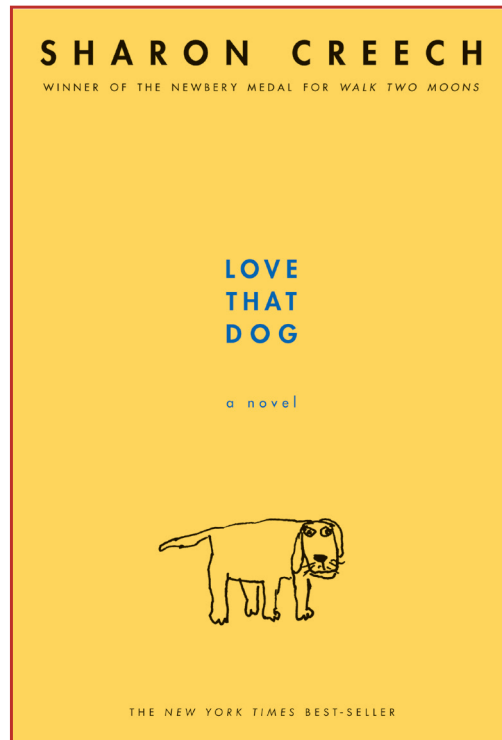
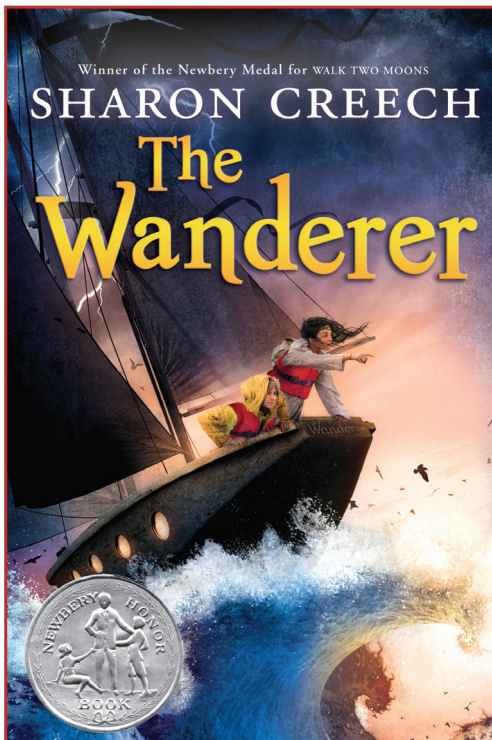
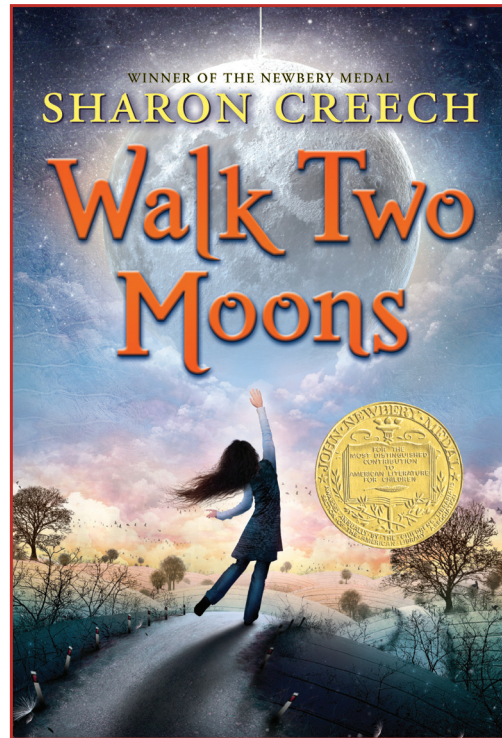
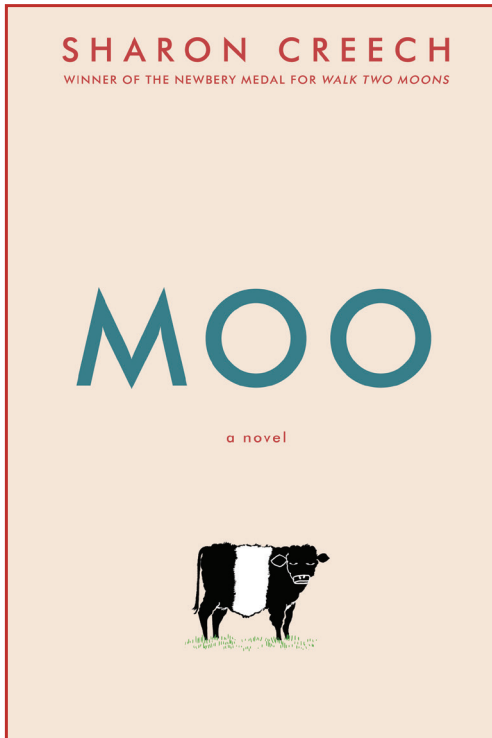


