

• Meet the Author •

Shutta Crum

Interview conducted by Toni Buzzeo, career media specialist and author (visit www.tonibuzzeo.com).

Grades
K–2, 3–5



Photo courtesy of cynthialeitchsmith.blogspot.com

Shutta Crum is the author of numerous picture books and two novels. In 2002 she was awarded the Michigan Library Association's Award of Merit as youth librarian of the year. In 2005 she was invited to read at the White House. And in 2010 she spoke to many teachers and thousands of students while spending a month touring American military base schools in Japan. Of Shutta's latest book, *MINE!* (Albert A. Knopf), the *New York Times* says: "... a delightful example of the drama and emotion that a nearly wordless book can convey." For more, visit: www.shutta.com.

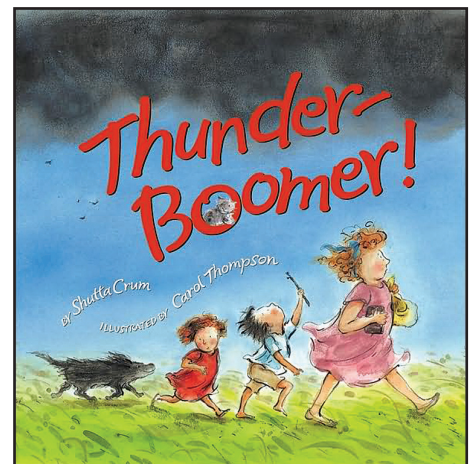
It's hard to imagine that the author of *Thunder-Boomer!* isn't a veteran of some pretty big thunderstorms. What can you tell us about your experiences with them?

SC: I've had three major experiences with storms that I remember vividly. The first was when I was very young, maybe eight or so. I remember my mother yelling for us kids to come home. (In those days moms often simply hollered down the street for kids, as we were often playing in someone's yard.) We came running. She was frantically taking clothes off a whipping clothesline while shouting for us to get in the basement. We had a basement entry that led directly up into the yard with a wooden door over it. I'm the oldest, and as I was shepherding my younger siblings down below I looked up to see the twisting clouds of a tornado above—all gray and black and cork-screwed around. It really frightened me.

The second happened not long after my husband and I were married. We went canoe camping in Michigan's Upper Peninsula and into northern Wisconsin. One night tornadoes came through Wisconsin. We were in a little tent in the

woods. There was no place to go. We'd canoed several days into the wilderness, so even our car was not available. The thunder was tremendous, and the lightning lit up the world outside our tent like a strobe light blinking on and off. Branches were crashing down. And the sound of whole trees falling was unmistakable. Later, we discovered a whole swath of downed trees. We were fortunate not to be in the tornado's path and not to have a tree come down on us. Needless to say, we got very little sleep that night!

Then, not too many years ago, my husband and I were driving across Kansas in a camping van. Tornadoes were in the area. We were overtaken by a storm with huge golf-ball-sized hail. We were in the van, and it was so loud that my husband and I couldn't hear each



Meet the Author

other, although we'd pulled under a tree and stopped the car! I had to put a pillow over my head to block out the din. Later we saw cars with broken windshields and kids running out to collect the giant hailstones. I will never forget the sound of that ferocious hail slamming into the metal of the car all around me.

Thunder-Boomer! has been critically acclaimed, and it's no wonder! Your use of onomatopoeia is extraordinary in this book. Can you talk about what led you to incorporate so many sound words in the text?

SC: I think it was that hailstorm that got to me. It planted a seed that took several years to grow into a story. And living on a farm, as we do, we've seen a number of storms that have taken down trees and ruined our garden.

When I started *Thunder-Boomer!* I imagined the text to be in the same shape as the storm. That is, it would start with long-worded lines—as though a storm was still a ways off. Then the story would tighten down to just the jumbled short sounds of it all. Ping! Pang! Whump! Bang! Zzzzzst! Brumm! Then I'd planned to have the story widen out again at the end as the storm moved off.

Pretty cool, huh? But my editor didn't like the short, terse lines as the story got shorter. She liked all the detail that I could put into a longer line. And so the structure changed to longer free verse. However,

we put a good deal of the sounds into the illustrations and kept the wild middle bit.

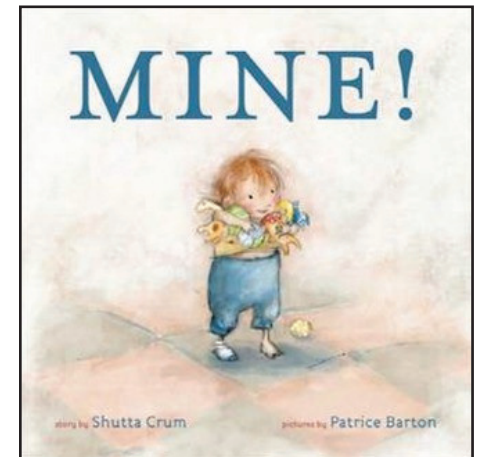
I'm proud of how it turned out. And as a librarian I am particularly proud of the fact that it was an American Library Association Notable Book as well as a Smithsonian Notable (which tells me that I got the science details right!).

