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Q & A with Kerry O'Malley Cerra

By Patricia J. Murphy | Dec 11, 2023

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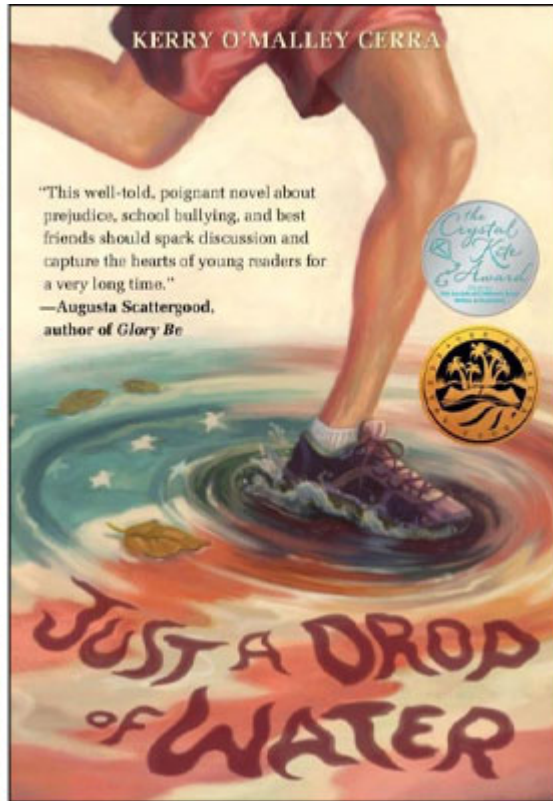
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As a former teacher and school media specialist, Kerry O'Malley Cerra has seen the power of stories to change and save lives—including her own. Now the author of two middle grade novels, *Just a Drop of Water* and *Hear Me* (a story inspired by her own hearing loss), and the forthcoming *Make a Little Wave*, Cerra is committed

to creating stories that depict deaf characters in a multitude of ways, and standing up for diverse books. PW spoke with Cerra about how her hearing loss impacted her life and writing, how a cochlear implant has given her a new way to hear and amplified her voice, and what her hopes are for her hearing and deaf readers.

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Can you tell us how you pivoted from being a social studies teacher to a school media specialist, and how your hearing loss played a role in this?

I was diagnosed with sensorineural progressive hearing loss at the age of 16. I wasn't the best student, and I discovered that social studies was the only subject that I liked and was good at. I don't know if these things were related to my hearing loss because I hadn't been diagnosed just yet. So, when I thought about what I wanted to do when I grew up, I decided to become a social studies teacher. And I taught world history in Broward County Schools in Florida.

Unfortunately, because of my progressive hearing loss, I discovered that I couldn't hear my students properly or teach them the way that they deserved to learn. I also realized I was more stating dates and facts to them, and not being able to have conversations at all. I didn't want to be the teacher who lectured all day. So, I decided to step back from teaching because of my disability. However, because I love teaching so much and I wanted to stay involved with students, I

was offered and accepted a media specialist job. This was over 20 years later. There was a large gap between the two jobs where I was solely writing and raising my kids.

What did you enjoy most about being a school media specialist? What was the biggest challenge?

I loved talking about books, recommending books, and finding books for kids who said they don't like to read. I found that looking for a book that "fits" is a lot like shopping at a discount clothing store. It can be very overwhelming because there are so many choices, and sometimes things are crammed together and hard to sort through to find just the right item. That's where my love of weeding and genre-fying our book collection helped me help my students find books! I also did all kinds of things to help promote titles, including Book Cover Bingo, First Chapter Fridays, Battle of the Books, and posting on social media. The best thing was seeing the circulation numbers increase in the time while I was there. It was a huge goal for me. But in the end, the book challenges were incredibly overwhelming, and I found I wasn't creatively productive with my own writing due to the stress. As hard as it was, I ended up stepping away from my media specialist position at the school.

Can you tell us about one particular book challenge?

When the graphic novel *Flamer* by Mike Curato was called out in one of the governor's speeches, the book was challenged in our district. We followed the legal process to determine the validity of the book in a high school setting. Our committee voted (6–1) to keep the book on our library's shelves. Because there's a Florida state statute that says there are consequences [i.e. jail time and/or fines] for not complying with the state's guidelines, there were people saying that I could go to jail for our committee's decision. This was terrifying because I wasn't the only one on the committee, but I was the one responsible for the outcome.

It was, and still is, a really difficult time to be a media specialist, and I was also creatively stifled. I didn't write anything new during that time at all. And since being an author was my career, I knew I needed to step back from the library job and focus on writing. I didn't want to entirely walk away from the kids or the books when everyone out there was fighting for them. So, when I was invited to join the district's superintendents' book review committee, I said, "Yes!" This new role has allowed me to defend diverse books *and* write full-time.

Why is this fight for diverse books personally important to you?

I've always been somebody who dislikes injustice. Just because a book might not be right for you—or your student, it doesn't mean it isn't right for someone else. I've literally seen books change lives—including mine! While I was a pretty big reader as a kid, I'd never read a book about someone with hearing loss. But when I was in my 40s, I read Cece Bell's *El Deafo*. It was the first time that I saw myself in a book, and that shouldn't have been the case. I wish there had been books about hearing loss [when I was growing up]. It could have made a difference.

