"A splendid novel that I read in one sitting."
—GARY D. SCHMIDT, two-time Newbery Honor winner

SIDE TRACKED

DIANA HARMON ASHER

The most important race is with yourself.

Praise for *Sidetracked*

ABA Indies Introduce title
ALSC Notable Children's Book

"Heartwarming and funny, *Sidetracked* is the book we all wish we had read in seventh grade." —Gitty Daneshvari, author of *School of Fear* and *The League of Unexceptional Children*

"Just read it! Diana Harmon Asher has written a witty, observant, and sensitive novel."
—Susan Isaacs, *New York Times* bestselling author

"Joseph's first-person voice is fresh and authentic, and his character arc is immensely satisfying."
—*Kirkus Reviews*

"The characters in Asher's debut novel are likable and approachable, and the story is absorbing and moves quickly."
—*School Library Journal*

"Natural-sounding narrative with a good amount of humor."
—*The Horn Book*

"Joseph's first-person narrative engages readers on page one and never lets up."
—*Booklist*

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR *SIDETRACKED*

1. What comparison does Joseph make to describe his middle-school experience? What does he convey with that comparison?
2. How can we describe the reactions to Heather in the first three chapters? How does her being a girl impact the way people react to her?
3. What challenges do we learn that Joseph and Heather have in common? How are their challenges different?
4. Why is it difficult for Joseph to form friendships, even with others who are trying to be kind to him?
5. Based on Joseph's description at the beginning of Chapter 6, how would you describe Mrs. Fishbein? What does she have in common with Joseph?
6. How do Joseph's classmates generally perceive what he is doing in school? How does he explain what he is doing at those moments?
7. Throughout the book, what role do adults play in the social division that we see between groups of kids?

8. How does the author use sensory details to help tell the story? What purposes do these details serve?
9. What does Joseph mean when he says, "Maybe I've had enough years of personal defeat and I'm ready to give shared misery a try"? Why is "shared misery" appealing?
10. What's the importance of Mrs. T's quote, "Joseph did what Joseph could do today"?
11. How does the retirement home remind Joseph of middle school? Why does he say, "I've gotten to help Grandpa with his jailbreak after all"?
12. When Joseph wants to quit, what makes Heather's pep talk effective?
13. Why is the uniform so important to Joseph? What does it symbolize for him?
14. Throughout the book, what is it about running that gives Joseph a sense of belonging that he hadn't found before?
15. What are the different feelings that Joseph has about the encouragement he gets after his first race?
16. In Chapter 18, what is the "problem" that Joseph identifies about cross country as a sport? Do you see that as a problem?
17. What is the significance of Heather's name? How does it fit her personality?
18. Why does Heather talk to Joseph the way she does at the Brockton meet?

19. How do Joseph and Heather each show a different side of themselves at the league meet?
20. How does Grandpa explain Joseph's reaction to the gun? How does this explanation help Joseph see himself differently?
21. What do Joseph's actions at the end of the book show us about him as a person?

AUTHOR Q&A

An interview with **Diana Harmon Asher**

1. How did you come up with the idea for *Sidetracked*, and for your main character, Joseph?

One of the things that I love about the sport of cross country is how it can turn the most unlikely athletes into runners. Joseph sees himself as the worst athlete on the planet, and joining a sports team is the last thing he expects to happen in seventh grade. I wanted to tell the story from Joseph's point of view, to portray the world as he saw and felt it—including the anxieties, the confusions, and self-doubt. As I wrote, Joseph developed a unique personality, with lots of peculiarities, but lots of strengths, too. When Heather and Grandpa entered the storyline, I realized that a theme common to all of them was the way expectations weigh us all down. I tried to write a story that showed each of them trying to reconcile who they are with what they are expected to be.

2. Did you know how the novel would end before you started writing it, or did you make many changes along the way?

That's a really interesting question. I knew that I wanted Joseph to grow, and to have a victory, but in a realistic way. I didn't want him to join the team and suddenly discover a hidden athletic talent that makes him "okay." But I also

didn't want to give him some consolation prize, like the sportsmanship award. He needed to come through for Heather, and also prove something to himself, but he had to do it using the traits we've seen in him throughout the story, and what he's learned from Coach T and his teammates. I've been to a lot of meets (all three of my sons ran cross country), and it's common for the faster runners to "lap," or overtake the slower runners. That gave me a chance to have Joseph cross paths with faster runners during the final meet, but it took a while to figure out exactly what would happen there. I also went to a middle-school league meet to cheer on a team that my son was coaching. Watching the finish, I realized that there are ways to earn a "win" while still not being anywhere near the fastest one out there.

