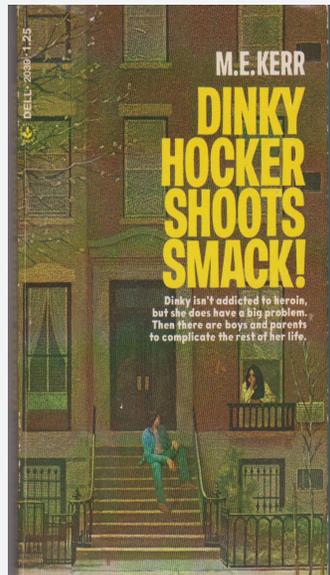


Words from the Author: My Life with *Dinky Hocker Shoots Smack!*

Kerr, M. E. *Dinky Hocker Shoots Smack!* New York: Harper & Row, 1972.

M. E. Kerr



The winter I moved from New York City to Brooklyn I was determined to write a children's book. My friend, Louise Fitzhugh, was having great success with *Harriet the Spy*, her first book. She promised to help me if I would guide her through an adult mystery novel. I was writing them for Gold Medal Books under the pseudonym Vin Packer. I wanted to write a hardcover as much as Louise wanted to write for her peers.

I always loved writing about a new place.

"Don't say you live in Brooklyn," my mother cautioned me. "Always call it Brooklyn Heights. The Heights has class that the rest of Brooklyn doesn't."

At the time, I was a volunteer teaching writing once-a-month to New York City teenagers. The only really promising student I had was Ruthie, a thirteen-year-old black girl.

"If you can do anything to help Ruthie raise her sights to the beauty in life, I'd be very grateful," her mother told me. "And until then I'd appreciate it if you would not print her stories in that class newspaper. I'm ashamed of them."

Ruthie's mother was a do-gooder, a volunteer in her church, a caretaker of young delinquents. She was seldom home when her daughter arrived from school, often missing dinner, always sharing with Ruthie what she knew about the lives of those she tried to help.

The only kids I saw were those I encouraged to write once a month. At the same time, the sole child I longed to write about was Ruthie, way overweight, sarcastic, pessimistic. "So Long, Nice to Know You" was her latest story about a youngster whose cat was given away because it shed on the furniture. Ruthie told me while her mother defended her decision to part with Ruthie's cat, saying, "Ruthie was too attached to that creature. I let it out the door and it ran away. Some pet!"

"Don't tell people we've moved to Brooklyn," I began my story, "tell them we've moved to Brooklyn Heights."

For awhile it was hard for me to capture the tough vulnerability of Ruthie, the bravery and loneliness that only her writing, slices of pizza, and candy bars seemed to curtail.

In school her classmates began calling her Shakespeare and asking her to read her stories aloud. They whistled and applauded, which made her more daring and also more graphic. Words her mother sometimes used when talking about her charges began filling stories titled "Carolyn Crackhead," and "Snow in Summer." Not everyone knew what *smack* meant, or horsehead, or shooting up, but Ruthie was always happy to explain. Until the school decided the writing classes weren't accomplishing anything, Ruthie had her own little celebrity. When I said goodbye to her, I thought I saw tears in her eyes, but she said she had a new allergy that made her cry over nothing.

When I finished writing my book, I called it "*Dinky Hocker Shoots Smack*," a title Ruthie would have applauded. The editors at Harper & Row, the same ones who loved Louise Fitzhugh's work, liked my story but did not like the title. Since it was a book about an overweight child, Ursula Nordstrom, top editor, decided we should call it "Inside Dinky Hocker."

"They say that inside every fat person there's a thin one crying to get out," she explained. The other editors thought Ursula's suggestion was brilliant.

My agent disagreed. "We want to sell this," she told them. "Keep the title or lose the book." They kept the title.

The book was published in 1972. It is still selling today.

Louise never wrote her mystery story, but one of her children's books became a Broadway play, and most kids today know *Harriet the Spy*.

About the Author

M. E. Kerr has produced over 20 novels and won multiple awards, including the American Library Association's lifetime award for young adult literature and the ALA Margaret Edwards Award. She was described by the *New York Times Book Review* as "one of the grand masters of young adult fiction."