect (everything from [Amazing Tales of Women in Music](#) to [What Makes A Terrorist](#)). She's now branching out into fiction, with two titles on the market and two more already scheduled for release.

Here is our interview.

Chazda: Shelley, this looks like a fantastic book. I can't wait to read it! What was your inspiration for writing Finders Keepers?

Shelley: My parents own a cabin on Whitefish Lake near Hayward, Wisconsin, which is the setting for "Finders Keepers." They've owned it for nearly 30 years, and I've always thought it would be the perfect setting for a children's book.

Also, it's true that Al Capone, who's prominently featured in "Finders Keepers," had a lake home not far from my parents' cabin. I toured it before it was closed to the public. He owned a private lake, and his presence brought lots of bootleggers to the area. The northwoods of Wisconsin was a vacation paradise for Chicago gangsters.

You have two stand alone middle grade novels on the market, each published by MacMillan but through different imprints (Square Fish and Roaring Brook Press). Any plans for a book series?

I'd love to do a series, and I have an idea that I'm fleshing out right now. But first I have two more stand alone middle grade novels coming out: "A Patron Saint for Junior Bridesmaids" (September 2016) and "Laura Ingalls is Ruining My Life" (September 2017).

[Note from Chazda: I can't wait to get those!]

How did you decide that it was middle grade fiction you wanted to write?

I was writing YA - two novels that never got published - when an editor asked me to write a nonfiction book for the middle grade audience. I was a journalist for seven years, and he was looking for a writer who had experience in current events and journalism-style writing.

That book was [What Makes a Terrorist?](#) Another book I did for that company, [Little Rock Girl 1957](#), took off and performed well commercially and critically.

That success gave me a shortcut into the world of middle grade, so I changed my focus from YA fiction to middle grade fiction. Many agents and publishers were willing to read my fiction because of the success of [Little Rock Girl](#).

How was the contract arranged with your publisher?

I signed with an agent, Susan Hawk, and she did the negotiations. I couldn't imagine doing it any other way. The business side of publishing is incredibly complicated, and agents are experts.

There's a big trend toward self-publishing, but I wouldn't venture into that world. I don't have sales and marketing skills, and I write better stories thanks to my brilliant editor, Kate Jacobs.

With your previously published MG book, [The Graham Cracker Plot](#), I've seen 3 different cover designs for it, all English-language versions. Can you talk a little bit about that?

The cover for [The Graham Cracker Plot](#) is a very interesting story. First, it's important to understand that authors have very little control over the covers for their books, and that's not a bad thing. Writers know writing; art directors know covers.

With [The Graham Cracker Plot](#), my first editor had a vision that resulted in the original cover (where the cop is prominently displayed), but she left and went to another publishing house. That first cover was on the galleys, but it didn't make it to the copies that ended up in bookstores.

The new editor, along with the marketing team, decided to go in a different direction - in which Daisy is prominently displayed. When the paperback was going to be published, the editor and marketing team thought combining the two iterations would make the book more distinct in a crowded marketplace.

My first novel has three covers!

What book events do you attend? Where can people meet you?

When I was unpublished, I went to a lot of conferences to learn everything I could about the industry. Now that I have an agent and a publisher, I focus on school appearances.

It's an honor to meet kids who've read the book. Elementary and middle grade readers are wonderful – they have so much enthusiasm, and they ask great questions.

What kind of relationship do you have with your editor?

I went to New York to meet my agent (Susan Hawk) and editor (Kate Jacobs) shortly after signing my first contract. We went to lunch together, and I toured the Roaring Brook offices and got to meet the editorial and marketing teams. I think it's important to meet face-to-face with people when you're in a collaboration.

Most of our correspondence is through email, though, but I talk to Susan Hawk on the phone probably between six and a dozen times a year.

Usually I chat on the phone with Kate Jacobs during revisions to make sure we're on the same page. I also like both of them on a personal level. They're wonderful people.

Are you touring the book? Where – and what has your experience been like?

My friend, author [Stephanie Bodeen](#) (“Shipwreck Island” and “Lost”), and I planned a regional tour together. We called it “Adventures From the Middle,” and we hit a bunch of bookstores plus did some school visits. Stephanie does tons of school visits – she’s in high demand – so I got to learn from one of the best. We signed lots of books, ate lots of gas station food, and drove more than 1,200 miles. We had a blast.

What is the thing you are most proud of with Finders Keepers?

I love that it’s grounded in dramatic outdoor-based play. I don’t want to sound preachy, but we need kids to put down their electronic devices, get outside, and unleash their imaginations. The segments in which Christa and Alex become Chase Truegood and Buck Punch are my favorite part of the book.

What is for you the most challenging aspect of writing an MG novel like this?

The ending was truly a challenge. Without giving anything away, I guess I can only say I wanted to strike a balance between a happy ending and a realistic ending. My editor and I spent a lot of time talking about the ending.

Who would you say has been your greatest inspiration in life (not just in writing)?

When I wrote “Little Rock Girl,” I found nine heroes: The Little Rock “Nine.” These nine African American teenagers integrated the all-white high school in Little Rock in 1957 and faced obstacles that would’ve sent adults running.

They are proof that children can change the world.

If you could read your story to any particular person in the world, who would it be?

My 11-year-old daughter is my first reader. She’s given me incredible insight into the world of kids and tweens, and her analysis of my stories is spot on. She tells me exactly what she thinks without sugarcoating her response.

Her dad is a writer, too, so she’s grown up with storytelling. She was the rare kid who could explain the differences in first-person, second-person, and third-person points of view when she was in preschool.

How long did it take you to get published?

It seemed like forever. I always wanted to be a writer. I wrote my first book when I was seven years old. I wrote stories and plays and poems throughout my childhood.

I started writing novels when I was thirty years old. It took 12 years for me to get my fiction published. I

was tempted to give up many times, but I kept writing and getting better.

Dreams can come true.

What will she be doing next?

Quite a bit, I'm sure. You can bet on a lot of great reads coming from Shelley Tougas. I discovered Shelley's writing through her fiction, but nonfiction is clearly something she hasn't given up - because she loves it!

About that she says, "I started my career in nonfiction. I worked in journalism for seven years and then wrote ten nonfiction books for kids. Compelling nonfiction is important because it shapes the way kids view and understand the world. I'd love to do more nonfiction in the future."

- Get updates on Shelley Tougas books: [visit her website](#).
- Connect with [Shelley Tougas on Facebook](#).
- Read the Booklist starred [review of Finders Keepers](#).
- Connect with [Shelley on Twitter](#).
- Her literary agent is Susan Hawk. [She Tweets](#).
- Her editor is Kate Jacobs, for [MacMillan Kids Books](#). [She Tweets](#).

Keep creating, no matter what.

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