# TEACH CREECH

MAKE THE NOVELS OF NEWBERY MEDAL-WINNING AUTHOR  
**SHARON CREECH** COME ALIVE IN THE CLASSROOM!



# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Lyle Rigg

It has been said that a reader can get acquainted with authors just by reading the words they write. This is especially true of Sharon Creech, who chooses to share so much of herself and her heart in her novels. The best way to make Sharon Creech alive and real to the students who love her books is to share some of her personal insights with them.

When asked about her childhood and the impact her family has had on her writing, she states, "I grew up in a big, noisy family in a Cleveland suburb, with hordes of relatives telling stories around the kitchen table. Here I learned to exaggerate and embellish, because if you didn't, your story was drowned out by someone else's more exciting one." From her childhood, she remembers the experience of reading—"of drifting into the pages and living in someone else's world, the excitement of never knowing what lay ahead."

Creech shared some events that happened to her in real life that have ended up on the pages of her novels and in the hearts of her readers. "It is difficult to separate fact from fiction now, but much of what happens to Mary Lou in *Absolutely Normal Chaos* happened to me. For example, the arrival of a country cousin, the bumbled kiss in a field, and the bedsprings crashing down the attic steps. Also, I took the same trip Salamanca takes in *Walk Two Moons*, though no one died on the trip, and I lived in Switzerland like Dinnie in *Bloomability*. I was even a champion 'downfeller' at skiing like Dinnie was. Like Jack in *Love That Dog*, I really, really, really did not get the wheelbarrow poem. But more than the specific events, what I draw on is the 'real' sense of places I have been and the kind of atmosphere generated by those places and the people I have met."

Creech usually begins her stories "with the image of a character and a setting" (a girl on a sailboat, for example), and then she lets "the character talk in order to hear her voice. The voice gives many clues about what she values, what she cares about, her worries, and her fears. Place also shapes character, and both the voice and the place get me started. Then, I trust that a story will emerge. Words generate more words; thoughts generate more thoughts."

There is a piece of Sharon Creech in every book she writes. Creech's daughter, Karin, took the same trip as Sophie does in *The Wanderer*. Although they followed the same route and encountered a storm, Sophie developed a personality all her own. The first two Bompie stories that Sophie tells are Creech's father's stories, but the rest are imagined. Also, like Reena in *Moo*, Creech's granddaughter and her family—and Creech herself—moved to Maine and met an ornery cow.

Most of Creech's novels deal with the themes of family and friendship, and also of loss and abandonment. She writes such heartfelt stories about the characters and their losses that the reader has to wonder what she has experienced to get the emotions so right. Creech is not sure why this is the case, but she offers some insight: "I started writing seriously in 1986, after my father died. He had suffered a stroke in 1980, and I would think about all those words locked up for six years because his mind could neither accept nor deliver words. The connection between my father's death and my flood of writing might be that I had been confronted with the dark wall of mortality; we don't have endless time to follow our dreams. But it might also be that I felt obligated to use the words that my father could not." All of her books balance seriousness with humor. "That is part of me and of my family: you might face difficulties or sadness, but humor can take the sting away."

