

# OUT OF MY MIND by Sharon M. Draper



A GUIDE FOR TEACHERS

# About the Book

**M**elody is not like most people. She cannot walk or talk, but she has a photographic memory: She can remember every detail of everything she has ever experienced. She is smarter than most of the adults who try to diagnose her, and smarter than her classmates in her integrated classroom, who do not understand her need for their friendship. But Melody refuses to be defined by her physical challenges. The story, told only through the thoughts in her mind, is one of tragedy as well as triumph.

# About the Author

**SHARON M. DRAPER** is a two-time Coretta Scott King Award-winning author, most recently for *Copper Sun*, and previously for *Forged by Fire*. She's also the recipient of the Coretta Scott King/John Steptoe Author Award for New Talent for *Tears of a Tiger* and the Coretta Scott King Author Honor for *The Battle of Jericho* and *November Blues*. Her other books include *Romiette and Julio*, *Darkness Before Dawn*, and *Double Dutch*. She has also been twice nominated for the NAACP Image Award. She lives in Cincinnati, Ohio, where she taught high school English for twenty-five years. She's a popular conference speaker, addressing educational and literary groups both nationally and internationally. For more information visit her online at [www.sharondraper.com](http://www.sharondraper.com).



# Discussion Topics

- » The novel opens with a powerful discussion of the power of words and language. How does this help capture the reader's attention? What predictions can the reader make about the narrator of the story? What inferences can be made about the thought processes of the narrator's mind?
- » In a world that does not work for her, what seems to cause the biggest frustrations for Melody?
- » Describe Melody's parents. How do they learn to communicate with Melody and help her to overcome everyday problems? Why are those efforts sometimes a complete failure?
- » How does Melody feel about school? How does she fit in with her classmates and what makes her different from the rest of the children in H-5? What would be Melody's ideal school situation?
- » Discuss Melody's teachers since she began going to school. What does this say about her school system, or about attitudes at her school about teaching children with special needs?
- » Describe Mrs. V. What role does she play in Melody's development? Why is she a necessary addition to Melody's life?
- » What is significant about the story of Ollie the fish? How does Ollie's life mirror Melody's? Describe Melody's feelings when she is unable to tell her mother what really happened.
- » Describe how the introduction of Penny as a character changes the family dynamics. Analyze Melody's complicated feelings about her little sister.
- » How does the inclusion program change Melody's school experiences? Describe both positive and negative results of the program. Describe Melody's deep, unrealized need for a friend.
- » What does Melody learn about friendship during the trip to the aquarium? Make a comparison between Ollie's life, the life of the fish in the aquarium, and Melody's life.
- » How does Melody's computer change her life, her outlook on life, and her potential? Why does she name it Elvira?
- » Why does Melody decide to enter the quiz team competition? What obstacles must she face and overcome just to get on the team?
- » What does Melody learn about friendship and the relationships of children working together as she practices and competes with the quiz team? What does she learn about herself?
- » What is ironic about the events at the restaurant after the competition? How does this scene foreshadow the events that led up to the airport fiasco?
- » Describe Melody's feelings before the trip to the airport, while she is there, and after she gets home. How would you have coped with the same situation?
- » Describe Melody's extreme range of emotions as she tries to tell her mother that Penny is behind the car. How did the scene make you feel?
- » Discuss the scene in which Melody confronts the kids on the quiz team. What is satisfying about how she handles the situation? What else might Melody have done?
- » Why is the first page repeated at the end of the book? How has Melody changed, both personally and socially, from the beginning of the book to the end?
- » How would this story have been different if it had been written from a third-person point of view: from the point of view of her parents, for example, or an outside observer?
- » Explain the title of the novel. Give several possible interpretations.

# Activities & Research

» Put yourself in Melody's chair. Write a paper that tells what it would be like to be Melody for one day. Write about your feelings and frustrations.

