

SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. *Rosa, Sola* is set in Chicago, and Rosa attends Our Lady of Mercy School. You also grew up in Chicago. Did you go to Our Lady of Mercy School?

No, I attended Our Lady Help of Christians School, which used to be in the Austin neighborhood in Chicago. One of the reasons I chose Our Lady of Mercy as the school in *Rosa, Sola* was because at the time I was writing the novel, there was no school by that name in Chicago. It wasn't until after the book came out that I learned there had indeed been a school with that name when I received a letter from a reader asking if I'd been a classmate of hers there. She told me one of the character's names in the novel was close to that of a friend of hers, too.

2. Despite the strong Catholicism of the characters and the themes, the novel was published by a secular publisher. How did that happen?

I didn't set out to write a book specifically for Catholics, so I submitted it to secular publishers. After several rejections, two publishers expressed interest and I was pleased to receive a contract from Candlewick Press, a very successful publisher of books for children and teens. To my surprise, my editor asked me to expand on the characters' religious beliefs, which I was happy to do. However, despite some lovely reviews, including a starred review from *Booklist* magazine, the book was never published in paperback. After the hardcover went out of print, I got the rights back and republished the book in paperback and ebook and included a new Discussion Questions section.

3. While the book ends on a hopeful note, it does deal with grief and loss. What made you choose to write a novel like this for young readers and for what ages is it recommended?

Before I went to graduate school, I never envisioned writing this story—I'd planned to work on something else there. *Rosa, Sola* grew out of a writing exercise my mentor gave me my first semester. She asked me to write a short story based on an event from my own childhood that still stirred deep emotion in me. I ended up writing a story called "Rosa's Prayer" that was more about the power of prayer than about grief. My mentor encouraged me to expand that story into a novel. I was ten years old when I experienced the events that inspired *Rosa, Sola*, so I wrote it for readers ages 10 and up. Unfortunately, grief is often part of childhood, whether experienced personally or by a child's friends. It's my hope that *Rosa, Sola* can help young readers see that when grief does touch us, we can turn to God for strength and consolation. Interestingly, even though Rosa is only in fourth grade in the story, teen readers have responded especially well to the novel, so I'm pleased to have it included on the CatholicTeenBooks.com website.

4. How did you come to write your second novel, *Playing by Heart*, set in 18th-century Milan?

I originally wanted to write a nonfiction biography about Maria Gaetana Agnesi, a mathematician turned humanitarian. My undergraduate degree is in mathematics and computer science, but I never heard of her until I read an article about little-known women of note. I haven't yet found a publisher for the biography. Meanwhile, I decided to write a novel from the point of view of Maria's younger sister, Maria Teresa Agnesi, who was one of the first Italian women to compose a serious opera. Both women were manipulated by their father, who used

them to try to raise his social status among Milan's elite society. The two main characters in *Playing by Heart* are modeled on the Agnesi sisters and the novel is the story of their struggle to follow their God-given calling at a time when women had few options. So many myths have been published about the Agnesi family, both in print and online, that I've created a website to dispel some of them at MGAgnesi.com.

5. Several of your reviewers have commented on how Emilia Salvini, the main character in *Playing by Heart*, is a heroine modern teens can relate to. How is that possible given how different 18th-century Milan was from our current time?

While it's true that the culture of Hapsburg Milan was quite different from today's culture, I believe girls like the young Maria Teresa Agnesi, who Emilia is modeled after, struggled with many issues that are familiar to today's teens, such as living in the shadow of an older sibling, trying to fit in among her friends and society, dealing with parental expectations that may conflict with her own dreams, finding her place in the world, falling in love, etc. I hope that by highlighting those similarities, I'm able to help readers imagine themselves in Emilia's shoes and appreciate how much more difficult it was to be a girl in the 18th-century, even a privileged one.

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