Creech offers great advice to aspiring writers: "Read a lot and write a lot. Reading widely allows you to absorb how other writers develop stories, and it allows you to hear many different kinds of voices and approaches to storytelling. Like any skill, writing takes practice. Try different forms when you write: poetry, short stories, and plays. Have fun and experiment." It is obvious that Sharon Creech has taken her own advice.

# AN INTERVIEW WITH SHARON CREECH

**Q:** Most of your books focus on the main character's family and how they change as the story progresses. Why is family such a familiar theme?

**A:** Exploring families comes naturally. I am from a large family, full of ever-evolving individuals who fascinate me. They are important to my life. I have also lived over twenty years in Europe, working with students of all nationalities, and I have been intrigued by many kinds of families and the ways in which each student is shaped by his family. Endlessly interesting!

**Q:** What prompted you to begin to write novels in verse?

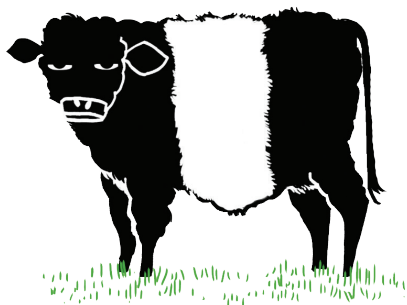
**A:** *Love That Dog* appeared that way, out of my head and onto the page, much to my surprise. It felt so liberating to write in that spare form, and although every novel I write does not lend itself to being told in verse, some—like *Heartbeat* and *Hate That Cat*, and now *Moo*—do.

**Q:** How does your writing process differ when you write prose and a novel in verse?

**A:** The writing process is virtually the same, whether prose or verse. I am still developing a character and his or her universe in short scenes which, when taken together, paint a larger picture. What differs is the voice, which is more lyrical and condensed in verse. In writing *Moo*, I alternated between verse and prose to reflect Reena's varying moods.

**Q:** Can you share the "behind-the-book" story about *Moo*? Have you ever known a cow that behaved like Zora?

**A:** *Moo* was inspired by our recent move to Maine, our granddaughter's work with a local farm, and one particularly ornery cow named Zola (not Zora). Zola really did run amuck at a fair, but she also had a tender, loving side, too, and charmed us all.



**Q:** Are the characters in *Moo* based on people you know? If so, how do you know them?

**A:** My daughter's family, like Reena's in the book, moved from a big city to coastal Maine, where they became involved with a local farm raising Belted Galloway cows. Reena and Luke were inspired by my grandchildren, with their love of cows and drawing and Maine, but the characters also take on lives of their own.

**Q:** Why was it important that you create lasting and supportive friendships for Reena?

**A:** This was not a conscious goal, but rather grew out of Reena's particular character. Although she is initially wary of both Mrs. Falala and Zora, Reena increasingly responds to and eventually nurtures these relationships. I wish all our children had access to such lasting and supportive friendships, and I suppose that wish of mine influences the choices my characters make.

**Q:** Why do you set *Moo* in Maine?

**A:** Not only did my daughter and her family move to Maine four years ago, but so did my husband and I. We love living here. We have lived in three different countries and four different states, and each place shapes us in its own way. Each place surfaces sooner or later in what I write.



Photo by Karim Leuthy

*Sharon's granddaughter with Ginger the cow*

# TEACH CREECH! USING LITERATURE CIRCLES

Literature Circles are small discussion groups comprised of four to five students, each of whom has a specific role. The students lead discussions in their small groups, and the teacher acts as mediator and facilitator. Literature Circles can be used in one of two ways: (1) each group reads a different book, or (2) the entire class reads the same book. This student-centered instructional technique enables each student to participate regardless of his or her reading level.

## **A MODEL LESSON**

The following lesson uses Sharon Creech’s picture book *A Fine, Fine School* to work through the process of Literature Circles as a class. Using a book written for a younger audience, older students will be able to grasp the thematic ideas, character traits, and writing style more readily. Because Creech’s novels have similar themes, character traits, and writing styles, students will then be able to apply the concept of Literature Circles to any of her books.