Then, when I finally had the courage to write about a deaf character inspired by my hearing loss, my son wrote a review on Goodreads about the book when he saw news of its upcoming publication. (He had read a draft in our shared Dropbox.) I was just floored by how good it felt to be understood and seen. I didn't realize how important that was. I very much teared up that he truly understood me—and I felt it was the first time despite the fact that he'd lived at home for 18 years and knew about my hearing loss. The book helped him get me, and I needed him to finally understand me authentically.

We all want our kids to read stories to feel empathy towards others, and we talk a lot about that. But I don't think we talk enough about what it really means for people to see themselves in these books—or for us to see them in a book! To be honest, I never really understood this until I read my son's review. His words changed the way I viewed my role as a media specialist. So, when I recommended a book to a student who might be dealing with, for example, a disability or a death in the family, I would ask more open-ended questions —instead of “Did you like the book?”—in case this kid wanted to sit down and talk about it. Thanks to my son, I now see how books should be more than just windows and mirrors. They also need to include dining room tables where we can pull up a chair and talk about them. I also encourage teachers to have one-on-one book conversations with their kids.

How did you begin writing for kids?

I wrote a lot of silly poems as a kid and made-up commercials that I'd perform for my family. Then, when I became a mom, I remember rocking my daughter and reading a parenting magazine when I spotted an ad about writing kids' books. And, while I never thought about being a children's author, in that moment, I thought, “Let's give it a try!” But, because I wasn't a strong student in school, I had to reteach myself punctuation and grammar. I also started taking classes through the Institute of Children's Literature. When I joined the SCBWI, that's really when everything changed. My first book was *Just a Drop of Water*. It's about two boys, one Christian, one Muslim, and how their friendship changes in the wake of September 11. It's a book with themes including friendship, bullying, and stereotyping that are important to me—and the social studies teacher in me.

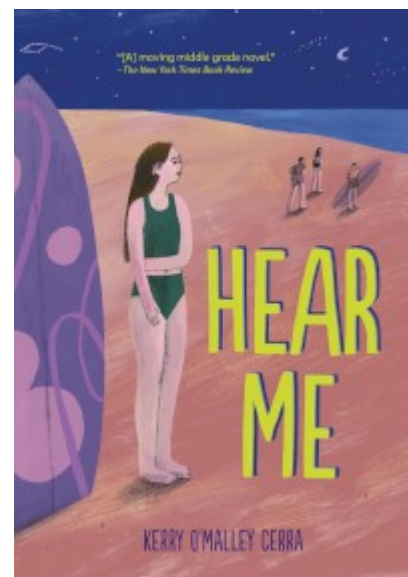
With *Hear Me*, I swore that I didn't want to write about hearing loss because it was a story that I never wanted to tell. I was embarrassed and ashamed of my hearing loss, and I was not comfortable talking about it. But I also felt like a hypocrite when I was pushing for diverse books [as part of two groups that later became We Need Diverse Books], and I didn't want to tell my #OwnVoices story. Later, when a teen girl raised her hand and spoke in front of a packed media center at a literary event, and shared, “I'm deaf and here are my hearing aids...” and she was not embarrassed, I thought, *if she's not embarrassed, why am I?*

Flash forward to a few years ago when my hearing was getting even worse, my hearing aids were no longer helping me, and I decided to take the media specialist job. I had started seriously writing the story that would become *Hear Me*. Soon after, I set up an appointment with a cochlear implant surgeon at the University of Miami. I told myself it was just research for the book. I swore that I'd never have a cochlear implant, but I liked and I trusted the surgeon. So I got the information that I needed for the book. And soon after, I received an email that they had scheduled my surgery. I said to myself, “What is going on here? I was only there for the book!” And so I had to make a decision, and I committed to cochlear surgery a few months later. I ended up finishing a revision of the book on the morning of my surgery. I only did one ear because I was terrified—and it has changed my life!

In what ways did it do that?

First, can we talk about audiobooks? I'm obsessed now that technology streams books right into my head. I can make my own phone calls and enjoy conversations.

But in terms of writing, it's safe to say I'm shy by nature, and throw in hearing loss on top of that, I definitely wasn't going to find my way to any podium, protest, platform, etc. I use my writing for that. Now that I've had the implant, my hearing



in that ear has gone from only 8% to 90% in quiet situations and around 70+% in crowds. So I'm more apt to speak up now that I can participate in meaningful conversations. This is especially timely with the book challenges happening across the nation. I can defend reading *and* push for books that represent all variations of hearing loss and deafness.

Can you tell us about some of these diverse depictions in your upcoming books?

I have a novel, *Make a Little Wave*, coming out next summer with a character who has double cochlear implants. She's what I call "an accidental activist" who doesn't enjoy speaking out, but she sees a certain injustice and there's no turning back for her. It's a conservation-themed book. She's trying to change laws about shark fishing and is forced to speak out in order to effect change. Like me, she learns that these things go hand-in-hand. Another title, *The Gallaudet Eleven: The Story of NASA's Deaf Bioastronauts*, is the story of the 11 deaf men who helped NASA/America win the space race. And, right now, I'm writing a manuscript about a character who happens to have hearing aids.

With the main character in *Hear Me, Rayne*, you use asterisks to indicate words that she misses to give a glimpse into hearing loss. You also supply resources for kids who might want to learn more about deafness and cochlear implants. What are some of your hopes for readers of *Hear Me* and your other books?

I want kids to be able to pick up and enjoy my books even if they don't relate to or know anyone with hearing loss or deafness. I'd like to make them think about the difference between listening and hearing, and what it means not to be heard. Ultimately, I hope that each of my books finds the right reader—the reader who might need it, the reader who was like me at 16 wishing that somebody understood them—so they don't feel so alone.

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