

Douglas Armstrong on *Even Sunflowers Cast Shadows*
Interviewed by Meg Kissinger, *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*



© Barbara J. Miner

Q: *The thing I was most amazed about was that you were not a six-year-old girl, because the Emma in the book talks the way a six-year-old talks and her emotions are dead on.*

A: I'm glad to hear you say it. It was one of my great concerns, a middle age man trying to get in touch with his inner child and his feminine side in a rather public way. I had to be very still to find it. I suspect we all have the ability. We just don't try to develop it.

Q: *So you think we all have these feminine and masculine characteristics?*

A: Yes, I do. Or maybe it's just some people. I don't know. I do know I didn't always get Emma right the first time. But one of the great things about creating fiction, the writing and rewriting, is you get an infinite number of chances to get it right.

Q: *Sad and harrowing things happen in the book, as well as tender and sweet. Telling these things through the voice of a little girl gives a lightness to it. Was that done intentionally?*

A: Sure. It's instantly more entertaining. For kids, the world is full of sharp edges. Silly little things can seem like a big crisis, because they don't have the experience and perspective of an adult. Yet when something truly serious is going on, they are apt to underestimate its importance. There's something funny and engaging about that when viewed from a safe distance. Emma doesn't see the most obvious things coming.

Q: *Like when she ran away with her neighbor. She didn't mean for that to turn into the adventure it did.*

A: Right.

Q: *She thought she was never going to see her family again. And the way that's drawn out in the story, you don't know either. So, the reader is going along as a six-year-old.*

A: Right. And it's in her mind that they've made an awful mistake and there may be no way to fix it. So the reader wonders, how much trouble are these girls in?

Q: *You've said that some of this is based on the experiences of your mom as a girl growing up in Kansas. How much of it is true?*

A: The bones of it come from incidents in my mom's life. Her parents and grandparents are based on real people. Her adoration of her brother, that's true too. The neighbors, her friendships, a lot of them are composites. She knew a lot of people. I needed to simplify the cast list. It's changed enough though that when my mother read it, she said, this is not my story any more, this is yours. She's right, even though some of it is based verbatim on things that happened to her. There are times when I had to plug in my own experiences from childhood to flesh out the things she'd told me.

Q: *Her baby sister dies...*

A: That was fairly common in those days, unfortunately.

Q: *Yes. Was it a challenge not to flood that with information? It was more powerful for not being overwhelming with every twist and turn of the illness. My question is, how do you deal with that and keep the story moving and the tone appropriate from the point of view of the narrator?*

A: I followed my mom's lead on that. She never knew what all of her sister's symptoms were or what she died of, and I don't think their parents knew either. Medical science obviously wasn't as advanced. It was a different era. Think of all the crazy home remedies that Emma has to suffer through, including cigar smoke blown in her ear to soothe an earache. All she knew was there was this important thing going on with the baby, but life didn't stop all around her. She had school and friends and chores until it all ended suddenly.

Q: *There is the death of the grandfather as well. And Emma laughing on his deathbed when she didn't mean to. That could be offensive to some people, but it's not here. Tell me about that.*

A: I went back to my own experience. I can't tell you how many times I felt like laughing at inappropriate times in church and on odd somber occasions. A kid doesn't always get the ritual going on or doesn't always buy into the depth of the emotion of a moment. And they get nervous. The temptation is to laugh, and knowing it's wrong makes it all the more irresistible. You get that tickle going...

Q: *Yeah. And the brother eggs her on.*

A: That's right. There are consequences, of course, and they continue to ripple through the story.

Q: *There were great barnyard expressions in here too.*

A: That's my mom for you. She heard it all, and remembered it. And I just naturally express myself with some of the same funny phrases she used around us

growing up. I'm not always conscious of it. It sure made her dialog easy to write though.

Q: *I would think it would be the toughest part to do, the dialog.*

A: I tend to think of stories in terms of scenes and write them that way. I like chapters that play as scenes. It can feel episodic, but you glue it altogether with the underlying mysteries and the internal dynamics and narrative arc.

Q: *Your purpose in writing this, was it to get down the stories your mom had related to you?*

A: We used to tell my mom that she should write a book about her hometown. And she'd say, yeah, it would be a best seller. But she had no intention of doing it, of course, so I decided I would do it. I thought it would help me get in touch with who my mother really was and what her life had been like before I knew her, all the way back to B.I.P., before indoor plumbing. Part of the fun for me was exploring what life was like in that era.

The first person I showed the manuscript to was my daughter when she was 17. I think she was quite surprised to see her grandmother in this light. And I think that it took down the age barrier and opened up the possibility of better communication between them.

Q: *Speaking of grandmothers, Emma's is one every kid can relate to – a scary grandma that you hate but you can't let on that you do. That was pitch perfect.*

A: My mom still talks about her grandmother Thaney. Now she's horrified that she looks like her.

Q: *What did you come away with from this that you weren't expecting?*

A: What startled me – my mom and I exchanged a lot of email as she reflected on this time in her life – was the number of her memories that were somehow tied up with sex, even as a small girl.

