

Advice from a penwoman

Only seventeen when her first book became a success, S.E. Hinton gives some tips about novel writing

by Lisa Ehrichs, 18, Bayside, N.Y.

The Outsiders, a tough yet sensitive novel about a gang of teen-agers from the wrong side of the tracks, was a major success for author S.E. Hinton when it came out in 1967. Its publication marked the beginning of a new category of young-adult literature: novels that looked beyond the narrow world of the high school prom. But the most remarkable thing about *The Outsiders* is that its author, Susan Eloise Hinton, was only seventeen when the book was published.

Ms. Hinton followed *The Outsiders* with three other novels, *That Was Then, This Is Now*; *Rumblefish*; and *Tex* (Laurel-Leaf Books, Dell Publishing). In 1970, she graduated from the University of Tulsa, in Oklaho-



ma, and continues to live in Tulsa with her husband. Below, Ms. Hinton talks about her early success as a novelist and gives advice to today's young writers.

How did you first become interested in writing?

I started in grade school—it was just something I enjoyed doing. I was the type of girl who loved horses and cowboys, so I wrote about them. I read a lot and had fun making up my own stories. Though it was the first one published, *The Outsiders* was actually my third book. I found that for me, novels were easier to write than poems or short stories.

Why is writing a novel easier?

A novel gives you time to define characters, and characters are my strong point. I think about them until I know everything there is to know about each of them.

What made you write *The Outsiders*?

I'd wanted to read books that showed teen-agers outside the life of "Mary Jane went to the prom." When I couldn't find any, I decided to write one myself. I created a world with no adult authority figures, where kids lived by their own rules.

How long did it take you to write it?

The Outsiders took me a year and a half. During that time, I did four complete drafts. The first draft was forty pages, then I just kept rewriting and adding details.

How did you get it published?

It was amazingly easy. A friend gave me the name of an agent [from Curtis Brown, Ltd., New York] who read it and liked it. He thought he could sell it and did—to Viking, the second publisher we tried!

What kinds of problems did you face as a young writer?

The publisher thought that my being a teen-age writer was a good gimmick, and my close friends thought it was neat. But people I didn't know too well started treating me as though I were stuck-up. I had always been a smart-alecky kid, but after the book was published, I knew I had to change or else people would think success was going to my head. So I became quiet—but people saw that as being stuck-up, too!

Why are your main characters, such as Ponyboy in *The Outsiders* and Rusty-James in *Rumblefish*, always male?

I started writing before the women's movement was in full swing, and at the time, people wouldn't have believed that girls would do the things that I was writing about. I also felt more comfortable with the male point of view—I had grown up around boys. But my female characters will be getting stronger.

In what ways do your characters reflect aspects of your own personality?

The characters have to be part of yourself, you have to understand them. By the time they go through your head and work their way down on paper, they reflect some aspect of you. Ponyboy Curtis [*The Outsiders*] probably comes closest to me—he's absent-minded and quiet and daydreams a lot.

Why do you think you've been so successful as a writer?

I think it's because I remember how it felt to be a kid. It's not the happiest time, but if you hang on, it gets better.

Any tips for young writers today?

Read. Read everything you can get your hands on. I read a lot when I was younger, and I still do—it's almost an obsession! ●

S.E.