What inspired you to write Mockingbird in first person? Did you even consider telling the story from a different perspective?

As 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 she could live in her shoes, I felt I could better understand why she talks and behaves the way she does.

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

Overcoming losses, having hope that things will be better, is a major theme in all my books because I am 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.

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?

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.

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

My daughter was diagnosed with Asperger’s in 2nd grade. It explained a lot of things for me. I’ve always been interested in people who are on the 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. I felt they could better understand why she talk and behaves the way she does.

The most important thing to remember is that there’s no right or wrong way to have a reading group. Do what you’re comfortable with and always have fun, and your group will be a success!

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.

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Mockingbird
by Kathryn Erskine
HC: 978-0-399-25264-8 • $15.99
Grades 10 up • Grades 5 up
National Book Award Winner

“No one should miss this remarkable and moving experience.”
–Andrew Clements, author of the bestselling Frindle and Things Not Seen

Mockingbird is a lovely, perceptive, and poignant story.
–Sharon Creech, author of the Newbery Medal-winning Walk Two Moons

“This will grab you by the heart and throat, give you a good shake, and then set you cheering for the human spirit.”
–Jim Trelease, author of the prominent Read-About Handbook

Also by Kathryn Erskine

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HC: 978-0-399-25200-3 • $16.99
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After years of moving to new foster homes, fourteen year old Matt has learned to rely on himself at school and everywhere. But she revisits in with peaceful Quakers Sam and Jessica and starts to find herself getting involved despite her best efforts—especially when conflict arises in town and at school over the war in the Middle East.

• A Virginia Readers Choice Selection
• An ALA Quick Pick Top Ten
• A VOYA “Top Shelf Fiction for Middle School Readers” Selection

KATHRYN ERSKINE

HOW TO START YOUR OWN BOOK CLUB
Think it would be hard to start your own book club? Think again!

All you need is a little bit of organization and some friends who are as excited about the books you read as you are. Here are a few tips to get you started.

The best way to find people to be in your reading group is to ask your friends. Think of all the people you know who like to read, and ask them to join. If you still can’t find people like you, have enough people, ask each of your friends to bring someone else. You can usually get a good discussion going with six to eight people, but any number that is comfortable for you will work. If you’re having trouble finding enough cool people to form your reading group, check with your school, local library, or bookstore to see if there’s a group that you can join.

Figure out when and where you want to meet. Some groups meet once a month, some meet every other month. You could get together somewhere like a house, like a beach, in the park, or in the school, library, or your school’s library if it sounds too official and overwhelming to decide all the “wheres” and “whens.” For now, don’t worry about your group and how you get to make all the decisions. All you have to do is get together once, and you can work out the rest of the details later.

Decide how you will choose books and how the discussions will run.

Maybe you have a favorite author that you and your friends would like to focus on. Or maybe you want to take turns picking your favorite book. Maybe one person likes to talk and would like to lead the discussion, or maybe you would rather just all get together and talk about the books you are reading. If you get stuck, you can often find discussion questions online (try the publisher’s website) or at your local library or bookstore.

The most important thing to remember is that there’s no right or wrong way to have a reading group. Do what you’re comfortable with and always have fun, and your group will be a success!

For more discussion guides to get your group going, visit www.penguin.com/teachersandlibrarians

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ABOUT THE BOOK

In Caitlin’s world, everything is black or white. Things are good or bad. Anything in between is confusing. That’s the stuff Caitlin’s older brother, Devon, has always explained. But now Devon’s dead, and their father cries a lot. Caitlin wants to get over it, but as an eleven-year-old girl with Asperger’s, she doesn’t know how. When she reads the definition of “closure” in the dictionary, she realizes that is what she and her father need. In her search for closure, Caitlin discovers that not everything is black and white—the world is full of colors—messy and beautiful, and it is through this discovery that she embarks on a road which leads her to find both healing and closure.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

• In what ways 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?
• Caitlin’s father tells her that “The whole town is upset by what happened. They want to help. They want to help you to deal with, Caitlin…without Devon.”(p.5) How do readers know Caitlin isn’t dealing with the loss of her brother? What are some of the behaviors she displays that verify how she is processing this loss?
• Devon serves as a navigator to Caitlin as he helped her understand and explore the world. How does his absence make it significantly more difficult for her to deal with others? What are some of the specific kinds of things Devon did to help his sister? What was his motivation in doing these things? Did he stand to gain anything for assisting her?
• Why do you believe Caitlin’s father is providing her the support she needs? Why or why not?
• Mockingbird is told in first person; how would the story be different if someone besides Caitlin were telling it? Do you thinking changing the point of view would make the story better or worse? Why?
• Based on instructions on how to act, Caitlin reminds herself to “Look At these things? Did he stand to gain anything for assisting her?”(p.5) How do readers know Caitlin isn’t dealing with the loss of Devon?
• Why or why not?
• In what ways 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?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

As a resident of Virginia, KATHRYN ERSkINE was devastated by the 2007 shootings at Virginia Tech. In the aftermath of this tragedy, she was driven to understand how community and family—particularly families with special-needs children—dealt with this violent event, and how our lives might be different if we understood each other better. In writing Mockingbird and telling the story of Caitlin, a young girl with Asperger’s syndrome, she walked into the fragile world herself, and like Caitlin, offers us something “good and strong and beautiful.”

Kathryn was a lawyer for fifteen years before turning to her first love, writing. Her debut novel, Quaking, was one of YALSA’s Top Ten Quick Picks for Reluctant Young Adult Readers. She lives in Virginia with her husband, two children, and her dog, Phoebe.

Visit her on her website at www.katherynskine.com

RESEARCH AND ACTIVITIES

• Author Kathryn Erskine created a playlist of the music she listened to as she wrote Mockingbird, which you can find below. Consider the story and create a CD with an original playlist for the novel. Create original art for the jewel case and on the interior, and after including appropriate artist information, offer an explanation for the selection of each song.

Kathryn Erskine’s Mockingbird Music Playlist

Elmer Bernstein, “Main Title From ‘To Kill a Mockingbird’”
Elmer Bernstein, “Footsteps in the Dark”
Cathy Bollinger, “Everyone Has Strengths to be Proud of”
Raffi Harris, “You Ride Your Way and I’ll Ride Mine”
Judy Collins, “Colors of the Wind”
Marti McCall, “Through Your Eyes”
John McCutcheon, “Kindergarten Wall”
The Mosaic Project, “Empathy Song”
Randy Newman, “You’ve Got a Friend in Me”
Kathy Griffin, “Rough Song”
Carly Simon & James Taylor, “Mockingbird”
Steve Miller Band, “Fly like an Eagle”

• Though many schools have anti-bullying programs which include conversations about acceptance of differences, little formal instruction is offered to “typical” students about their peers who fall on the Autism Spectrum. Working in small groups, draft a plan for a school wide program which helps define ASD’s (Autism Spectrum Disorders) and shares common behavior patterns and rationalizations for those behaviors. Be sure to include ways program ideas which allow “typical” students to serve as social models and buddies.

• Throughout the novel, Josh struggles greatly because he feels that others blame him for being related to one of the school shooters. Using Josh’s voice, write a journal entry in which you detail the playground event and the altercation with Caitlin. To prepare, create an outline using the five W’s (who, what, when, where, and why). Remember to write in first person and give special attention to sensory imagery (what you saw, smelled, heard, etc.).