### **Follow these steps:**

1. Before reading the book, explain each individual role (Director, Passage Detective, Researcher, Connector, and Vocabulary Enricher—see definitions below) and assign one to each student, rotating through the roles.
2. Group the students according to their assigned roles (all Directors together, etc.) and have them brainstorm ways to accomplish their assigned tasks.
3. Read *A Fine, Fine School* to the class, occasionally stopping to point out passages, words, or questions that might be helpful to the circles.
4. Work with each role group to accomplish their assigned task.
5. After students have discussed the book within their role groups, have them form Literature Circles—groups of four or five students with one from each role—and have them discuss the book again, allowing each member to carry out his/her role.
6. Have each circle report orally to the class on their findings about theme, characters, and style.

### **The roles:**

- **The Director** focuses the discussion on the big ideas of the reading. He/she should ask open-ended questions that will allow for discussion. These questions should be written and brought to the group session. Some sample questions are:
  - ✓ What are two important ideas presented in *A Fine, Fine School*?
  - ✓ Did the reading remind you of any real-life experiences?
  - ✓ What, if anything, surprised you in the reading?

- ✓ How does Mr. Keene show compassion? Courage?
- ✓ What do Mr. Keene and Tillie have in common? Why is it important?
- **The Passage Detective** chooses specific passages in the reading that might foreshadow an event, reveal something about a character, evoke strong emotion, paint word pictures with imagery, or encourage critical thinking. He/she should bring these passages to the group sessions so that the group can discuss their importance to the book as a whole. For example:
  - ✓ Mr. Keene repeating, “Aren’t these fine children? Aren’t these fine teachers? Isn’t this a fine, fine school?”
  - ✓ “We certainly are learning some amazing things. But,” Tillie said, “not everyone is learning.”
- **The Researcher** supplies author information and provides historical or cultural information about the reading to lend a better understanding to the group. This is not in-depth research—just new ideas and information to be shared informally. For example, students reading *A Fine, Fine School* might research the effects of the year-round school on students, teachers, and their families.
- **The Connector** makes connections between the book and other texts, including other novels, short stories, poems, movies, television shows, news, and/or songs. These connections build background, deepen comprehension, and engage the readers. For example:
  - ✓ Movies: *School of Rock*, *Kindergarten Cop*
  - ✓ TV Shows: *The Wonder Years*, *Saved by the Bell*
  - ✓ Song: “School’s Out for Summer”
- **The Vocabulary Enricher** finds new or special words that are important to the text. Students should record the page and paragraph numbers and then define the words. Note: This is an optional role if it is necessary to have five students in a group.

# TEACH CREECH! USING LITERATURE CIRCLES

## Additional tips for successful Literature Circles:

- Set up a reading schedule that allows the novel to be completed in three to four weeks. As teacher, you should decide whether you give your students time in class to read or assign the book(s) as outside reading. The researcher will also need additional time to research topics on which he or she has chosen to focus.
- The Literature Circle should meet once a week for 20 minutes if your school has block scheduling. If your class meets daily, you will want to schedule meetings twice a week.
- Students should come prepared to their sessions with questions, research found, passages to discuss, and connections—all of which must be in writing.
- The students may change roles from week to week to allow each student to experience each role.
- The teacher may modify group size when needed and alter the roles accordingly.

## **APPLYING THE MODEL LESSON**

After completing the model lesson using *A Fine, Fine School*, each student will understand the expectations of his/her role. Now you can set up new Literature Circles with four or five students (one per role) in each group, and assign each circle one of the following novels written by Sharon Creech: *Walk Two Moons*, *The Wanderer*, *Love That Dog*, and *Moo*. In addition to the questions outlined on the previous page, ask students to focus their discussions on the following ideas and how they apply to the novels:

- Themes: loss/abandonment, family relationships, self-discovery, friendship
- Character traits: honesty, open-mindedness, courage
- Writing styles: story within a story, literary allusions, imagery

As each group reads, they should find support for the above as well as look for other major ideas and character traits.

Each group can choose one or more of the following projects (or come up with their own) to complete and share with the class:

- Make a collage that might be found hanging in the bedroom of one of the characters and write a brief explanation of each item selected.
- Write diary entries that one of the characters might have written during the course of the story.

