

• Meet the Author •

Shutta Crum



Shutta Crum is an award-winning writer and librarian. (In fact, she was Michigan's 2002 Youth Librarian of the Year.) Her novel, *Spitting Image*, made the Kentucky Bluegrass and the South Carolina Junior Book award reading lists, as well as the New York Public Library's Children's Books, 2003—100 Titles for Reading and Sharing. *The Bravest of the Brave*, a 2006 *Children's Choices* winner, made the Chicago Public Library's The Best of the Best. Other books have graced state lists, or the Bank Street College's Best Children's Books of the Year lists. In 2005, she was invited to read at the White House.

There is a wonderful "storytelling voice" in *My Mountain Song*. I know you had a career as a children's librarian. Was part of that career storytelling?

SC: You bet! In fact when I was an Outreach Librarian I did traveling storytimes to pre-schools, community centers,

area hospitals, the local home for abused women and children, schools for kids with special needs, classes for the profoundly deaf, and on the Bookmobile. Then I became a youth specialist and did regularly scheduled children's programming in the library, which included a great deal of storytelling. However, I must say, I come by my storytelling abilities naturally. I am the descendent of many "big talkers" through my Appalachian relatives.

My Mountain Song has a strong sense of place. How many of the visual images and sensory details of the story are drawn from your personal history?

SC: A great deal of the sense of place is from my personal story. I was born in southeastern Kentucky of good mountain folks. For a time, my father worked in the coal mines. We moved to Michigan with that whole migration of southerners who came to work in the auto factories after the war. But we always missed the mountains and family. So every summer while I was growing up, we went south to visit our many relatives, including grandparents and great-grandparents. In fact, for a while we had five generations alive and one of my great-grandfathers

Interview conducted by Toni Buzzeo, career media specialist and author (visit www.tonibuzzeo.com).

was going strong when I was in my thirties.

Do others of your books also take place in the mountains of the South?

SC: Yes. The setting of *Spitting Image* my novel, is Kentucky in 1967. It is very loosely based upon an incident that took place during President Johnson's War on Poverty—the murder of a Canadian film board photographer. It was my first novel and is very much a product of the love and respect I have for mountain people.

In fact, *Spitting Image* was written as an expansion of Brenda Gail's story in *My Mountain Song*, but geared to an older audience. These two books are inextricably "of the same fabric,"



though they do not share any plot details. First, I wrote a poem about *my* love of the south and the mountains. My poetry critique group said it sounds like a story. So I started writing my very first children's book manuscript, *My Mountain Song*.

I got one rejection on the manuscript—then I did a stupid thing. I put it away for almost fifteen years. I didn't know that writers get rejected every day. When I finally decided to dedicate myself to writing for children, I pulled it back out again and worked on it. Critiques of the picture book manuscript said that it sounded so "big," maybe I should expand upon it and write a novel. So I did that, too! So it went from poem, to picture book, to novel. Then before I could finish and sell the novel, I got an offer on the picture book. *My Mountain Song* became—after almost twenty years at that point!—my fourth or fifth book out.

The characters in your book, Brenda Gail, Melvin, Gran Pap, and Big Ma, are all so vividly portrayed. Are they based on real people you have known?

SC: By now, you probably know the answer to this—a big yes! Brenda Gail is my sister. (Though I don't think she ever hit a chicken with a rock! That part is made-up.) I wanted to write a story about a tough, but loveable kid like my younger sister. However, I must confess something here. "Shuck Beans" was *my* nickname. Also, the story briefly mentions that she finally gets to visit with-out her pesky brothers. I also

have two pesky, younger brothers. I'm the oldest. Jennie Belle was my great-grandmother's name. But the most fun I had in remembering and writing this story was thinking about my bothersome cousin Garry. (To whom I gave my father's name for the story, Melvin. Look at the dedication.) I have more cousins than I could count in a coon's age. My cousin Garry is one of the most loveable—though he always has a nickname for everyone and everything! He's also one of the most ornery—he *still* calls me "Shuck Beans!"

This issue of *Library Sparks* has a theme of character education. Your book is a wonderful fit for subtly teaching children so much about human relationships and our interactions with others. What role do you think books play in character education in children's lives?

