Q – Why 1950?
A – I chose the historical setting of post-war America because it’s complex and often misunderstood. Following WWII, the U.S. experienced unparalleled prosperity. But the American Dream for some became the quiet nightmare for others. Societal pressures to conform were severe and deep tensions developed across social, racial, and gender lines. People escaped these pressures in various ways and the alluring “come hither” of New Orleans was one of them. But for some, the Big Easy was more than they could handle. People kept a lot of secrets back then. Illness and family troubles were often hidden from the public. Sometimes, what looked perfect on the outside was quietly rotting on the inside.

Q – Did the time period inspire the creation of the characters?
A – Well, the more I researched the time period, the surface sparkle faded to reveal a fair amount of pain. Learning of that pain helped me create characters like Willie, Forrest Hearne, Charlotte, and Miss Paulsen – beautiful souls whose kindness and encouragement plant seeds of hope that eventually sprout courage.

Q – So how would you sum up the book?
A – I’d say it’s a story about decisions and how they shape our destiny. Teenagers are constantly facing difficult decisions and are often worried about being perfect. But some of the most interesting people are those we can’t categorize. Those are the characters I love to create, those who remind us that beauty can be perfect in imperfection. Sometimes, small acts of kindness and respect can impact young people more than we’ll ever know. It could be a teacher, like Miss Paulsen, who believes in a student. Or it could be a David Copperfield, like Forrest Hearne, who inspires someone to dream big. Right now there’s a teenager somewhere who is about to put on shoes that will take them in the wrong direction. We all know how easy it is to make bad decisions. But who knows, maybe they’ll decide to put on the brown loafers and step out of the easy.

Q – How did you research the book?
A – I took several trips to New Orleans and spent many days at the Williams Research Center. I also combed library archives. I walked Josie’s paths that describe in the book and interviewed people who had intimate knowledge of the underbelly of the city. My meetings were both fascinating and terrifying. My research was a bit like being a detective and I love that aspect.

Q – Why New Orleans?
A – New Orleans is unlike any city in America and such a rich backdrop for a novel. Its cultural diversity is woven into the food, the music, the architecture — even the local superstitions. It’s full of secrets and dark doorways. It’s a sensory experience on all levels and there’s a story lurking around every corner.

Q – Why do you enjoy writing historical fiction?
A – History is full of secrets. Writing historical fiction is a bit like being a detective and I love that aspect.

You really have to research and dig in order to unearth information that will be interesting to readers.

Q – How did you create Josie Moraine?
A – Those girls inspired me. They taught me that we can learn to fly, even if we’re born with broken wings. The idea of that broken, yet beautiful bird became Josie Moraine.

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The year is 1950. The place is New Orleans, frequently referred to as ‘The Big Easy.’ The main character, Josie Marcone, is the teenage daughter of a French Quarter prostitute, who desperately wants to escape the sordid life into which she has been subjected and make a fresh start for herself somewhere far from New Orleans. An exceptionally intelligent and resourceful young woman who loves to read and longs for a ‘literary life,’ Josie devises a plan that will make her dream of a college education in a new locale a reality. Josie is surrounded by complicated characters who lend both color and support to her existence, yet is also plagued by those determined to do her harm. The most vivid character of all is the city of New Orleans itself, rendered in messy, exuberant, and heartbreaking detail. Just as we think Josie may actually leave all behind, she is dealt one crushing blow after another, including being the victim of a crime she did not commit, and enduring not one but three unexpected deaths. Will she overcome such tremendous upheaval to become the hero of her own life? Readers of Ruta Sepetys’ impeccably researched and emotionally riveting debut novel, Between Shades of Gray, will discover the answer.

Josie is an exceptionally intelligent and resourceful young woman who loves to read and longs for a ‘literary life.’ She is a past president of the Children’s Literature and Reading Special Interest Group of the International Reading Association, an active member of the Children’s Literature Assembly of the National Council of Teachers of English, and a former editor of the Journal of Children’s Literature. Between Shades of Gray was her 2008 chair of the Notable Books for a Global Society award committee for the International Reading Association. She is a past president of the Children’s Literature and Reading Special Interest Group of the International Reading Association. She is also the author of Out of the Easy.

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Josie says about herself, “No matter how I parted my hair, I couldn’t part from the crick I had crawled out of.” (p. 258). Why can’t Josie see the good in herself the way others do? (Reading Standard 1)

Josie and Jesse are both characters with very difficult pasts who could have easily chosen a lifestyle of ‘hustle and bling’ like many of the other people in their lives. Why do you think each of them is able to choose a different path? (Reading Standard 2)

While John Lockwell is not a sympathetic character, Josie essentially blackmails him to get what she wants. How do you feel about that decision onJosie’s part and why? (Reading Standard 2)

Josie often reflects on the concept and elements of family. How would you define family and what are some things that create feelings of family for Josie? (Reading Standard 1)

Josie makes a decision to do something abhorrent to her in order to get the money she needs from John Lockwell but is not able to go through with her plan. What is your reaction to that scene? How does the author create those feelings in you as a reader? (Reading Standard 5)

Patrick has a secret that is never explicitly stated in the text. What is his secret? How does the author use foreshadowing to reveal it? What are specific clues from the text that illuminate what he is hiding about himself? (Reading Standard 5)

How does Patrick feel about the part of himself that he is keeping secret? How do you know this? (Reading Standard 1)

What happens when Patrick tries to explain his secret to Josie? Why do you think he never confronts him with the fact that she understands what he is hiding? (Reading Standard 3)

On page 284, Josie recalls the following quote from Keats: “I love you the more in that I believe you have liked me for my own sake and for nothing else.” How does that quotation apply to Josie’s relationship with Patrick? (Reading Standard 3)

Josie’s mother is an extremely unlikeable character. Does she have any redeeming qualities? Cite specific examples from the text that influenced your feelings about her. (Reading Standard 3)

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A Shakespearean reference to Richard III: “The sins of the father are to be laid upon the children.” In Josie’s case, she is punished for her mother’s sins in a number of ways. What are some of Josie’s mother’s sins for which Josie is punished and in what ways is she punished? (Reading Standard 2)

Ruta Sepetys was born and raised in Michigan in a family of artists, readers, and music lovers. Her award-winning debut novel, Between Shades of Gray, was her winning debut novel, winning an international following and earning her the title of “literary sensation.” Ruta Sepetys’ second novel, Out of the Easy, is a joy forever.” Josie’s life and her surroundings are filled with ugliness, heartbreak, and the intriguing and storied French Quarter of New Orleans. Ruta lives with her family in Tennessee.

To learn more about this fascinating author, visit www.rutaspetys.com.

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