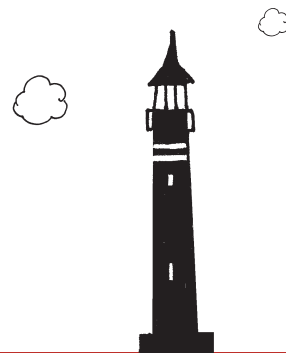
- Write a poem or song that expresses one or more of the character's feelings.
- Create a piece of original artwork that interprets one of the themes of the book.
- Write and perform an original skit based on the book.
- Write letters that two of the characters might have written to one another about what is happening in their lives.
- Create an original board game based on the book.
- Write and record an original news broadcast about the events in the book.
- Write and illustrate a picture book based on the characters and events in the book.
- Cast the characters in a movie based on the book and develop an advertising campaign for the movie.
- Create a cause-and-effect continuum of how and why the main character changes as a result of the events and situations that occur.

## **ASSESSMENT**

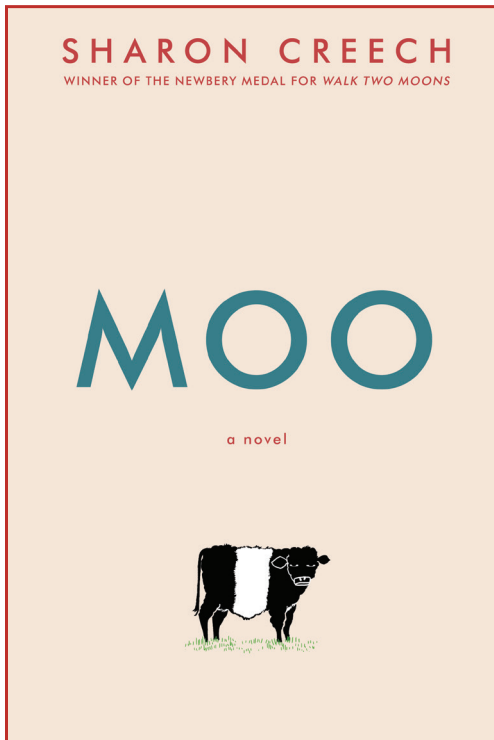
Assessment in Literature Circles can be both formal and informal.

**Formal:** Students should have input on how their final product should be evaluated, and this should be determined prior to the completion of the assignment. The quality and presentation of the project should be taken into consideration.

**Informal:** Students should bring their written assignments to each session. These will include the Director's questions, the passages chosen by the Passage Detective, the information found by the Researcher, and the connections discovered by the Connector. As the teacher visits with each Literature Circle group, he or she can check these, and each student should hand in his/her assignment along with a written self- and peer-evaluation for each session. The reports can be given back to the group at the next session.

