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# The Skin I'm In by Sharon G. Flake

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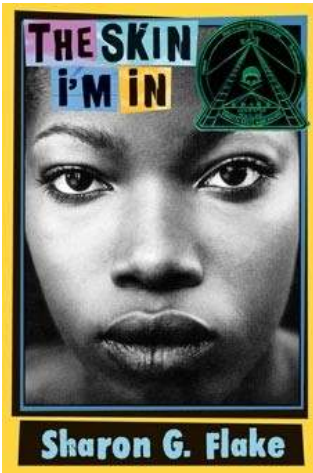
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## Summary

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Thirteen-year old Maleeka Madison is tall, skinny, and dark-skinned. That's a problem for her, because it's such a problem for everyone else at school, it seems. To make her life easier, Maleeka befriends the toughest girl in school. Only bullies force you to pay more than you'd like, so life for Maleeka just gets harder, until she learns to stand up for herself and love the skin she's in.



## About the Author

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I'm still pinching myself, thankful as I can be that I've been blessed to be a young adult author. Life is so full of twists and turns that you never know where a road might lead you. Just think about it. I went to college to become a pediatrician, but ended up majoring in writing instead. Good thing because I absolutely did not have what it took to be an MD. That's cool with me, because being a young adult author is the best, most marvelous, most incredible thing to ever happen to me in life, besides giving birth to my daughter, Brittney.



I have written many books and received numerous awards and recognitions. However, there's one thing you should know—authors are more than the books they write and the recognitions they receive. We're people too. For instance, I'm a mom as well as a daughter. I was raised in Philadelphia and have two older sisters, two older brothers and a younger brother, who by the way used to have tea parties with me when we were young. I was shy growing up, but I'm over most of that now. I'm still a little bit quirky though, so if you're ever in Pittsburgh and see me walking in my neighborhood trying to catch raindrops on my tongue, or laying in the snow chilling out, don't worry. I'm just being me.

Okay. What else? I like music—rap, elevator light, country (oh yeah I said country), and gospel. I believe in giving back and helping out so I'm always up to something good I hope—which doesn't make me perfect, but does make me like myself a little better. I am an inner city girl and I still live in the inner city, but there's something about seeing cows and chickens, barns and corn growing that I like a lot too. When I was young I wanted to own a pig and an elephant. I was deprived—I never got either. But I did get a lot of love, laughter and great story telling from my parents and older relatives.

I am a graduate of the University of Pittsburgh, with a degree in English. I once was a house parent for youth placed temporarily in shelters. I also

worked with young people in a foster care program for about eight years, and then I skipped off to work for the University of Pittsburgh where they really believed me when I said I could write press releases and do public relations. I spent eighteen years at Pitt—some of the best years of my life by the way. While there, I wrote The Skin I'm In, but not on their time—I don't think. Several years ago I left the University in order to become a full-time author. Now I work from home in my PJs or two-day old clothing.

Well, I'm sure that's more than you want to know. But it's me—some parts of me anyhow. If you need to know more, there are tons written about me on the internet. Otherwise you may always e-mail me, but know this; I won't do anyone's homework. But I will e-mail you back and be as helpful as I can.

Hope. Dream. Believe. I do!

<http://www.sharongflake.com/bio/>

*To contact Ms. Flake, go to: <http://www.sharongflake.com/2sayhello/>*



## Book Review

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A timid seventh grader finds the mettle to shake some bad companions in this patchy esteem-builder from Flake. Tired of being harassed in the halls for her dark skin and homemade clothes, Maleeka latches on to tough, mouthy classmate Charlese for protection, although the cost is high; doing Charlese's homework and enduring her open contempt. Enter Miss Saunders, a large, expensively dressed advertising executive on sabbatical for a year to teach in an inner-city school; Maleeka puts up a hostile front, but slowly, angrily, responds to the woman's "interference," creating a journal that is part diary, part a fictional slave's narrative that later wins a writing contest. As Maleeka inches toward independence, Charlese counterattacks, bullying her into incriminating acts that climax with a fire in Miss Saunders's classroom. The violence is contrived, the characters sketchy and predictable, but the relationship that develops between Maleeka and Miss Saunders isn't all one-way. A serviceable debut featuring a main character that grows in clearly composed stages. (Kirkus Reviews)



## Discussion Questions

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Warning! Some of the questions contain key elements of the plot. Do not read if you don't want to know what happens!

