



## HOW LOCAL AUTHOR, SHELLEY FRASER MICKLE, IS ERASING DIFFERENCES FOR CHILDREN

by Kendal Norris

An author for over forty years, Shelley Fraser Mickle has chosen in her work to focus on children – special children – those who are physically different in some way. A woman with deeply southern roots, Shelley grew up in Arkansas and Tennessee and graduated from the University of Mississippi in 1966 with a double major in English and Psychology. An early, life-altering experience with polio in 1950 brought her to grips with many of the themes that would highlight her later work: patience, courage, resilience and determination. She commented, “That illness meant spending a good deal of time in a hospital, a wheelchair, braces and crutches. I was paralyzed, but slowly regained the use of my lower limbs. I definitely knew what it felt like to be different as a child.”

Her memoir, *The Polio Hole* recounts not only her personal trial with the dread disease, but a scientific exploration of how it was finally conquered by Jonas Salk’s vaccine. A portion of the sales from the book goes to the Rotary International/Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation partnership to eradicate polio. Shelley noted,

“There are two versions now: one for middle school students and one for adults. It’s been placed on the required reading list for the University of Florida Medical School as well.”

Shelley’s first book, *The Queen of October* published in 1989, became a *New York Times* Notable Book and was recently put on Kindle. Her second, *Replacing Dad* set in Cedar Key, is about divorce and its effect on children; that one was made into a CBS Sunday Night movie in 1999 and later appeared on the Hallmark Channel. She recalled, “Another reason I began writing about children who are different in some way – physically, mentally or emotionally – is that there were no real precedents in literature for these types of characters other than the Dickens’ stereotype of Tiny Tim. I felt we needed to humanize children who are facing unique challenges in their young lives. And in this way, I also hoped to educate their peers on how to perceive, accept and make friends with kids who are different in some way.”

Before beginning her literary career, Shelley Fraser worked in the development department

of Vanderbilt University. There she met future husband John Mickle, then a medical student who became a pediatric neurosurgeon. Married in 1967, they have two grown children and two grandchildren and live on a 20-acre gentleman's farm called Blueberry Hill in Alachua County. Shelley said, "We've always had horses; at the moment we're down to one horse named 'Precious,' a miniature horse named 'Caliente,' two dogs and two cats."

Animals like hers often show up in Shelley's children's books that are geared toward early readers, adolescents and young adults (as well as grown-ups). Her book *101 Dog Street* has as its lead character a girl who's in a wheelchair sporting flickering lights when she hits a certain speed; it's modeled after a real child who rode around her neighborhood making friends with dogs and giving them rides. A portion of the profits from *101 Dog Street* have benefited the Sebastian Ferrero Foundation. Her best-selling



2007 book, *Barbaro, America's Horse* is a non-fiction work celebrating the life of that great champion and the heroic efforts to save him after his terrible injury. Shelley recalled, "I got to travel and trace Barbaro's career, meeting with his trainer, the owners and the vets. Portions of the proceeds from the book have also gone to charities designated by Barbaro's owners."

And the most recent of her books, *Jason and Elihu: A Fisherman's Tale* features Sundance, a charming miniature horse from Gentle Carousel, a High Springs, Florida non-profit organization that uses their group of blue-eyed, 27-29" tall miniature horses for therapy purposes. These animals visit children and adults in nursing homes, hospitals, hospice settings and group homes. The magical creatures particularly bring a smile and hope to children who are ill, abused or autistic. "Sundance even accompanied me," Shelley said, "to a recent book signing at Tioga Town Center for Jason and Elihu. He's a truly magical creature!" A part of the sales proceeds from this book have benefited Florida Foster Care System. The book is also for sale in all of the Publix Stores in Alachua County.

Shelley's 2004 *The Turning Hour* about teen suicide won the Governor's Award and was named the best suicide prevention tool in education. She considers it her best work to date. But on a lighter note is her collection of

A portion of the proceeds from all of Shelley Fraser Mickle's books is donated to a service or nonprofit organization.

Her partners include:

**Rotary International**

[www.rotary.org](http://www.rotary.org)

**Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation**

[www.gatesfoundation.org](http://www.gatesfoundation.org)

**The Sebastian Ferrero Foundation**

[www.SebastianFerrero.org](http://www.SebastianFerrero.org)

**Florida Foster Care System**

[www.redesignfostercare.org](http://www.redesignfostercare.org)

**The Council for Exceptional Children**

[www.cecgatorland.org](http://www.cecgatorland.org)

**Gentle Carousel Therapy Horses**

[www.horse-therapy.org](http://www.horse-therapy.org)

**Hands-to-Love Camp**

[www.handstolove.org](http://www.handstolove.org)

**The Barbaro Foundation**

**Hearing-impaired education organizations**

essays published in 2000, *The Kids Are Gone*, *The Dog is Depressed* and *Mom's on the Loose*. She said, "In fact, I'm mostly known in this area for reading my humorous essays and doing public service announcements for public literacy on National Public Radio – something I've been doing since 1995."

In April of last year Shelley and her husband John decided to start their own publishing company, Wild Onion Press, in Gainesville. "I'm extremely excited about offering a forum for young writers and authors. Books that we publish are, as the website says, not about children with differences, they are for children with differences, as well as for any reader who loves a rip-roaring adventure. And each of our books, fiction, non-fiction or biography, has a designated non-profit that will receive donations that are a good fit for the story's theme. We're

dedicated to creating positive portraits and building on authenticity in all of our stories."

Shelley Fraser Mickle's talent, energy and dedication have made a difference by erasing differences among our most vulnerable but promising population. At a recent book reading there were 750 children in the audience. After Shelley's presentation, a little girl approached the author and said that she had just been operated on for a benign brain tumor. The character of 'Jazel' in *Jason and Elihu* had also had a brain tumor operation. The girl said that reading the book made her feel less frightened and gave her courage. Of this simple testimony, Shelley commented quietly, "So you see, it's working." **VJ**

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