» Investigate the problems of children with cerebral palsy, especially those that are of school age. How does it affect the child socially, academically, and personally?

» Investigate the possible causes of cerebral palsy, and what preventative measures, if any, can be taken by the mother.

» Research current laws for inclusion of children with disabilities into classrooms. What effect, if any, do such things have on a school community?

» Research current treatment options or communication devices for young people like Melody.

» Write a letter to one of the characters in the book explaining your feelings about the events in the story. What advice would you give Melody, Rose, Mr. D, or Mrs. V?

» Describe the relationship between the able-bodied children and Melody. Would you describe it as a true friendship? When situations become monumental and overwhelming to young people, what is likely to happen? Explain.

» Imagine it is the last day of fifth grade. Write a letter or create a conversation between one of the following pairs of characters:

- Rose and Melody
- Melody and Mrs. V
- Melody and Catherine
- Mr. D and Melody
- Melody and Claire

» Trace the story of one of the following characters. Imagine you are a reporter doing a story on one of their lives. Write everything you know, as well as whatever you can infer about the character in order to write your magazine article.

- Claire
- Mrs. Valencia
- Mr. Dimming
- Rose
- Penny

» You are a reporter at one of the following scenes. Write the story for your newspaper.

- Student with Disabilities Makes Quiz Team
- Child Struck by Family Car
- Big Storm Grounds Air Traffic
- Local Quiz Team Wins Big

## WRITING ACTIVITIES

Read the quotes, then write the essay that follows.

### » COMPARE/CONTRAST PAPER

(a) "Mrs. Billups replied, with that superior tone that teachers dressed in nice red business suits use when they're talking to mothers with dirty shirts on, 'We were reviewing the alphabet, of course. The sound of the letter *B*, if I recall. I always start with the basics. These children need constant review because they don't retain information like the rest of us.'"

(b) "Mrs. Shannon told us on the first day, 'I'm gonna bust a gut makin' sure y'all get all you can out of this school year, you hear? We're gonna read, and learn, and grow. I believe every one of y'all got potential all stuffed inside, and together we're gonna try to make some of that stuff shine.'"

Compare and/or contrast the characters of the two teachers, Mrs. Shannon and Mrs. Billups. Discuss their effectiveness at teaching their subjects, as well as how they relate to students. Use specific examples from the book to support your statements.

## » DESCRIPTIVE PAPER

“I began to recognize noises and smells and tastes. The *whump* and *whoosh* of the furnace coming alive each morning. The tangy odor of heated dust as the house warmed up. The feel of a sneeze in the back of my throat. And music. Songs floated through me and stayed. Lullabies, mixed with the soft smells of bedtime, slept with me. Harmonies made me smile. It’s like I’ve always had a painted musical soundtrack playing background to my life. I can almost *hear* colors and *smell* images when music is played. Mom loves classical. Big, booming Beethoven symphonies blast from her CD player all day long. Those pieces always seem to be bright blue as I listen, and they smell like fresh paint. Dad is partial to jazz, and every chance he gets he winks at me, takes out Mom’s Mozart disc, then pops in a CD of Miles Davis or Woody Herman. Jazz to me sounds brown and tan and it smells like wet dirt.”

Write a descriptive paper that uses sensory imagery. Describe a specific scene and bring it to life with your words. Use vivid verbs and powerful adjectives and adverbs as you write. Use as many of the senses as you can (sight, sound, smell, touch, taste).

## » NARRATIVE PAPER

“From the very beginning Mrs. Valencia gave me no sympathy. Instead of sitting me in the special little chair my parents had bought for me, she plopped me on my back in the middle of the floor on a large, soft quilt. The first time she did that, I looked up at her like she was crazy. I cried. I screeched. She ignored me, walked away, and flipped on her CD player. Loud marching band music blared through the room. I liked it. Then she came back and put my favorite toy—a rubber monkey—a few inches from my head. I wanted that monkey.