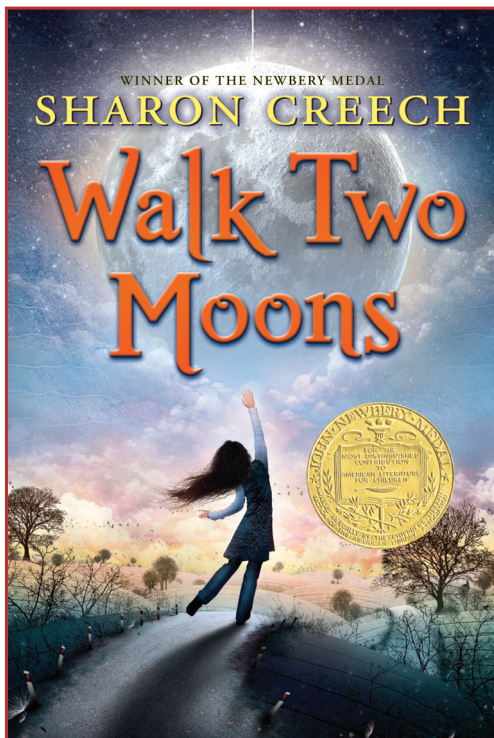


# TEACH CREECH! GUIDING QUESTIONS



## Moo

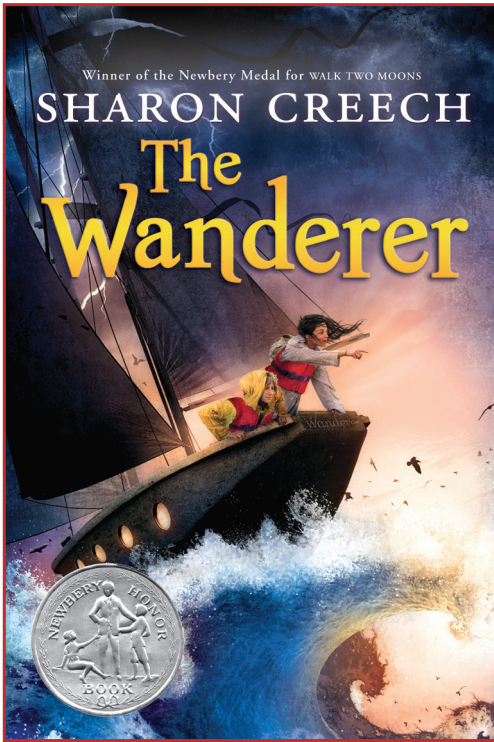
1. How does the author use the spacing and shapes of letters and words to convey meaning? Find an example to share with the class.
2. How does drawing help Luke communicate? How do his drawings express his emotions?
3. How does Reena react to Zora when she begins to work with her? How and why does her relationship with Zora change?
4. Zora is a Beltie cow. What is unique about Beltie cows and special about Zora's bloodlines?
5. What is Luke's reaction when he learns that the meat he eats comes from animals like Zora and Paulie? How does Mrs. Falala reassure him?
6. What role does Zep play in helping Reena understand Zora? How does Zep's cow, Yolanda, help Zora?
7. Why is it ironic that Mrs. Falala is found in her "remembering room"? What is Luke's reaction to Mrs. Falala's drawings?



## Walk Two Moons

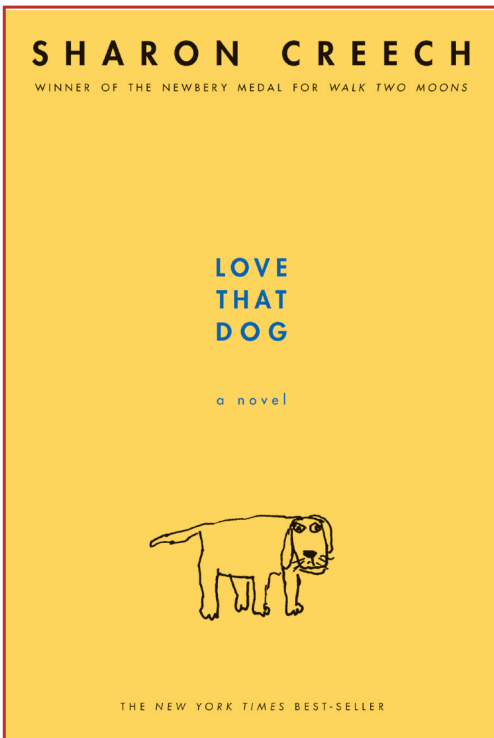
1. Sal says that behind Phoebe's story is her own. What does she mean by this? What are some similarities between their stories? What are some differences? Why do you think each of the girls' mothers believed they had to leave?
2. Sal's father sometimes tells her she's "trying to catch fish in the air" (p. 115). Explain this figure of speech. How does it apply to Sal?
3. Why do you think the author created ambiguity around Sal's missing mother? Why didn't she just make it clear that Sal's mother had died?
4. "In the course of a lifetime there were some things that mattered" (p. 260). What does Sal think those things are? What do you think they are?
5. Throughout her trip to Idaho, Sal prays to trees because "this was easier than praying directly to God" (p. 7). Why does Sal trust trees to answer her prayers? What kind of relationship does she have with trees?
6. Mr. Birkway discusses a poem by e. e. cummings entitled "the little horse is newLY" (p. 123). Why does Sal relate to the poem? Why does her first kiss with Ben remind her of the poem?