Q: *Right. I suppose that's how generations roll on.*

A: If there's a theme in the book that you don't quite expect, it's that sex can be a big part of children's lives too. Not having it, but having it all around them. It's more than just "what's it like to kiss a boy?" They're curious about the procreative act, but it's taboo. You could get your mouth washed out with soap for saying something about it. I was curious to revisit that stage in everyone's development, before they've taken a bite of the apple.

Q: *To that end, although it's a story written about the 1920s, almost 90 years ago, some of the themes hold true today. You could have written this about a modern time, right here, right now.*

A: I think so. And on other levels besides budding sexuality. I tried to structure the story so there would be multiple lines of tension. There are evolving relationships between the children, the tension in the house over the grandparents living with them...

Q: *We tend to romanticize that era. Small towns too. But there are a lot of dark things going on here. The book keeps going to the edge and backing away with humor while keeping the tension going. Did you have to plot that out?*

A: I think that came from my mom's personality. That's her way. She's very intense with an eye for the dark side and a joke or a dodge to get around the suffering part. One of the things I most wanted to do was capture her personality. So I was very pleased when I showed the book to my sister, and she said, yes, this is mom. This is what she must have been like as a girl.

Q: *There are heartbreaking scenes here. And the reader's tolerance for that is limited. I think you did a great job of not going over the edge.*

A: Thank you. For the most part, I wanted the book to be funny. The thing that's most appealing to me in life is laughter. And when you can put heartbreak together with laughter, it's rare, and you've got true poignancy.

Q: *It's a deep story with adventure and mystery, danger and scandal.*

A: At its core it's about a girl trying to come to grips with who she is. And she doesn't know how to be who she wants to be. Her heart is in the right place, but her lively brain hasn't quite caught up.

Q: *Books like To Kill a Mockingbird and Angela's Ashes and other very successful stories take on big, serious stuff from a child's point of view. Did you look to stories like those for inspiration?*

A: To Kill a Mockingbird is probably my favorite book about childhood for the same reasons I think everybody loves it. And I think it's the book on everybody's mind when they pick up a new story about a girl growing up in a small town in the south in the last century. I felt like I needed to pay honor to that. So the opening page of my novel is a direct homage. The structure is the same.

Q: *If it worked for Harper Lee...*

A: [Laughs.] That's right. Hers is a remarkable book. Its shadow lurks over everything that follows. Angela's Ashes is darker than this, I think.

Q: *He had three dead siblings, Emma had one. Other crazy stuff happened to Emma, though. So you did look to others?*

A: All these things that you read in your life become part of the fabric of how you see life and how you tell about it. I can't *unremember* them. But once I was underway, I don't recall that they were ever part of any conscious decisions I made about my own writing. I was just out to capture my mother's childhood, sort of honor it in a way, and somehow still respect her privacy by changing some things. This is not her memoir. But I didn't cover up the naughty things she did either. I thought, sympathy be darned.

Q: *Emma is so funny. She's darling. She's very authentic. She's plucky. I wish I could hang out with her. Yet she had her sins. And you let the reader in on it all.*

A: I think I had it in mind also that girls need to be able to read about girls who have adventures, that it's okay to be assertive and to go out and do tomboy things and they'll be fine.

Q: *How long did it take you to write this?*

A: The first draft took about ten months. And then I let it sit for a year while I did other things. And then it took six months to revise. I was never sure I would be able to make all of the elements dovetail the first time through, you know, the main story elements. But somehow it just came together on its own.

Q: *Having been a reporter for years and a stickler for facts, was it a leap to go to fiction?*

A: This wasn't the first fiction I wrote. I had a number of short stories published in the '90s. It's true, you do have to break a heavily ingrained pattern that you're accustomed to writing in, but it's really a craft that you can learn. I enjoyed it. And I had already started to exercise some of those muscles by writing movie criticism for the paper all those years.

Q: *Did you start knowing where you wanted the story to end?*

A: Yes. It was the way the characters attached to that story and the subplots that developed as I wrote it. I knew what had to happen overall, but I didn't know where each of the sisters would end up in it. That's the fun part for the author, letting the story reveal itself through the characters as you go.

Q: *We haven't talked about the racial element here. My favorite scene in all of literature is in Huck Finn when he gets scolded for hanging out with Jim, and he's told it's a sin. And he says, well, all right then, I'll just go to hell. Emma befriends a girl and she didn't care what it meant for her.*

A: Well, she was conflicted. It was a tortured friendship, and there comes a time when she wanted to get out of it. She knew that Roberta was different. It's said that everyone is the same in God's eyes, Emma recalls. Which leaves her to wonder, how can God not see the difference if I can?

Q: *But she's not a sap. She doesn't go for the politically correct thing. That was a bold thing to bring up.*

A: Emma reduces it to the basics. It's troubling to her that this girl she walks to school with goes all quiet when the subject of Christmas comes up, because Santa Claus doesn't stop at the Negro houses – or so Emma has heard. And she doesn't like it when Roberta is subjected to hateful talk. Yet Emma's dedication to this girl wobbles badly.

Q: *It's very honest. It's why I love Emma. She has a great heart. Yet it's taking a risk. How did you come to this balance?*

A: For me, it was always let the chips fall where they may. And rather than having to invent a character out of whole cloth, and worry about those things, I had the advantage of spending a lifetime with the subject of my story and seeing that in the end it balanced out.