

**Meg Medina** received the 2019 (John) Newbery Medal for *Merci Suárez Changes Gears* (Candlewick Press). She delivered her acceptance remarks at the Newbery-Caldecott-Legacy Banquet on Sunday, June 23, 2019, during the American Library Association Annual Conference.

For more information about the Newbery Medal, visit <http://bit.ly/newbery-award>.



# Newbery

## MEDAL ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

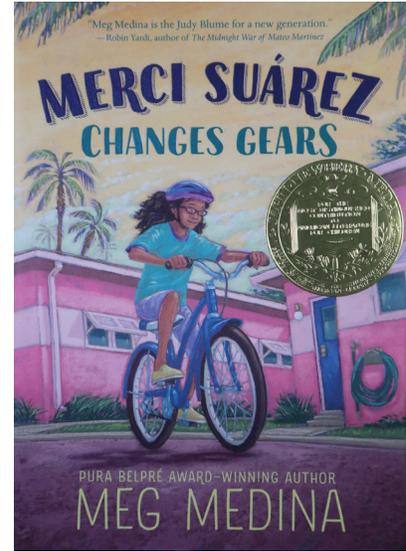
**G**ood evening. Muy buenas noches.

I'm so happy to be with all of you here tonight, and to share this incredible moment on stage with Sophie [Blackall] and to help honor the enormous legacy of Walter Dean Myers. My deepest congratulations to all the winners and honorees of ALA awards this year, particularly to Veera [Hiranandani] and Catherine [Gilbert Murdock]. I've been working my way through the reading list that your works have provided, and I feel so honored to be celebrating with all of you.

It has been six months since I received my life-changing phone call, and in all that time I've been wondering what to say right now. I've decided what's important to say about *Merci Suárez Changes Gears* and this lovely award can best be told by way of my personal bike history.

I've owned four bikes in my life.

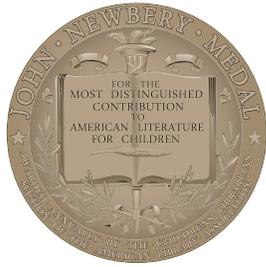
The first one I got when I was about six. It was forest green and had training wheels, and it arrived as something of a miracle because it was a gift from my father, a man I didn't remember at all. He and my mother had separated years earlier, when they were recently arrived from Cuba. He had never lived with us in *my* lifetime, so he was an utter mystery to me, almost a dark fantasy. What I did know had come in confusing



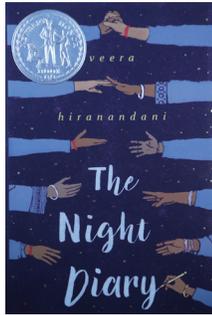
snippets, just a child's peek into the mysteries of the adult world and all the ways it could go wrong. Imagine my confusion when my grandfather Norberto—my father's father—delivered this beautiful present to our building's stoop one day. I hopped on that bike and loved it instantly. There is a picture of me in a yellow spring coat smiling for my grandfather who took the shot. Unfortunately, it wasn't meant to be mine for very long. One day soon after I received it, I carelessly left it on the stoop to go upstairs for a moment. When I returned, it had been stolen, just as my mother had warned.

It's spectacularly unfortunate symbolism, but I still look back on that experience fondly. That bike (and its

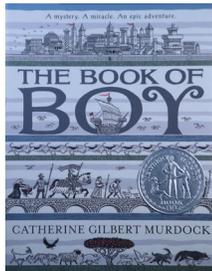
Meg Medina is a Newbery and Belpré award-winning author of numerous works for children and teens. Her book *Burn Baby Burn* was long listed for the 2016 National Book Award and shortlisted for the Kirkus Prize. An advocate for Latinx readers and writers of all ages, Medina's work examines how cultures intersect, as seen through the eyes of young people. In 2014, she was recognized as one of the CNN 10 Visionary Women in America. Medina lives in Richmond, Virginia.



## 2019 NEWBERY HONOR BOOKS



***The Night Diary***  
Veera Hiranandani  
Kokila/Penguin  
(originally Dial/Penguin)



***The Book of Boy***  
Catherine Gilbert Murdock  
Illus. by Ian Schoenherr  
Greenwillow/HarperCollins

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disappearance) taught six-year-old me that the most unexpected things happen sometimes, things we barely understand. Some of them are truly wonderful and some of them are awful and unfair.

The next bike I remember was my three-speed, with a banana seat and high ape-hanger handlebars. It had a plastic basket with daisies on the front and blue-and-white streamers dangling from the grips. I was something of a legend on my block thanks to that bike, having mastered how to pop a wheelie.

I got that bike for Christmas, maybe the year I was ten. What's remarkable is that my mother gave me that bike. I say that it's remarkable because Ma wasn't really the bike type. In fact, my mother didn't know how to ride a bike herself, or how to swim or drive a car—all things I would eventually learn to do. Those activities were not things her parents thought girls should engage in, due to complicated and distorted interpretations of femininity. Anyway, my mother was generally a fretful person, too. She saw danger at every turn. If talking with my mouth "full" of a single black bean could kill me, imagine what a bike could do! And so, the thought that she would give me a bike to ride on the streets of Queens, New York, seemed unfathomable.