The story is made all the livelier by the presence of Scooter, Maizey, and finally Thunder-Boomer. As you developed the story, at what point did each of the animals arrive? What more can you tell us about them?

SC: Good question! Scooter was always there. Every good farm needs a dog, and dogs are often afraid of storms. The problem was that I wanted some kind of surprise at the end. But what could that be?

Then I thought of my cats. We had a series of cats over the years—my favorite was a little black one that was the runt of his litter. He lived to be twenty and had passed away not long before I started writing *Thunder-Boomer!* I envisioned him as a little black storm cloud as I wrote. I knew most readers would be expecting a chick to be under Maizey's wing ... but the memory of my kitty's purr was so loud, I wanted him to be the surprise gift of the storm.

By the way, I LOVE how the illustrator did the front matter illustrations to indicate how the new kitten got to the farm. This allows me to point out to young readers that they can tell



a lot about a story if they study the opening pictures, prior to even reading the first word.

Recently, you've published a book for very tiny children titled *MINE!* which has received some lovely critical attention. And I hear that you are writing another. How is writing a book like *Thunder-Boomer!* different from writing a toddler book like *MINE!*?

SC: Hah! The process was very different. First off, it was my editor from Alfred A. Knopf, Michelle Frey, who challenged me to write a book for the very young. It wasn't an idea I'd been thinking about already. She'd just recently become a mother and said she'd noticed that books for babies were selling well. So I started reading books for the very young and thinking of things that little ones deal with. At the time, my youngest granddaughter was three and a new little brother had just appeared in her family. One day she crankily confided in me that she was not supposed to say "mine" all the time. Yay! I had an idea.

Now I needed to figure out how to write it. Earlier I talked about how I had visualized the structure of *Thunder-Boomer!* as a storm. Well ... I really couldn't do anything like that for *MINE!* I knew it would have only a few words. (It has only nine and a half repetitions of the same word, and a single "woof!") How does one submit such a short text to an editor and give her some idea of what is happening? I had to write *MINE!* like a play—that is, in beats that depicted how the plot would unfold. And that unfolding would happen through the illustrations.

I also had to be very careful. For as writers know, we never tell an illustrator how his/her illustrations should look. So what I did was describe the actions of the two kids as a sequence of who did what—and then intersperse the limited text. I specified very little as to the look of the kids, the dog, or the setting. I did not even specify the exact ages of the two children, sexes, or if they were related.

And, of course, the kids have to resolve the problem presented on their own. That's pretty hard to do with two babies, one of whom is still pretty preverbal! So it wasn't until after some struggling with the story that I realized I needed a dog to move the plot forward—unlike in *Thunder-Boomer!* which always had a dog. The dog allowed the story to evolve naturally without a mom intervening. It saved my story and resulted in a book that has gotten four starred reviews and many other acco-

lades. So recently Knopf bought another manuscript for toddlers from me with the title "Uh-Oh!" As you can imagine, there is mayhem coming!

What ideas are you working on right now? Any other stories that are bubbling on the back burner and not quite ready to make it to the page yet?

SC: Like you, I am always working on something. Some things pan out, some do not. And sometimes my heart breaks a little when a piece I love does not get picked up by a publisher. Did I do something wrong? Does it need, yet again, another polish? Is it the market? Or the subject and my perspective on it? Who knows? So I don't like to talk a lot about new projects. I will say, however, that one new story an editor is currently considering involves a mouse for whom collecting words is a passion. (Beep, beep! Metaphor happening!)

In what ways does your former career as a librarian inform your writing?

SC: Being a librarian has helped a great deal in my writing career. It means that all those thousands of books I've read, tens of thousands of reviews I've studied, and folks I've helped—young and old—all that information gained resides in the real estate of my brain. This is where it needs to be to inform my decisions when I write, and when I discuss with my agent where to

send something new. Like you, I have an internal database of knowledge I can draw upon to tell myself, *Nah! There's too many books already on that subject. Or, what can I bring to it that is new?* This keeps me from wasting time, and makes me look closer at my ideas as I develop them. Not only was being a librarian just about the best job in the world—it was one that nourished me personally. It continues to do so, today, as I write.

How can readers learn more about you?

SC: I have a huge website (something like fifty pages of info) for kids, teachers, writers, and librarians. It includes my blog and is at www.shutta.com. My contact info is there for folks to write to me. And please, teachers, do let me know when you perform *Thunder-Boomer!* Also, send pictures (with permissions) that I can post. I love to celebrate kids, books, and Reader's Theater!



Toni Buzzeo, MA, MLIS, is an author as well as a career library media specialist. She is the author of many picture books, most recently Inside the Books (Upstart, 2012) and Stay Close to Mama (Hyperion, 2012) and many professional books and articles. Visit www.tonibuzzeo.com or e-mail Toni at tonibuzzeo@tonibuzzeo.com.