

About Louis Sachar



"I want kids to think that reading can be just as much fun and more so than TV or video games or whatever else they do."

—Louis Sachar

Holes tells the story of how a single event—a pair of sneakers falling out of the sky—changes the course of a person's life. Author Louis Sachar knows a thing or two about that: In college he signed up for a job as a teacher's aide at an elementary school because he thought it sounded easy. As it turned out, the time Sachar spent working with the kids at Hillside Elementary School in California inspired him to try writing children's books. Now he's an award-winning author!

Louis Sachar (pronounced *Sacker*) was born in East Meadow, New York, on March 20, 1954. Sachar's mother stayed at home to care for Louis and his older brother, Andy. Their father commuted to New York City to work on the seventy-eighth floor of the Empire State Building. Sachar's father sold Italian shoes, which may help explain the strange significance of footwear in the plot of *Holes*.

As a kid, Sachar remembers trying to fit in. He played in the Little League, ran track when he was in middle school, and was a good student. He liked reading books, especially those by E. B. White, who wrote *Charlotte's Web* and *Stuart Little*. Sachar also recalls having to stay clear of the woods across the street from his house where the older, tougher kids liked to play. When he was nine, his family moved west, to a town called Tustin in southern California.

“Writing was always my first love,” Sachar insists, but he worked at a variety of other jobs before becoming an author. He even had a short but surprisingly successful career as a Fuller Brush Man, selling scrub brushes and other household items door-to-door.

Sachar went to college at the University of California at Berkeley, where he majored in economics. He graduated in 1976. After college, Sachar worked in a sweater warehouse in Norwalk, Connecticut, and wrote at night. He continued writing even after he enrolled in school to become a lawyer. In fact, it was during his first week in law school that Sachar got the news that his first book, *Sideways Stories from Wayside School* (1978), had been accepted for publication. After graduating from law school, Sachar worked part-time as a lawyer for eight years while he continued writing children's books. He finally quit practicing law in 1989 to become a full-time writer.

To date, Sachar has published twenty-one books for children. He clearly has a gift for creating memorable characters that readers want to hear more about. Sachar's first book, *Sideways Stories from Wayside School*, evolved into a series of zany tales about a

school accidentally built sideways, that is, thirty stories tall with one class on each floor. Sachar has also written a series of books featuring a character named Marvin Redpost, a boy who believes he is actually a prince who was kidnapped at birth. *Holes*, a more complex and ambitious book than Sachar's earlier works, was published in 1998.

Sachar's editor Frances Foster has compared his success to that of Roald Dahl, the author of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and *James and the Giant Peach*. "Louis was discovered by the children who loved his books, like the Wayside stories. There are books which adults discover and push onto kids—this was completely the other way around." It's easy to see why the absurd humor of a book like *Sideways Stories from Wayside School* would appeal to young readers: In one chapter, a smelly new student turns out to be a dead rat dressed in layers of overcoats!

Sachar's books have won many awards. *Holes* earned a dozen honors and became the first book ever to win both the Newbery Medal and the National Book Award for Young People's Literature in the same year. The Newbery, the most prestigious prize in American literature for children, is awarded annually by the children's librarians of the American Library Association. Another great honor, the National Book Award, is presented to one book each year selected by the National Book Foundation as an outstanding contribution to children's literature. Sachar receives a lot of fan letters from readers who have enjoyed his books, and he visits schools and bookstores all over the country where he reads and talks about his work.

Sachar currently lives in Austin, Texas. He met his wife, Carla, while visiting an elementary school where she worked as a counselor. Their daughter, Sherre, was born in 1987. Sachar enjoys playing chess, tennis, and tournament bridge. He also likes to ski and play guitar. He has two dogs named Tippy and Lucky. They are the only company allowed in his office while he is writing.

How *Holes* Came About



"It took me a year and a half to write Holes, and nobody knew anything about it, not even my wife or my daughter."

—Louis Sachar

If Louis Sachar had never moved to Texas—if he had stayed on the East Coast where he was born or in California where he went to school—there's a good chance *Holes* might never have been written. In his acceptance speech for the *Boston Globe-Horn Book Award*, one of the many prizes he has won for the book, Sachar told the audience, "*Holes* was inspired by my dislike of the hot Texas summer." Luckily, Sachar was in the right place at the right time to dream up this award-winning tale. In contrast, the unlikely hero of the darkly humorous story seems to always be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Then again, if Stanley hadn't walked under that freeway overpass at just the right moment . . . well, who knows what might have happened to him? "When the shoes first fell from the sky, [Stanley] remembered thinking that destiny had struck him."

