**Ash and Feather by Sharon Frances**

**Sample Q and A for Interviews**

*Ash and Feather* is a novel in verse for upper middle grade and young adult readers. Through magical realism, I explore the complex issues of mental health and identity in a way that is both honest and hopeful. The main character, fourteen year old Phoenix copes with the pain, fear, and confusion of her parent’s cancer diagnosis by envisioning herself and the people around her as birds. Phoenix’s perspective is a poetic one: lyrical, subtle, and imbued with magic, yet her vision of her bird self is a concrete way to visualize existential questions. Through her feathery filter, we follow Phoenix as she interacts with her parent, Eagle, and grandparent, Duck, , navigates the hospital with help from a counselor (Hen), and experiences her first love with Ing (hummINGbird). She uses the power of her imagination and confidence in herself to take flight from the ashes of her own grief, gaining for the first time a sense of her own power.

**QUESTION: *Ash and Feather* focuses on a family impacted by cancer. How do you talk to children, tweens and teens about cancer?**

ANSWER: The book addresses cancer in an approachable way by integrating it into the life of a family, intentionally unshaming and demystifying talking about a life threatening disease without being overwhelming. The main character, Phoenix, grapples with both her parent’s diagnosis and treatment and her own questions about grief and death, as she lives her early teen life: cooking, playing, learning at school, taking walks. Even though it is hard, it is important to have age-appropriate conversations about cancer with young people. Talking through what happens during cancer and the emotions your child might have will help your children feel safe and connected to you. Encourage young people to share their questions, worries and thoughts. Engage in activities like role play, reading books, creating a feelings collage, going on a walk, laughing and playing together to help build a safe environment to process cancer and be a family together. While battling breast cancer, I developed a series of online resources for families to use during their own struggles: <https://www.wellbeings.studio/talk-about-cancer>

**QUESTION:Why does Phoenix see herself and those she loves as birds? Is she really both a human and a bird?**

ANSWER: I hesitate to respond with certainty that Phoenix imagines herself as part bird or that she IS part bird. I want to leave that open to the reader, for them to decide based on what they need from the story. Definitely, Phoenix has a strong attraction to animals, and birds, in particular. Birds make her feel free, hopeful, and full of possibility. She also loves birds’ sense of escape and adventure. When her emotions are high, whether out of fear, anger, excitement, or joy, Phoenix accesses the parts of herself that are bird-like. She channels bird qualities to process her emotions and engage with the world. Across time and space in literature and folklore, there are many examples of relationships between humans and animals, as companions, familiars, spirit animals, and hybrid human-animals. All of these relationships would be fun to explore after reading *Ash and Feather* to prompt further reflection.

**QUESTION: Why was it important for you to portray Phoenix’s queer relationship with her best friend Ing?**

ANSWER: I’m a member of the LGBTQ+ community and a passionate advocate for queer kids and young adults. I purposefully wrote Phoenix’s parents without gender, and explored Phoenix’s queer attraction to her friend Ing, because I believe in the power of representation. I wish more LGBTQ+ literature had been available to me when I was a young person. Phoenix and Ing fall in love because of their unique connection as birds, and by sharing special experiences together: nature walks, crafts, games, poems. Their physical attraction (touch, a kiss) is an emergent characteristic of their close relationship without emphasis on detailed sexual encounters, which I believe is appropriate for an upper elementary/middle grade readership. I hope telling Phoenix and Ing’s story will help queer youth understand themselves, normalize queer experiences, and make them relatable to all readers.

**QUESTION: Tell us about Phoenix’s family. How do you define family, and why is the way you portray family important to you?**

ANSWER: I define family as the people who live together or are close to one another, take care of and love each other. There are many ways to be a family, including mixed generation families, queer families, interfaith families, adopted and foster families, multilingual families, single parent families, mixed status families, and families with step parents. In *Ash and Feather,* Phoenix lives with her parent and grandparent. She comments at one point that she wasn’t used to seeing her family dynamic represented in popular culture. She also struggles with communication in her family, gets frustrated, and repairs connections over time. Increasing representation of diverse families and how they navigate adversity is important in many ways. Readers can learn to appreciate and empathize with different points of view. Talking about diversity can increase our capacity to communicate about previously stigmatized and silenced ways of being in the world.

**QUESTION: Hen, the counselor, plays an important role for Phoenix during her parent’s cancer. Can you tell us more about why you included this character?**

ANSWER: *Ash and Feather* is a journey of self healing. The main character Phoenix, an early teen, self soothes through her own creative coping skills and with processing strategies mostly from her middle school counselor, Hen. When I write poems with Phoenix and Hen, I can show how these coping and processing activities work in real time. The reader can live through them, as they balance in a yoga pose or use “sometimes, always, never” to respond to statements about difficult emotions and topics. From my own personal struggles with depression, anxiety, and panic during family issues and cancer, as well as through my research on mental health, I identified many strategies that Phoenix encounters in the book.

**QUESTION:Why is *Ash and Feather* an important book to support the mental health of tweens and teens?**

ANSWER: I am very interested in writing adolescent stories of healing because I struggled so much as a tween and teen with challenging family situations, such as parental cancer, divorce, emotional abuse and alcoholism, as well as my own depression and body dysmorphia. I also started questioning my sexuality in high school and did not have any resources for any of these issues to help me, including for my psychological, social and emotional well-being. Self-healing is essential for early adolescents as they encounter real world problems and need positive, creative strategies to help them process what they are learning and feeling. I wanted to write not only a book about creativity and healing, but also a tool for readers to use in their daily lives. There are many activities in the back of the book that promote emotional well-being, as suggested by social workers, educators and doctors.

Most importantly, Phoenix is a strong character whose inner voice and sense-of-self guide her, confidently allowing her love for birds and flight to influence her identity. I want my characters to be a guide for the reader as they learn to trust their own voices and bodies during difficult times. I hope reading my stories will be a wellness experience of struggle and joy, with strategies for readers to reference in their daily lives.

**QUESTION: Tell us about the illustrations in *Ash and Feather*. Why did you use the relief print-making style?**

ANSWER: I decided that each of my novels-in-verse will include both poetry and illustrations. I characterize my poetry as raw, organic, emotional, and speaking from a confident inner voice. My illustrations are linocut relief printmaking. The results are textured images with stark contrasts that look both simple and complex at once. The prints are a little “rough around the edges” just like life. Pairing poetry and relief prints felt natural to me. They both focus on the essence of the moment, with spontaneous energy and meaning in between the spaces. I also love that poetry and printmaking are accessible mediums for most people, and I love to teach people how to create in both!