# TEACH CREECH! GUIDING QUESTIONS



## The Wanderer

1. In what ways is *The Wanderer* like a mystery novel? How does the author “drop clues” for the reader? Did you find it suspenseful?
2. The book first switches from Sophie’s to Cody’s point of view on page 23, the first entry in his “dog-log.” It’s our first hint that Sophie is an orphan and has only lived with her current parents for three years. What was your reaction when you found out? Did it change your view of Sophie’s reliability as a narrator?
3. Sophie’s father calls her “three-sided Sophie” on page 3: “one side is dreamy and romantic; one is logical and down-to-earth; and the third side is hardheaded and impulsive.” Do you agree with his assessment? Can you find moments in the book that reflect these three sides of Sophie?
4. Uncle Stew decides that each crew member has to teach the others something while on the trip. What does each of the young people’s choices—Cody’s juggling, Sophie’s storytelling, and Brian’s points of sail—show us about these three characters? What do the crew members’ attitudes toward one another’s choices tell us about them?
5. Sophie has a recurring dream she calls “the one with The Wave” (pp. 125, 208). What role do dreams play in this novel?

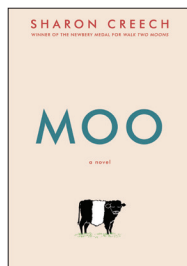


## Love That Dog

1. Jack’s beliefs about poetry change throughout the year. What do you believe about poems? What makes something a poem? How are poems different from stories and other kinds of writing?
2. When he’s first learning to write poetry, Jack borrows a lot of ideas from other poets’ works. Why? Does borrowing from others help him to develop his own style? Where do you draw the line between being inspired by someone else and copying his or her work?
3. Jack feels nervous about having his work displayed in the classroom. Why does he want his early poems to be anonymous? How does he expect his classmates to react? Do you ever have a hard time sharing your work? Why?
4. Look back at Jack’s poems about his dog, Sky. How do these poems build on each other? How does Jack reuse his own words, and where can you find lines that were inspired by other poets?
5. Are you at all similar to Jack? Discuss Jack’s growth as a reader and as a writer using quotes from the book. Which one of his statements about poetry most echoes your own feelings?

# NOBODY TELLS A STORY LIKE NEWBERY MEDALIST SHARON CREECH

## A Selected Bibliography



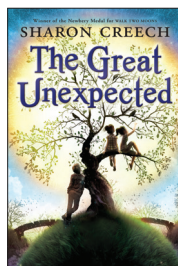
### Moo

Tr 978-0-06-241524-0 • \$16.99  
Lb 978-0-06-241525-7 • \$17.89



### The Boy on the Porch

Tr 978-0-06-189235-6 • \$16.99  
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Pb 978-0-06-189238-7 • \$6.99



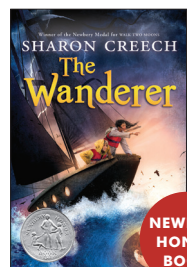
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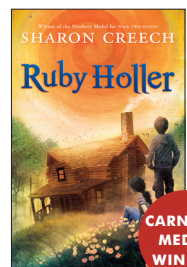
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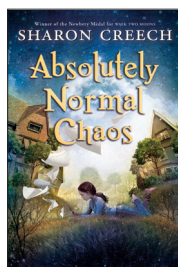
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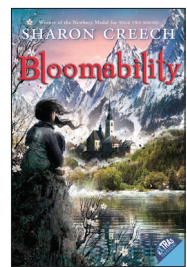
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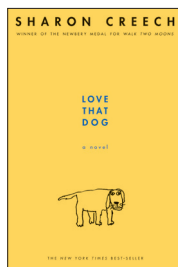
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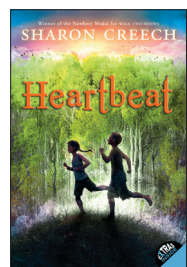
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