Sachar spent eighteen months writing *Holes*, which, coincidentally, is the length of Stanley's sentence at Camp Green Lake. Sometimes the work of bringing this wonderful story to

light seemed like hard labor to its creator: “As I was writing the novel, I identified with my main character, Stanley Yelnats, who had to dig a hole each day, five feet deep and five feet wide, under the blazing Texas sun. Most days I, too, felt like I was struggling for no apparent reason.” As is his practice, Sachar kept all of the details about the book to himself until he finished it. “By not permitting myself to talk about *Holes*, I was forced to write it. The story was growing inside me for a year and a half, and I had no other way to let it out.”

Every writer has his or her influences, and two books in particular provided inspiration for this one: Kurt Vonnegut’s *Hocus Pocus* and William Goldman’s *The Princess Bride*. As Sachar told the *Austin Chronicle*, “I like the way the opening chapters [of *Hocus Pocus*] were sort of short and jumpy, and how they led into the story. . . . And *The Princess Bride* had these colorful characters and this bizarre setting, and that’s sort of like *Holes*.”

Holes was first published in 1998, when Sachar’s daughter, Sherre, was in fourth grade. She told her father she thought the Warden, the mysterious red-haired woman in charge of Camp Green Lake, was scary. Sachar was surprised when other readers agreed. He’d imagined the Warden, with her venomous fingernails, as a cartoonish and exaggerated villain, like the characters in comic books. Sachar says he based the figure of the Warden on a woman he knows. “But she’s not nasty like the Warden, not at all. She’s very nice.” All the other characters and events in *Holes* come from Sachar’s imagination, including the

yellow-spotted lizards that play such an important role in the story.

During his career as an author, Sachar has invented many memorable characters, which have reappeared in later books in the Wayside School and Marvin Redpost series. The plot structure of *Holes* makes the possibility of a sequel unlikely, however. The lifting of the Yelnats family curse and the closure of Camp Green Lake suggest we will not be hearing any more about Stanley Yelnats. As the narrator of *Holes* says at the novel's conclusion, "You will have to fill in the holes yourself."

An Interview with Louis Sachar



In Holes, the character of X-Ray says that every kid in the world wants to dig a big hole. Was this true of you? Did you ever do it?

No, but the idea of it sounded like fun.

About being a writer

What experience—or maybe it was a person or a teacher—first encouraged you to imagine yourself as a writer?

I think it was in high school that I [learned to like] to write. Probably because my brother did. I don't think any teacher in particular directed me that way. If I was influenced by anyone, I guess it was by J. D. Salinger and Kurt Vonnegut, the authors I was reading at that time.

Were little stories and stuff like that the first things you remember enjoying writing?

Yeah, I took a creative writing class when I was a senior in high school.

Do you think that was worthwhile? There's always that question of whether you can teach writing.

Oh, I think it was very worthwhile, not so much because of anything the teacher taught us but because we had to write a story every week or every two weeks and because every time you write you learn from your writing.

How do you prepare to write a book? Do you keep notes or a journal, or do any particular kind of research?

No. I sit at my desk and think, Oh, what am I going to do? [Sachar laughs.] It's a real slow process, and I might go week after week and not be able to come up with anything that interests me enough to sit down and write about. So . . . there are a lot of days where I feel like I just can't think of anything. And at some point I get an idea and I start to explore it and write a little bit about it and it grows, and new ideas spring from that, and that's how the story gets started.

Many of your books have evolved into sequels. What are some of the pleasures of writing about the same characters in many different situations, and what are some of the difficulties of that?

To me the most fun part of writing is creating the new characters. Sequels are less enjoyable to write, but in a lot of ways they're easier because you already know the characters.

Are you encouraged, in part, to write sequels by the response of your readers who want to hear more about those characters?

That was definitely the case with [the] Wayside School [series]. *Marvin Redpost* was always written with the idea that there would be several of them. And then one of my very early books was *Someday, Angeline*, and with that one I really liked all the characters a lot but when I looked back on it years later I didn't really think the story was all that engaging. And so I thought I would try to give those characters another chance. So . . . the same characters are in the book *Dogs Don't Tell Jokes*.

What's the nicest compliment you've ever received as a writer? Besides, of course, winning the Newbery and all those other awards!

Well, I hear all the time from kids or from parents who tell me their kids never liked to read and then all of a sudden they read one of my books and they can't stop. I've heard that a lot and that always feels really good.

Do you read reviews of your work?

