



Question and Answer with Kathryn Erskine

Q: What inspired you to write *Mockingbird* in first person? Did you ever consider telling the story from a different perspective?

A: I wanted to use first person to really get inside Caitlin's head and have readers see the world the way she sees it. If they could live in her shoes, I felt they could better understand why she talks and behaves the way she does.

Q: The issue of dealing with loss manifests itself throughout *Mockingbird*. What inspired you to use this as a major theme throughout the novel?

A: Overcoming losses, having hope that things will be better, is a major theme in all my books because I'm a big believer in hope. Despite the losses we suffer, we can still gain something – it may not be the same, but it can still be good. Sometimes, a person you don't expect, a person who's not exactly great with people, a person like Caitlin, can pave the way for great healing.

Q: On your website, you include a music playlist for each of your books; can you tell us why you built these playlists and what inspired you to include these specific selections for *Mockingbird*?

A: For *Mockingbird*, the obvious songs were themes from *To Kill a Mockingbird* because Caitlin makes me think of Scout in the movie, and the wonderful James Taylor / Carly Simon version of "Mockingbird". The line from the song that kept running through my head was, "Hear me now and understand." Most of the other songs on my list are for kids and they're about issues Caitlin has to deal with, such as empathy and sharing.

Q: Aspiring writers are often told to write what they know; how have you followed that sage advice?

A: My daughter was diagnosed with Asperger's in second grade. It explained a lot. I do believe that there's much we can do to help those on the autism spectrum learn about and understand our world. At the same time, I think we can learn much of value from people who see the world differently.

Q: What influences your writing?

A: Life. That may sound silly, but I'm influenced by everything around me all the time. Suffering of any kind speaks to me very loudly which is why, I suppose, my books tend to have heavy themes. But the focus is on handling the suffering, dealing with the problems and, in the end, triumphing. That's how I like to write my world, both in books and real life.

Kathryn's *Mockingbird* playlist

"To Kill A Mockingbird" – Elmer Bernstein
(Main Title from movie)

"Footsteps in the Dark" – Elmer Bernstein
"Everyone Has Strengths to be Proud of" –
Cathy Bollinger

"You Ride Your Way and I'll Ride Mine" – Rolf Harris

"Colours of the Wind" – Judy Kuhn

"Through Your Eyes" – Martina McBride

"Kindergarten Wall" – John McCutcheon

"Empathy Song" – The Mosaic Project

"You've Got a Friend in Me" – Randy Newman

"Sharing Song" – Raffi

"Mockingbird" – Carly Simon & James Taylor

"Fly Like an Eagle" – Steve Miller Band





Discussion Questions

- ◆ How much knowledge did you have of Asperger's syndrome before reading *Mockingbird*? Did the book help your understanding?
- ◆ Did the use of the first person narrative help draw you into Caitlin's perspective? What is the effect of the author's use of capital letters to punctuate certain phrases, for example "The Day Our Life Fell Apart"?
- ◆ Asperger's and autism sufferers often show signs of repetitive or ritualistic behaviour; how does this present itself in Caitlin? How do these actions make her feel?
- ◆ Caitlin's father tells her that, "The whole town is upset by what happened. They want to help. They want to help you deal with life, Caitlin...without Devon" (p12). How do readers know Caitlin isn't dealing with the loss

of her brother? What are some of the clues that let us know how she is feeling?

♦ Consider the various important relationships Caitlin has with the people in her life, for instance her father, Mrs. Brook and Michael. How do each of these characters help Caitlin's emotional development? Do they ever hinder it?

♦ Caitlin says "I wish Dad would just tell me things. It would make life a lot easier" (p168). What do you think of her father's way of coping with his daughter's Asperger's and his son's death simultaneously?

♦ What motivates Josh to behave the way he does? Do you think he has a valid reason for being so angry? What do you think of Caitlin's and the other children's behaviour towards him?

♦ Discuss the significance of colour in the novel. Compare Caitlin's reactions earlier in the book, for example her preference for black and white, to those that come later, for instance her reaction to Mr. Walters' gift

of colouring pencils. Are the contrasting reactions important? Why?

♦ In what way is Devon's unfinished chest symbolic of the loss of Devon? How has it impacted the rest of Caitlin's family? Although her father has covered the chest with a sheet, why do you think he chooses to keep it in their home?

♦ Over the course of the novel, Caitlin tries to understand the meaning of closure, and how to achieve it. What are some of the events that help her achieve closure? How does her understanding of the concept of closure change?

♦ In some ways, *Mockingbird* begins and ends at the middle school – the scene of the shooting and subsequently the ceremony at the end of the story – as if the book were coming full circle. Do you share this general feeling of resolve?

♦ Describe this book in five words to a friend and explain your choices.

***To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee is regularly referred to throughout this book. You may like to read that classic novel and discuss the differences and similarities between the two. For example:**

♦ Discuss the parallels between Caitlin, Devon and their father, with Scout, Jem and Atticus. Are there any other parallels between the two novels? And what impact does the period the books were written in have on the issues they address?