- ◆ Why does Maleeka consider herself a "freak" and a "loser"? In what way does she identify with Miss Saunders?
- ◆ Maleeka describes herself as "the kind of person folks can't help but tease." Do you think her negative attitude toward herself influences the way others treat her?
- ◆ In what ways do we all internalize judgments about our appearance? How do these feelings affect our self-esteem and identity?
- ◆ Why do you think Maleeka is ridiculed for being dark-skinned in a school that is predominantly African American? Where do you think such attitudes about skin tone come from?
- ◆ Why does Maleeka feel that Malcolm is lucky he looks more like his white father than black mother? Do lighter skinned black people enjoy certain advantages within their own communities and/or the larger society?
- ◆ Do you think Maleeka was right for telling the truth about Char's and the twins' involvement in the vandalism incident?
- ◆ When should you report an incident or seek help from an adult? When should you keep a confidence or secret?
- ◆ Are there consequences among your peers for "squealing" or "tattling"? What does it take to speak up anyway when you know it is the right thing to do?
- ◆ What tactics does Char use to coerce her peers into "going along"?
- ◆ Why does Maleeka decide to vandalize Miss Saunders' classroom, and act against her conscience and better judgment? What alternatives does Maleeka have in this situation?
- ◆ In your experience, do peer pressure and intimidation play a role in the way that students behave and treat one another? What would it take for you to rise above such pressure and do what you know is right?

- ◆ How does Maleeka expect that her new clothing and hair style will change things for her? Do others treat her any differently as a result of these changes?
- ◆ Can external features such as clothes, hair, make-up, etc. actually improve one's self-confidence? Do these things ultimately affect the way that others view us?
- ◆ Do you think that Maleeka's plan to trade homework for protection is a good one?
- ◆ Does the torment that Maleeka experiences justify her decision to cheat?
- ◆ Is there anyone else that Maleeka could have turned to for help?
- ◆ What does Maleeka sacrifice emotionally in order to gain Char's assistance?

Source:

[http://www.adl.org/education/curriculum\\_connections/winter\\_2005/The\\_skin.asp?cc\\_section=The\\_skin](http://www.adl.org/education/curriculum_connections/winter_2005/The_skin.asp?cc_section=The_skin)



## Author Interview

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**NYPL:** Perhaps you've read about Maleeka Madison or Raspberry Hill? Maleeka is so desperate to be accepted at school that she will do anything to be part of the "in" crowd. Raspberry is starved for money so she and her mom won't ever have to live on the streets again. Both Maleeka and Raspberry are heroines in books by author, Sharon Flake.

**Student:** What inspired you to write The Skin I'm In?

**Sharon Flake:** I have a beautiful dark-skinned daughter, and when she was little I started telling her stories about incredible dark-skinned girls who did wonderful things. And, as a black woman I know that if you're dark in our communities, people don't always say nice things about you, so I wanted to deal with that issue. So no, it's not about my daughter, who was 7 when I wrote this book. That's why I wrote it, just to help people learn to like themselves, no matter what other people say.

**Student:** Does The Skin I'm In reflect your own experiences as a teenager?

**Sharon Flake:** Yes, and no. Yes in the sense that when I was in middle school I felt very small and insecure and, like Maleeka, I didn't think I was pretty or smart enough. I would stay in my house a lot, and read books and watch TV rather than going out. Even though I got fairly good grades, that's just the age when you get messages from the people around you - especially others the same age - that you don't have it going on; that there's some problem with you. So in that respect me and Maleeka are alike. That has stayed with me for a lot of my life. I still have insecurities. There's a chapter in the book where Maleeka and Charlese destroyed a classroom. That also happened in a class when I was in school, although they didn't do as much as damage as Maleeka and Charlese did, but I still got called down to the office. But that's as close as it came to what Maleeka went through. In my life I think I sometimes feel too much, and so I can relate to what my characters are going through.