“Mrs. V sat down on the quilt. ‘Turn over, Melody,’ she said quietly. Sometimes she can make her voice really soft. I was so shocked I stopped yelling. I couldn’t turn over. Didn’t she know that? Was she nuts? She wiped my nose with a tissue. ‘You can turn yourself over,

Melody. I know you understand every word I say to you, and I know you can do this. Now, roll!’ ‘Actually, I’d never bothered to try very hard to roll anywhere. I’d fallen off the sofa a couple of times, and it hurt, so I usually just waited for Mom or Dad to move me to a comfortable position.

“Look at how you’re lying. You’re already on your side—halfway there. Use all that screaming and hollering energy you’ve got to take you to another position. Toss your right arm over and concentrate!’ So I did. I strained. I reached. I tried so hard I farted! Mrs. V cracked up. But slowly, slowly I felt my body rolling to the right. And then unbelievably, plop! I was on my stomach. I was so proud of myself—I screeched.

“I told you so,’ Mrs. V said, victory in her voice. ‘Now go get that monkey!’”

Write a narrative paper from the point of view of Mrs. V. Tell what kind of life she must have lived to become the person that she is. Discuss her hidden strengths and her attitude toward Melody.

## » EXPOSITORY PAPER

(a) “I had to blink a little to figure it all out. Everything you see on TV is fake. I saw the place where they film the news. When I watch it on television at home, it looks like the reporters are sitting in front of a huge window that shows all of downtown. But it’s just a painting, and it’s pretty small. So is the desk where the reporters sit. It seems so much bigger from home.

“I recognized a couple of the reporters who I watched every day. I couldn’t believe how skinny the morning lady was. On TV she looks normal sized. I’m going to look like a huge balloon when the cameras show me.

“Speaking of cameras, they were huge—like giant black mechanical space beings on wheels. Guys with headphones and women with clipboards ran around checking stuff. The back part of the studio was dark, but the place where the contest would take place was lit brightly. I could see the place where the teams would stand, and the big red buttons they would push for the answers.”

Write an expository (explanatory) paper that describes a room at your school, a building, or any other specialized room such as a computer lab. Tell what is unusual or unexpected about the place. Use as many specifics as possible.

### » PERSUASIVE PAPER

“Fifth grade is probably pretty rocky for lots of kids. Homework. Never being quite sure if you’re cool enough. Clothes. Video games. Parents. Wanting to play with toys, and wanting to be grown up all at the same time. Underarm odor. I guess I have all that, plus about a million different layers of other stuff to deal with. Making people understand what I want. Worrying about what I look like. Fitting in. Will a boy ever like me? Maybe I’m not so different from everyone else after all.

“It’s like somebody gave me a puzzle, but I don’t have the box with the picture on it. So I don’t know what the final thing is supposed to look like. I’m not even sure if I have all the pieces. That’s probably not a good comparison, since I couldn’t put a puzzle together if I wanted to. Even though I usually know the answers to most of the questions at school, lots of stuff still puzzles me.”

Write a persuasive paper that discusses one of the following options: (a) “Melody is just like every other fifth grader.” (b) “Melody is very different from the rest of the world.” (c) “Melody is unique in that she is very much like other children, yet not like them at all.” Be sure to use specifics to support your answer.

### » POINT-OF-VIEW PAPER

“The windows were almost completely fogged up, and got even worse as I continued to act like I’d been possessed by demons. Mom looked at me as if I had lost my mind. She screamed at me, ‘Stop it! Are you crazy?’

“But I wouldn’t stop. I couldn’t. I banged on the car window, pulled Mom’s shirt, hit her head. I pinched her, or at least tried to.

“I can’t take any more, Melody!’ Mom screamed over the thunder. ‘I *hate* it when you get like this. You’ve got to learn to control yourself! Now,

QUIT!’ She put her hand on the keys to start the car.

“I screamed, reached over, and tried to pull the keys from her. I scratched the back of Mom’s hand.

