

An Outsider, Out of the Shadows

By DINITIA SMITH

SEPT. 7, 2005

TULSA, Okla., Aug. 31 - The mystery of S.E. Hinton begins with her genderless name. Her most famous book, "The Outsiders," about teenage gangs and alienated youth in Tulsa during the 1960's, transformed young-adult fiction from a genre mostly about prom queens, football players and high school crushes to one that portrayed a darker, truer adolescent world. Since it was published in 1967, the novel has sold 14 million copies, 400,000 of them last year alone.

Yet the jacket covers of all her novels over the years, including "That Was Then, This Is Now" (1971), "Rumble Fish" (1975) and "Tex" (1979), have never included author photographs, and she has rarely spoken publicly or in interviews. In fact, some readers don't know that S.E. is a woman, Susan Eloise. Those who do, know mostly the basic facts: that she published "The Outsiders" when she was 17, that she lives in Tulsa and has shown horses. That's pretty much it.

Now Ms. Hinton has allowed her carefully preserved secrecy to be penetrated for the release of a recut version of Francis Ford Coppola's 1983 film of "The Outsiders" on DVD, on Sept. 20 by Warner Home Video. The film will have a limited theatrical run nationally and is opening in New York on Sept. 9.

It's as if Ms. Hinton's image, of a teenage girl who is somehow an authority on teenage life, has been caught in a time warp. But in reality, she's now a sturdy homemaker, either 54 or 56, though she won't give her exact age. She speaks in a gritty Oklahoman accent, and has lived almost all her life in Tulsa, where she is married to David Inhofe, a software engineer. They have a son, Nick, 22, at college back East.

Ms. Hinton won't show a reporter her house, which she described as a red brick ranch, with a pool -- in an affluent neighborhood. And she won't show the home where she grew up, either, in a poorer section. "I don't want to revisit it," she said curtly.

But she did acknowledge that she grew up in a working-class neighborhood of worn houses on Tulsa's North Side. She attended Will Rogers High School, where students were divided into groups, including Greasers from blue-collar families or Socs (pronounced SO-shes, from social), rich kids whose families benefited from Tulsa's oil money and wore wheat jeans and madras and drove Mustangs. Along with Anita Bryant, she is one of the school's most famous graduates.

"The Outsiders" is steeped in that world. Ponyboy, an orphaned Greaser (played in the film by C. Thomas Howell), lives with his two

brothers, Sodapop (Rob Lowe) and Darry, the oldest (Patrick Swayze).

"There's layers after layers after layers" of memories, Ms. Hinton said, as she drove past the Admiral Twin drive-in on East Easton Street, where the Greasers flirt with the Soc Girl, Cherry (Diane Lane), to the fury of her Soc boyfriend, Bob. "It just freaks me out."

Ms. Hinton's father, Grady, was a door-to-door salesman, her mother, Lillian, an assembly-line worker. "My mother was physically and emotionally abusive," Ms. Hinton said. "My father was an extremely cold man."

It's clearly a difficult admission to make, and one she has almost never made. The family attended a "fundamentalist, hellfire and brimstone" church, she said. "It turned me off religion."

Ms. Hinton said she was a tomboy, happiest at her grandmother's farm, where her aunt had a horse. She longed for her own horse, and escaped into reading and writing books. (She wrote two unpublished books before "The Outsiders.") "When I was writing she'd come into my room, grab my hair and throw me in front of the TV," Ms. Hinton said of her mother. "She'd say, 'You're part of this family -- now act like it.' I hate TV now."

Once her mother threw her manuscripts in the trash burner, but allowed her to rescue them. "I would tell myself, 'It'll get better,'" Ms. Hinton said. "'Hang on.'" When she was 15, her father developed a brain tumor. As he was dying, she wrote "The Outsiders," inspired, she said, by injustices perpetrated against her Greaser friends by the Socs.

A friend knew someone whose mother was a children's book writer, and Ms. Hinton sent her manuscript to her agent. It was bought by Viking for \$1,000. She gradually made money and bought her first horse. Then came writer's block and an intense depression. She met Mr. Inhofe in her freshman biology class at the University of Tulsa, and she said he helped her to write again.

Still, "The Outsiders" has an anachronistic feel, an all-white story about teenagers reflecting the segregated Tulsa of the time. Ms. Hinton said that it hasn't hurt the book's continuing popularity because "today black and minority kids identify with the Greasers" as outsiders. There is, she suggested, a universality in being an adolescent outsider. "My goal from being a child was to have a happy home life," she said. "My husband and I get along great." Their families are in Tulsa, old friends. "We're both introverts and it's hard to make new friends." She has her weekly writing group, and says she rereads Jane Austen annually. For years, she showed hunters. Now she rides trails on her registered paint horse, Sage.

