

Gold Stay

BY QURAYSH ALI LANSANA | ART BY AARON WHISNER

A VISIT FROM THE ACCLAIMED AUTHOR OF *THE OUTSIDERS* AND *RUMBLE FISH* CHANGED A WRITER'S LIFE FOREVER AND SENT HIM ON A PATH TO DISCOVER HIS OWN CULTURAL AND ARTISTIC IDENTITY.

I WAS SITTING IN my seventh grade reading class at Enid's Longfellow Junior High School on a fall morning in 1975 when the principal made a school-wide announcement: "The following students—who are doing exceptional work in reading class—should report to the library immediately after this announcement for a surprise reward." He began reading the list of names. I heard my best friend's name: Russell Hutchison. Then, I heard mine.

Russ and I met on a basketball court at the Armory in third grade. He attended Garfield Elementary, which then was a white school next door to Longfellow. I attended Roosevelt at the time, but two years later, in 1974, it was closed due to desegregation. I was transferred to Garfield, and Russ and I recognized one another as soon as I stepped into Kay Everly's classroom. She was a joyous woman and a fine teacher who retained her fascination with learning, and she fed my passion for reading and writing. She even laughed when Russ and I created a chalk dust cloud at the back of the room. (Then she changed our seat assignments.)

In Russ, I found a fellow lover of words, music, sports, and laughter. We were so immersed in one another's lives and cultures that he attempted to make me like The Beach Boys—that trick never worked—and I convinced him to sport an Afro to junior prom. We came from working class

families and were more "Greaser" than "Soc." We were like brothers until his death in 2001.

So on this day in seventh grade, Russ and I left our reading classroom to wander the long hallways toward the library, curious about who or what lurked on the other side of those doors. Food? A party? Cheerleaders?

I HAVE WORKED AS a literary teaching artist for more than twenty-five years, largely in the Chicago Public Schools. I presented the first teacher professional development session for the city's flagship arts education organization, Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education, in the early 1990s. I have taught in almost every setting imaginable, from prisons to private schools to rural North Carolina districts where I doubled the melanin content for miles. In October 2017, I walked into Irma C. Ruiz Elementary in Chicago's vibrant Pilsen community, a predominately Mexican and Latinx neighborhood. I was there to lead students in the creative writing portion of a peacemaking and community residency that also included visual art. After climbing three flights of stairs, I opened the door to Cynthia Holzmann's seventh-grade classroom and felt instantly welcome. Holzmann is among the finest teachers and humans I've known, and her students were engaged and open.

The pulse of any group of people, particularly a classroom of young people, can be assessed via their energy and the contents of the room. I scan every classroom I enter. Holzmann had a long wall filled with books spilling from the shelves. I looked above the chalkboard to find photocopies of book covers and author photos. The very last photocopy, to the right and just above her desk, moved me deeply and led me to a long buried—but profoundly impactful—memory.



THE IDEA THAT a published author could live in our midst was more than my mind could handle. I was enamored and drunk on every word. Hinton's presence changed my life.

WHEN RUSS AND I entered the library, several students were already seated at tables and on the red carpet floor. No food. No cheerleaders. But seated at the desk was a small white woman with curly, strawberry-blond hair and an uncertain smile.

"Good morning, everyone," she said. "My name is S.E. Hinton."

Russ and I lost our minds. We'd just finished reading *Rumble Fish* and *That Was Then, This Is Now*. Russ had read *The Outsiders*, but I had yet to get to that one. But here the author was in our library to read and talk to us. I knew the books were about Tulsa, a mythical place an hour and a half away. But neither Russ nor I had been there, and the idea that a published author could live in our midst was more than my mind could handle. I was enamored and drunk on every word. Hinton's presence changed my life.

The next year, Russ and I collaborated on a writing assignment for Oklahoma history class. We were to draft a piece of travel writing involving multiple towns, highways, and landmarks. It was the mid-'70s, and we cruised interstates at top speeds in a black and gold Trans-Am. Richard Grey, our teacher, enjoyed our story so much he made us read it aloud. My sister Dede showed it to her high school creative writing teacher, who said she'd give it an A. The year after Hinton's visit, my Oklahomey and I were acknowledged for our wordsmithing by our English teacher. Hinton's visit, and her books, enriched our storytelling and our lives. Her words validated our lower working class struggles—and our dreams.

DALE PECK, IN a September 2007 article for the *New York Times* titled "*The Outsiders*: 40 Years Later," writes,

"In his introduction to Slow Learner, Thomas Pynchon remarks that the appropriate 'attitude toward death' that characterizes serious fiction is usually absent in young-adult literature; but one feels The Outsiders would pass Pynchon's test. Dally is fearless, which Pony recognizes as heroic but also foolish. That Dally's death scene is a mesh of two of the most enduring moments in American cinema is beside the point. The question is not where the material comes from (West Side Story

is based on Romeo and Juliet, after all, and James Dean's antihero is a latter-day Bartleby or Raskolnikov) but what the writer does with it. The test comes when Ponyboy sums up the conflict between Socs and Greasers as 'too vast a problem to be just a personal thing.' Salinger couldn't get away with that line, and neither could Pynchon, because their books are too idiosyncratic, too distinct. But Hinton, earnest teenager that she was, wrote to reveal the universality of her Greasers, just as Wright and Ellison did for African Americans, or Paley and Roth did for Jews."

Peck's analysis is insightful, and upon re-reading *The Outsiders* as an adult, I wholeheartedly agree. However, the last sentence in his article resonates beyond the comparisons.

Tulsa, both in 1967 and 2018, is a racially and economically divided city. So it is certainly conceivable that the worlds of Hinton's Greasers and Socs didn't include people of color other than Johnny. It's just difficult to swallow. *The Outsiders* contains three references to non-white people. None of them are positive, and not one includes Black folks.

But as I was working on this essay, a friend's daughter spotted the book and told me she had to read it for class. A Black teenage girl on the south side of Chicago tells me she liked *The Outsiders*, especially Ponyboy and Johnny. This speaks to the power of art, the universality Peck mentions, and Hinton's ability to create and sustain a tangible world for young adult readers.

Born in 1964, I am a direct descendent of the Black Arts Movement, both from my five older siblings as well as my mentors, Gwendolyn Brooks and Haki R. Madhubuti. The mantra of BAM was the creation of art for, by, and about Black people with attention to the everyday realities of Black life. But do white folks read Wright's *Native Son* and Ellison's *Invisible Man*, both books preceding and arguably feeding BAM, with the same openness to universality as the Chicago teen welcomed *The Outsiders*?

As for me, I owe S. E. Hinton—not to mention many teachers and mentors—twenty books and counting worth of gratitude. She immersed me in her teenage reality and helped me to explore and chronicle my own. Great teachers—like great art—are gold. ■

GET THERE

 **THE OUTSIDERS HOUSE MUSEUM**
731 North St. Louis Avenue in Tulsa.
[facebook.com/theoutsidershouse](https://www.facebook.com/theoutsidershouse).