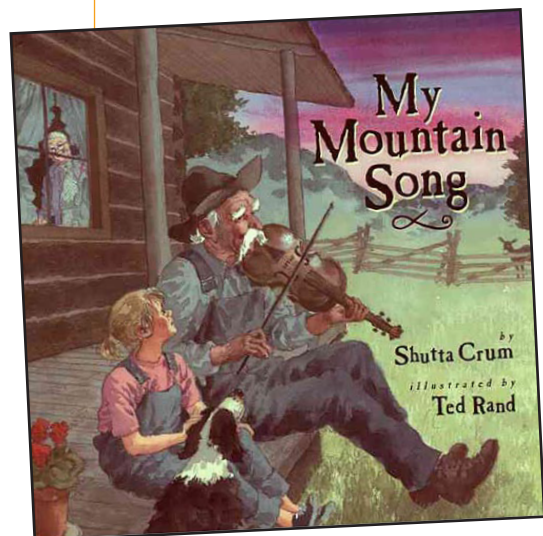
SC: I think books play a deep and abiding role in the character education of children. When we read, we internalize the experiences we're reading about and compare them to our own experiences and those of the people we know and love.

How would I behave in such a predicament? What would I say? How would I feel? Reading, and all story-making, allows us to role-play safely, and to test the waters of making more and more of our own decisions as we mature. By reading we come to know that even one small event can have great repercussions,

that we can't always predict how others will respond, and that how an event is perceived depends upon the perspective of the perceiver. Because of this, we begin to understand the world outside our small daily spheres. It may not always make sense to us, but we know it's there and we have begun to learn how to interact with it. By reading we learn what is expected of us and what we can expect. (Therefore, both Melvin and Brenda Gail apologize. And both are punished—though Melvin to a lesser degree by helping with the chores.) Hopefully, reading also instills in us an insatiable curiosity to find out more about the great going-on-and-on world beyond our own families and friends.

You have written many kinds of books over the years, including a wonderful middle grade novel, *Spitting Image*. Please reflect on the differences between writing a shorter narrative book like *My Mountain Song* and a novel.

SC: I've written a number of picture books over the past few



Meet the Author

years, two novel manuscripts, and I'm currently working on a third novel. What I find is that there are two very different processes, and my emotional response is different for each. With picture books it feels more like solving a puzzle. How can I get this, and this, and this, into very few words? If the text is in verse, there are the added constraints of rhyme, meter, and pattern. I have even been known to take scissors and cut-up the stanzas, rearrange them, and then rewrite connecting lines. Finally, I cut to the point that I feel something triumphant in my chest if I can find just one more "the" to delete. I use more of the problem-solving side of my brain with a goal of getting it all into the sleekest lines I can. Thereby, lots of the story remains for the illustrator to depict. It feels quick and fun, and like a satisfying splashy romp through a sprinkler on a hot day.

With a novel, I feel like I am jumping into a warm lake. I am overcome with the need to kick my feet, keep my head above the water, and keep swimming. I need to reread all I've written since the last time—or a goodly part of it. I need to do a lot of

thinking rather than simply rearranging. I need uninterrupted time to visualize my characters into being—first he moves his hand to cover his eyes ... then he raises his eyes and sees ... what? What, then, does he say? What effect does it have on the character who hears what he says?

It's altogether a slower, longer, deeper immersion. I am using more of the intuitive side of my brain as I figure out how to settle in for a marathon swim across a dark lake whose other side I can't quite see from here. And when I get there, though it may not be anything like I expected, there is the exhausted satisfaction of having done it.

How can readers learn more about you and your books?

SC: My Web site is www.shutta.com. There you'll find a short entry about why I wrote each of the books. Also, there is a reader's guide to *Spitting Image*, a handout for teachers

of classroom exercises using the picture books, my presentation information and fees, a speaker's brochure, and a fun page where I even have some recipes that are connected to the books.

My blog is at blog.shuttacrum.com. (The latest entries of the blog also pop-up on the Web page.) This is the spot where I write about up-coming books, news, books on my nightstand that I'm currently reading, and other fun stuff. Everyone is invited to drop by!

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Toni Buzzeo, MA, MLIS, is an author as well as a career library media specialist and member of the Maine Association of School Libraries Executive Board. She is the author of five picture books, most recently Our Librarian Won't Tell Us ANYTHING! A Mrs. Skorupski Story (UpstartBooks, 2006) and many professional books and articles. Visit www.tonibuzzeo.com or e-mail Toni@tonibuzzeo.com.

Books by Shutta Crum

- *All on a Sleepy Night*. Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2002.
- *Bravest of the Brave*. Knopf, 2005.
- *Click!* Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2003.
- *A Family for Old Mill Farm*. Houghton Mifflin, 2007.
- *Fox and Fluff*. Albert Whitman, 2002.
- *House in the Meadow*. Albert Whitman, 2003.
- *My Mountain Song*. Houghton Mifflin, 2004.
- *Spitting Image*. Houghton Mifflin, 2003.
- *Who Took My Hairy Toe?* Albert Whitman, 2001.