



The Family I'm In

By Sharon G. Flake

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The Story

Sharon G. Flake's groundbreaking novel *The Skin I'm In* ushered in a new voice that lit up the literary landscape and became a modern classic, passed down through generations. *The Life I'm In*, its sequel, furthered the power of unmistakable voices, opening the hearts and minds of teens everywhere. Now *The Family I'm In* presents John-John and Caleb, friends since childhood who have come face-to-face with the struggles and triumphs of growing into young men. They're living in a world where many Black boys are up against generational expectations, fears of the future, and how to navigate being "nice" kids who just want to be seen for who they are. Together, Caleb and John-John work through family illness, divorced parents, teachers who ask hard questions, and girls who think they have all the answers.

About the Author



Photo © Hannah Price.

Sharon G. Flake's novels have brought a bold dimension to literature for young people, selling more than a million copies worldwide, and reaching readers across the globe through numerous translations and theatrical productions. Ms. Flake's impressive body of work includes dozens of novels, chapter books, and illustrated works. She is the recipient of multiple Coretta Scott King Author Honor Awards and is a Kirkus Award nominee. Ms. Flake has received numerous NAACP Image Award nominations, among other citations, and has been praised as one of the single most influential authors of teen works whose novels have inspired a pantheon of writers. To learn more, please visit: sharongflake.com.

Reading Group Questions

1. *The Family I'm In* has two main protagonists—John-John and Caleb. Do they want and need the same things? Do their goals change over the course of the story? What is getting in their way?
2. What are some of the family dynamics you noticed throughout the story and how do they relate to the themes of the book?
3. What surprised you most about the book? Why? Were there significant plot twists and turns? If so, what were they?
4. How did each character change by the end of the book? And what do you think will happen next to the main characters?



Author Q&A

What made you want to write this story?

It's been twenty-five years since I wrote *The Skin I'm In*, and it feels as if it came out last week. Fans of the book continue to reach out to me by email, on the streets, and through social media. Last year, someone posted the book jacket on social media, and within thirty hours it had about 670,000 views! Recently, at my local library, a librarian heard me say my name. She told me her daughter was reading *The Skin I'm In*, so I asked to speak with her. We had a short but powerful conversation. People love the book. They can't forget it, and they always remember the way the characters made them feel and helped them believe in themselves. It's one reason I wrote the follow-up novel, *The Life I'm In*, and now, this third book, *The Family I'm In*. This go 'round, it's the young men from the first two books who are sharing their stories. John-John and Caleb open up about love, relationships with their fathers, and what it means to be a boy in a world where the old rules seem to no longer apply. Over the years, my readers have often inquired about these two young men. *The Family I'm In* will answer all of their questions.

How do you see this book as different from the last book you wrote?

The Life I'm In is the second book in what has been called the "I'm In" series. Lots of readers said they held their breath as they witnessed Char, the protagonist, run away from home and fight to survive. *The Life I'm In* is a book about repairing broken ties with family and friends, human trafficking, healing, forgiveness, and second chances.

The Family I'm In moves at a far different pace, but is a page-turner nonetheless. Readers will find themselves laughing quite a bit and reminiscing about their own high school days where love seemed ever elusive. In this novel, boys open up and share their deep, inner thoughts about everything from falling for that one special girl, to being a Black boy in America, to their struggles with family, love and admiration for their fathers, and their strong community ties. Readers will not want to put this book down.

Were there any particular challenges you were excited about this time?

I was excited to explore both Caleb and John-John more fully. In *The Skin I'm In*, John-John is the class clown and a tease. Readers always thought there was more to him, and now they get to see his depth. Caleb was perfect back then. A reminder to the world that such Black boys exist. It was tough to write about him this time. His goodness seemed to be a box, a cage restraining his full humanity, rather than showcasing it. Once I cracked both boys open, I got to see the blood running through their veins, see them trip, fall, get up, and run their own race. What excited me was witnessing the arc of their characters, their willingness to open up and break out of any preconceived notions my readers had about them. In fact, John-John and Caleb are as warm and complex as any real, human boy. That makes me proud.

What was the hardest part of the book to write? What was the most fun part?

The hardest part was deciding which boy would tell the story. Readers have inquired about John-John more often. Plus, given his humor, cockiness, and his relationship with Maleeka, I figured it only made sense to go with him. The most fun part was writing about young love and anything that would give readers the giggles. I also enjoyed exploring the relationships between boys and their fathers. That was fun in a different sort of way, profound on so many levels. John-John, it turns out, is one heck of a storyteller.

What would you love for a reader to understand more after reading this book?

I'd love for them to understand that young men, like young girls, feel a lot and think deeply about things. Given the chance, many of them will open up, if we are willing to hear what's on their minds without judgment and criticism. My novels have always given young readers space to do just that. I believe this time will be no different.