I read them. I mean, I'm always curious what people think and also what reviewers think because other people are going to read that. Reviews don't necessarily influence anything I write. But often I've been very impressed by the reviewer because, especially if it's a good review, it can also analyze what I did and I would think, Yeah, that's right, that is what I did! I don't analyze what I

do when I write. I always did poorly in English classes because I could always sort of internalize a book but I could never say what it was that really moved me about the book. It's the same way with my own writing.

Did winning the Newbery and other awards for Holes make it difficult to write the next book? Was the next one Marvin Redpost for Class President?

It was, but that was written before all the success of *Holes*. It took a year and a half after I wrote *Holes* before it was published, and during that time I was working on [the] Marvin Redpost [series]. Of course, those were much simpler books. They weren't trying to be as big and as grand as *Holes*.

So you do see Holes as an ambitious book? Did you feel that way when you were launching yourself into it?

Yes. I mean, all the other books I'd written had been about kids in school with a familiar background. But this was completely different; the story was all this past history and wide-open adventure. It was a lot different from anything else I'd written. And when I finished writing it and people would ask me, "Is this going to make it hard to write your next book?" I always felt that no, it added to my confidence. But it's been awhile, and I still haven't written that next book! [Sachar laughs.] So I think I do feel the pressure to try to equal *Holes*, to come up with something again that will be big and grand. . . . You know, *Holes* is read by both adults and children, so . . . I feel like, well, do I want to write for children next or do I want to write for adults?

I imagine Texas probably wants to claim you, but do you see yourself as a part of any regional literary community?

No. I don't feel like a part of any literary community. I don't meet with other writers. It's just me alone in my room, and then going and speaking at different places around the country.

Do you enjoy the solitary nature of being a writer? Or is that one of the things that's hard about it?

Both. I mean, I generally enjoy it and I think I'd have a hard time not having that, but at the same time it does make it difficult to always have to be self-motivated. But for the last year or two I've been working on the movie of *Holes*, and that's meant cooperating with many other people.

Making *Holes* into a movie

*What were some of the challenges of adapting *Holes* for a screenplay?*

The hardest part for me was just being able to see it as a movie . . . to get the rhythm of the movie in your mind instead of the rhythm of the book. And a lot of people, when I mention that [*Holes* was made into] a movie, say to me, "Oh, that's perfect! You know, I visualize it so well when I'm reading the book." But it's different, because a lot of that visualizing they're doing is in their mind. I might have just given a few little clues—saying it's hot, he's thirsty—and then they draw from that this whole picture.

But for the screenplay you have to describe every picture, and you have to do it in a very succinct [brief] way. It's not left to the imagination. You have to tell the director and the actors and the camera what they're looking at, what they're actually seeing. So that was more difficult.

About *Holes*

At what point in writing Holes did you decide that your protagonist would have a palindrome for a name?

When I first came up with the name, it was just something to put down on paper. I didn't feel like thinking of his name, so I just wrote *Stanley* and then wrote it backwards. I always figured I would change it. [But] at some point into the story. . . I thought that I wasn't going to change it. I liked the fact that it gave a kind of quirky humor to the beginning of the book. So that even though you knew Stanley was sent to this awful place for a crime he didn't commit, you know right away that it's not going to be just this grim story. And then the other reason I kept the name is because it was an easy way of telling the reader that he had the same name as his father and his grandfather and his great-grandfather, without making it stand out, without [making the reader think], Well, why are you telling me this? Because it's important at the end, you know, that his great-grandfather was also named Stanley. If you just said, Oh, by the way, he has the same name as his great-grandfather, well, who cares? But if you make kind of a joke out of it—that all these people are named because of this palindrome—then you don't realize you're being told this vital piece of information.

I'm curious about your use of the second-person pronoun in the book (for example, "You are now entering Camp Green Lake. . ."). Did you decide to write directly to the reader from the beginning, or did that develop as you were writing?

That emerged as I was working on it. Especially the stuff where I'd say, "You make the decision: Whom did God punish?" I kind of surprised myself that I was taking this tone . . . [and using] things like "God's thumb" and "You make the decision"—I mean, it's sort of this very high-handed tone of the writer. And I surprised myself that I took on that tone.

There are a lot of passages in Holes that are very sad to read. I'm thinking about when Zero is talking about his childhood. Were those parts difficult to write?

I don't remember. It's all difficult. . . . Whenever I write I try to keep it interesting and entertaining. I don't like reading things that are overly sentimental, so I would never want to write something like that.

You obviously have a knack for creating characters that your readers want to hear more about, and many of your other books are part of a series. Are you planning a sequel to Holes?

[No, but] I've toyed with the idea of writing a story about Armpit or X-Ray.

Finally, I just have to ask this: Do you suffer from foot odor?

No.