**Student:** Why do you think Maleeka was friends with Charlese? Couldn't she see she was being used?

**Sharon Flake:** Yes. Maleeka knew she was being used, but she thought it was the best she could do to get what she wanted, which was to be like everybody else. To dress the way they dressed. To be popular like everybody else or at least hang out with the popular kids. Sometimes even grown-ups do the wrong things for what they think at the time are the right reasons. But usually that just ends up making a big mess out of everything, which Maleeka found out.

**Student:** Is it your experience that teens can rise above their surroundings?

**Sharon Flake:** Yup, absolutely! Sometimes life is hard, and that could mean that you're poor, and you live in an area that's not nice, or it could mean that you're rich and you live in the suburbs, but your parents don't pay you any attention. But no matter what, there are usually people around you - a teacher, a rabbi, a preacher, a friend - who will help guide you and give you some good advice if you're willing to listen and work hard. Sometimes young people just need to know they're here on the planet for a purpose. It might not be to be an author, or a doctor, but to be a really loving mother, or a man on the street who decides he really wants to lead the Boy Scout troop. Young people have to know, even when times are hard, that they're here to do some important business.

**Student:** Who was your childhood hero or idol?

**Sharon Flake:** To tell the truth, it could just be my bad memory, but I don't remember having one! I really didn't particularly to my knowledge. My mom and my dad. My father is so very smart, and I still call him up to ask him about things. If it's the Middle East he'll tell me the history of the region, and how everyone ended up fighting. And my mom, who scrubbed floors for a living when we were growing up. As a writer, Langston Hughes who writes about black people, giving them a lot of dignity and wisdom, and I think that's what I do with my characters. I don't think you always have to look outside your own family or your church or your neighborhood for your heroes.

**Student:** How does an upcoming storybook writer get started, or what steps must I take first?

**Sharon Flake:** When I was in college I had a professor who said "Writers write." And I always thought that was the dumbest thing I ever heard. But since I got published I know what he means. I have a lot of people who tell me they want to be an author, but they don't write. Or they finished a manuscript 3 years ago, and it's in a drawer. And I thought "Oh, writers don't TALK about writing. They write." So my advice is to write. Write short stories, and if you don't finish one, that's okay, start another one. Take a

photo from a magazine, and write about what's happening to that person in the photo. Just make it up! A lot of young people talk about being published, and I just say this is America; everyone can be published once. But if you want to be published more than once, and have a career in writing, you need to learn to do it well. Go to the library and get books about writing. How to tell build a plot. How to write dialogue.

**Student:** Do you think that your books have universal appeal, or can they only really be understood by African Americans?

**Sharon Flake:** I think the surprise to me as an author was how universal people see them. I received an email a couple of months ago from a college student in Japan who had picked up The Skin I'm In in London, and loved it. I get black boys who loved both books, which surprises me because most of my characters are girls. I hear from white girls and women, Asian college students. Somebody's picked on all of us, apparently.

Source:

[http://www.adl.org/education/curriculum\\_connections/winter\\_2005/Chat\\_Sharon\\_G\\_Flake.asp](http://www.adl.org/education/curriculum_connections/winter_2005/Chat_Sharon_G_Flake.asp)



## Further Reading

If you liked **THE SKIN I'M IN** by Sharon G. Flake, you might like to read the following books, too!

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**AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MY DEAD BROTHER** by Walter Dean Myers

**BUDDHA BOY** by Kathe Koja

**CRUSHED** by Laura McNeal

**ENDGAME** by Nancy Garden

**ESCAPING THE GIANT WAVE** by Peg Kehret

**FADE TO BLACK** by Alex Flinn

**FIRE GIRL** by Tony Abbott

**FORGED BY FIRE** by Sharon M. Draper

**FREAK** by Marcella Fleischman Pixley

**HERE TODAY** by Ann M. Martin

**HIT SQUAD** by James Heneghan

**HOME OF THE BRAVES** by David Klass

**INVENTING ELLIOT** by Graham Gardner

**JIMI & ME** by Jaime Adoff

**KISSING THE RAIN** by Kevin Brooks

**NEW BOY** by Julian Houston

**PLAQUE YEAR** by Stephanie S. Tolan

**POISON IVY** by Amy Goldman Koss

**SHOOTER** by Walter Dean Myers

**THE FIRST PART LAST** by Angela Johnson

**WE ALL FALL DOWN** by Robert Cormier