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# New Shoes

## A conversation with author Susan Lynn Meyer

*Set in the South during the time of segregation, this lushly illustrated picture book brings the civil rights era to life for contemporary readers as two young girls find an inventive way to foil Jim Crow laws.*

**Susan, in two to three sentences, tell us about your book NEW SHOES.**

NEW SHOES is the story of Ella Mae, an African American girl living in the 1950s before the civil rights movement. Ella Mae is very excited when she goes with her mother to a shoe store to pick out her first pair of new shoes. But she is humiliated when she finds out that because of her skin color, she isn't allowed to try on any of the shoes – and the story is about what she and her cousin Charlotte do together to improve that situation.

**Though NEW SHOES is a fictional story, it focuses on the reality that many African Americans used to face when going to purchase shoes. Can you tell us where you found your inspiration for the story?**

I was reading about the Jim Crow era as background for a novel I'm writing set in New York in the 1940s. Before I started researching, I knew what most people know about segregation: about segregated seating on buses, segregated water fountains, segregated restaurants and segregated lunch counters. When I came across the fact that in many places, African Americans weren't allowed to try on clothes, hats or shoes before buying them, I was startled and appalled. I thought a lot about what it would have felt like to be slapped in the face by that practice for the first time. That's where the idea for NEW SHOES came from.

**Tell us about any research you did for the story.**

As I mentioned, the premise of the story – a girl finding out for the first time that she is not allowed to try on shoes – came from reading I was doing about the history of

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segregation. In the course of my research, I read a number of oral histories of African Americans who lived through this time. One thing I really enjoyed finding out about was the subtle acts of resistance and rebellion that people engaged in, such as refusing to patronize restaurants that would only sell food to African Americans by handing it out the back door, or planning ahead to bring their own drinks so that they wouldn't have to use segregated water fountains.

One of the most important things I did was talk to African American friends and ask them to read drafts of the story. One friend told me that in an early draft I had Ella Mae's mother's attitude wrong. I had her directly expressing resentment at the discriminatory situation in the shoe store when she talks to Ella Mae. My friend said that her own older relatives wouldn't have acted that way, that they would have tried to protect Ella Mae and encourage her to think positively. I thought about my own relatives from that generation, and about the way I talk to my own daughter when she faces adverse situations and my friend's advice immediately felt so right. So I changed what Ella Mae's mother says to her.

**In the story Ella Mae and her cousin Charlotte use creativity and ingenuity to help others. What do you hope young readers will take away from this story?**

I want young readers (and adult readers) to learn about this injustice in America's past. I hope the situation in the shoe store will immediately feel shocking and wrong on a gut level to children.

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When I was a kid, I often said furiously, "It's not fair," about one thing or another. That's the response I am hoping to evoke in young readers.

I hope young readers will feel Ella Mae's and Charlotte's courage and determination and confidence—and that they will see that by small positive steps, things can be made better.

**When did you decide you wanted to become an author?**

When I was a child, I loved to read, and being an author seemed like the most wonderful thing in the world to be—although it also seemed impossible. Where would you even start? I remember also being warned by my parents that a steady job was better, that it was really hard to earn a living as a writer. So I followed their guidance, and I did get a steady job, although one that involves a lot of reading—I now teach English at Wellesley College.

When my friends started to have children and I spent time playing with them, I returned to my earlier dream and began writing stories and poems for children. I worked at it a long time before anything was published.

### What advice would you give to young authors?

Read a lot! Read books you love and read all kinds of books. Write your own stories — what happens to you and what you think and feel are important. Try to capture your experiences in words.

Revise your work to make it better. I numbered the drafts of *NEW SHOES*, so I know it went through 23 drafts. It took me many versions of the story to figure out what Ella Mae and Charlotte could do after the shoe store experience to make things better. I tried *many* different endings!

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Photo credit: Hannah Meyer-Winkler

**SUSAN LYNN MEYER** is an English Professor at Wellesley College and a children's book author. Her WWII novel, *Black Radishes*, won the Sydney Taylor silver medal and was named a Bank Street Best Children's Book of the Year. She lives in Massachusetts with her family.

#### Praise for *New Shoes*

★ "It isn't easy to make a story seem as if it's telling itself, but this gripping piece of historical fiction does just that. Meyer's prose is vividly precise in its detail; the girls' optimism and determination is almost palpable." — *Publishers Weekly*, starred review

"The tale stands out from other stories of children overcoming obstacles, emphasizing how resistance and transformation can be found in the smallest of actions . . . Highly recommended; both a revealing glimpse into one aspect of America's institutionalized racism and inspiration for kids to create this own change." — *Kirkus Reviews*