“She smacked me on the leg. She’d never raised a hand to me before. Never. I still didn’t stop screaming and kicking and jerking. I had to tell her. *I had to tell her that Penny was out there!* Never had I wanted words more. I was going out of my mind.”

Read the passage above and explain how the point of view of the character who makes the observation influences the description. Discuss the scene through Melody’s eyes, then tell how it looks from her mother’s point of view.

### » POETRY

Write a poem about one of the following topics:

- The Girl on the Inside
- When Friends Betray Us
- A Fish out of Water
- Sisters
- The Power of Words
- Courage

### » CHARACTER SKETCH PAPER

“But Penny! Penny really was a perfect kid. After just a few months she was sleeping through the night and smiling through each day. She sat up exactly when babies are supposed to do that, rolled over right on schedule, and crawled on cue. Amazing. And it seemed so easy! Sure, she fell on her face a few times, but once she got it, she was off! Penny zoomed like a little windup toy. She learned the toilet was fun to splash in, and that lamps will fall if you grab the cord. She learned that Golden Retrievers are not ponies, peas taste funny, dead flies on the floor are a no-no, but candy is really good. She laughed all the time. She learned her sister Melody couldn’t do what she could do, but she didn’t seem to care.

So I tried not to care either.

“Dad and his camcorder followed Penny around like the paparazzi follow a rock star! We have hundreds of hours of Penny being cute and doing adorable things. And, well, I admit it, sometimes I got kinda sick of watching a new video every time she learned something new. It sorta sucks to watch a baby do what you wish you could do.

“Penny holding her own bottle.

“Penny feeding herself teeny tiny Cheerios from her high chair tray.

“Penny saying ‘ma-ma’ and ‘da-da’ just like the babies on Sesame Street.

“Penny crawling on the floor and chasing Butterscotch.

“Penny clapping her hands.

“How did her little brain know how to tell her to pull herself up to a standing position? To hold on to the sofa for balance? How did she know how to stand on her own? Sometimes she’d fall over, but then she’d pop right back up. Never ever did she lie there, stuck like a turtle on its shell.”

Write a character sketch of a family member, a friend, or a relative. Use strong verbs and adjectives, lots of specifics, as well as sensory imagery.

#### » PERSONAL ESSAY

“I squeezed my eyes shut. Stupid elevator music floated from the tinny airport speakers. I heard no beautiful colors. I smelled no lovely aromas. All I could see was the darkness behind my eyeballs. . . .

“The woman typed and clicked for what seemed like hours. Finally, she looked up. ‘There are no other flights to DC on any other carrier, sir. That weather system has grounded everything. There will be nothing until later this evening. I’m so sorry,’ she whispered. . . .

“I opened my eyes because they were filling with tears. . . .

“I still had not breathed out real good. . . .

“The entire airport felt like a vacuum. No sound.

No voices. No air. . . .

“I just sat there. The morning had started out like crystal, but the day had turned to broken glass.”

Write a personal essay that describes a special memory or event, or a particular loss in your life. Explain why it is meaningful to you. Be sure to include sensory imagery—sight, smell, touch, taste, sound.

#### » LANGUAGE ANALYSIS PAPER

“From the time I was really little—maybe just a few months old—words were like sweet, liquid gifts, and I drank them like lemonade. I could almost taste them. They made my jumbled thoughts and feelings have substance. My parents have always blanketed me with conversation. They chattered and babbled. They verbalized and vocalized. My father sang to me. My mother whispered her strength into my ear. Every word my parents spoke to me or about me I absorbed and kept and remembered. All of them. I have no idea how I untangled the complicated process of words and thought, but it happened quickly and naturally. By the time I was two, all my memories had words, and all my words had meanings. But only in my head.”

Think about how a child learns language, learns to understand words, and learns how to speak. Write a paper, using library or Internet resources, that traces language development in humans. Then analyze Melody’s abilities to interpret language without the means of a voice.

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