3. Why did you choose running as the focus of the book?

Cross country and track-and-field are sports that take in all those kids who have been cut from basketball, soccer, baseball. A lot of kids' hearts are broken around seventh grade, when they're told they can't play those sports for their school. Cross country and track is where they find their "team." There are also some really terrific athletes—boys and girls—who choose cross country and track, so there's a

great mix of talents and abilities. I also love the concept of the PR—the Personal Record. The idea of "doing your best" is great, but trying for a Personal Record is more than that. It means that your goal is to improve, to resist the urge to quit, to persevere and do better than you did last time. There's nothing wrong with competing with others—racing can be incredibly exciting! But for a kid like Joseph, striving for a PR can be so important, as a place to start. I have to admit, I also saw so many comic possibilities in the sport—goose poop on the track, mud on the trails, tiny little running shorts. And really, who can resist writing about a sport that has a term like "fartlek?"

4. Nothing is going right for Joseph until Mrs. T inspires and pushes him. Did you have a teacher like that?

When I wrote the acknowledgments for *Sidetracked*, I realized that the first people I had to thank were my favorite teachers—from elementary school all the way through college. They were kind, creative, and supportive. In fact, I sent my first- and fifth-grade teachers an early reading copy of the book, and it was an incredible experience to reconnect with them. That said, my needs were very different from Joseph's. Unlike Joseph, academics and school life came easily to me.

The teacher who encourages Joseph—Mrs. T—was actually inspired by one of the incredible resource room teachers in my sons' school—Nancy Tannenbaum. She was quite a character—loving, talented, and feisty. She understood kids like Joseph. They were "her" kids, and she would fight for them like a mother tiger protecting her cubs. Sadly, she passed away a few years ago, but her students and their parents will never forget her. I think she would have recognized parts of herself in *Sidetracked*'s "Mrs. T," and I hope she would have loved her as much as I do.

5. What was your process for capturing a seventh-grade boy's inner thoughts?

One of my writing workshop buddies recently pointed out how much I'm like Joseph. I don't have ADD, I'm not a seventh-grade boy, I didn't really have trouble making friends. But I do worry a lot, and I guess I observe things in a very particular way. When Charlie's football cleat lands on the bee, for instance, Joseph's reaction is exactly how I would react. Poor bee! Is it squashed? Is it trapped? Can I save it? Please, let it be okay. I guess I just extended that thinking through the lens of Joseph's personality. I'm also the mother of three sons, and I've tried to be around and involved, and to listen a

lot. So, in an odd way, I felt right at home in the hallways and sports fields of middle school.

6. What do you hope that a reader of *Sidetracked* who does not have ADD will get from your book (besides an entertaining read)?

I hope the book will make readers think about giving other people a chance—and giving themselves a chance. ADD is just a part of Joseph. There are so many quirks, differences and talents that make each person unique. Joseph is more self-aware than most kids, and maybe readers will look at their own challenges, try to understand them, and even laugh a little bit. I hope they will get the message that you can see humor in just about any situation. I also hope that readers will think about society's expectations of gender, physical appearance, and success. And yes, I hope they are entertained, and finish the book smiling.

7. What are you working on now?

I'm working on another middle-grade novel, this time told from a girl's point of view. I don't want to say too much about it, because I'm still working it out, but it moves from the world

of middle-school running to the world of middle-school musical theater.

8. Anything else we should know?

This is my first published novel, and I've been waiting and working for a long, long time. It's hard to convey how much it means to me that *Sidetracked* has gotten such an enthusiastic reception. I've spoken with kids who tell me they trudged through their summer reading assignments, then they flew through *Sidetracked* and really loved it. Hearing that just warms my heart.

Author Q&A courtesy of Dave Shallenberger, co-owner of Little Shop of Stories (Decatur, Georgia); Bookselling This Week*, a publication of the American Booksellers Association; and Deborah Kalb of deborahkalbbooks.blogspot.com.*

PRAISE FOR *SIDETRACKED*

ALSC NOTABLE BOOK
ABA INDIES INTRODUCE TITLE

"An entertaining story about a boy picking his way through the potholes and pitfalls of puberty."
—RICHARD PECK, NEWBERY MEDAL WINNER

IF MIDDLE SCHOOL WERE A RACE, Joseph Friedman wouldn't even be in last place—he'd be on the sidelines. With an overactive mind and phobias of everything from hard-boiled eggs to gargoyles, he struggles to understand his classes, let alone his fellow classmates. So he spends most of his time avoiding school bully Charlie Kastner and hiding out in the Resource Room, a safe place for misfit kids like him.

But then, on the first day of seventh grade, two important things happen. First, his Resource Room teacher practically forces him to join the school track team, and second, he meets Heather, a crazy-fast runner who isn't going to be pushed around by Charlie Kastner or anybody else.

With a new friend and a new team, Joseph finds himself off the sidelines and in the race (quite literally) for the first time. Is he a good runner? Well, no, he's terrible. But the funny thing about running is, once you're in the race, anything can happen.

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