What's more remarkable, though, is that my mom found a way to pay for it on her own. She was a single mom and worked in a factory back then, and her budget, including my dad's alimony, was spoken for pretty much to the penny. There was no extra money for a bike, I'm quite sure. But my mother, like many of the other immigrant ladies who worked alongside her testing transistors, was

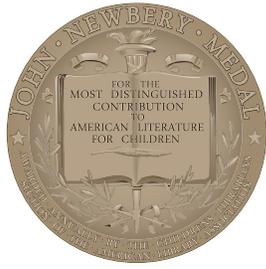
nothing if not resourceful. She was given the option of working through her vacation week so she could get an extra week's pay. And that's what she did—and with the money, she bought my bike.

At ten, I didn't give a thought to how she had paid for that gift. I was so dazzled by having received what I'd truly wanted. Looking back, I'm sure my mother would have liked to have had a vacation, maybe to spend a week admiring the palm trees in Miami. She always talked about Miami as a mecca, after all. When things got bad in the building or at her job or just with life in general, she'd threaten to pack us up and move to Mee-a-mee.

But that year she gave up her single week of rest, so she could give me a vehicle of freedom that she herself had never owned. You can bet I bought a combination lock that time! I loved that bike because it took me around the block and then to other blocks and neighborhoods, places my mother could not see.

That bike taught me that problems can have surprising solutions. It taught me that, in families, people sometimes willingly sacrifice for each other.

In my twenties, when I was newly married, my husband Javier splurged and showed up at our tiny Queens apartment with my third bike: a bright-red Peugeot ten-speed, which were all the rage in the 1980s. It was the color of happiness, I thought, even though I had to crawl over it in the hall to reach our living room. It had more gears than I knew what to do with. The skinny tires weren't good on sandy surfaces, either. But when I leaned over those ram-horn handlebars with my young and supple back,



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I thought I looked fierce, slick, and confident—none of which I really felt inside. That bike taught me that sometimes it's okay to enjoy style and flash, especially when you're young and when there is plenty of time ahead to do sensible things.

The last bike is the one that is currently at home in my garage. I bought it when we still lived in Florida over twenty years ago, in a town where the flat landscape begged a beach cruiser with a nice comfy seat. Our first daughter was an infant then, and I thought bike rides might help me understand the bewildering and unexpected new world of motherhood. Becoming a mother was harder than I had thought it would be, though I worked with Easter Seals and therapists and doctors who were trying to teach me all I'd need to know to be her mom. I'd strap my daughter into her seat and ride with my neighbor, sometimes for miles and miles. We eventually came to call those excursions Moon Rides because sometimes the sun would set, and we'd still be pedaling, thinking, talking.

I've never gotten rid of that bike. I owned it as all three of my kids grew up and learned to ride their own bikes. I still had it when my mother and my aunt grew ill and came to live with us—an event that upended our lives in so many ways, as anyone who has done caretaking knows.

"Let me buy you a new one," Javier always tells me when he sees me haul it out into the driveway. But something keeps me from accepting. It turns out my old seat is still comfortable, and I like the predictable squeaks and the dings, even if my kids laugh at me. I ride my bike these days with joy and ease, and I ride wherever I feel like going, with a well-earned sense of peace.

That bike taught me that sometimes you have to pedal over hard spots in life until you grow stronger and reach clarity.

My life in bikes.

And now, of course, there is this new imaginary bike, the one that Merci pines for in *Merci Suárez Changes Gears*. What did this one teach me?

When I sat down to write this novel, I wasn't thinking about bikes, necessarily. Mostly I was thinking about how to write in a time when so many disparaging characterizations of Latinx people have been taking hold. Whether it was aspersions being cast or border separations or the frightening uncertainty for the Dreamers, I wanted to shake the world and shout, "Stop afflicting children with these terrible and hurtful words. Stop warping their view about who they are and what their value is. It is hard enough to start a new life in a new place."

I had just finished writing a short story called "Sol Painting, Inc.," which appeared in *Flying Lessons and Other Stories*, an anthology edited by Ellen Oh (Crown Books). That story was about a girl whose voice could help me capture the warmth and eccentricities and troubles of one immigrant family. She could make you fall in love with them, laugh with them, and feel their pain as if they were your own family, because in so many ways they are like us. They are like all of us, a big, loving mess.

What grew from that story is a novel with a bike as Merci's first longing, a way to steer herself through the sixth grade and all that awaits her during that wonderful and bewildering year. Merci Suárez and her family are a Cuban clan who live intergenerationally, interconnectedly, in Florida, as

my mother dreamed of doing. And they're a family that sacrifices for each other in large and small ways every day, which is, I think, the most important legacy the elders in my family left me.

And what does Merci find out? Just what I have, I suppose. That life is full of wonderful surprises, like new friends in the sixth grade, and lousy ones; like loneliness and family illnesses. She discovers—as always children will—that happiness and heartbreak coexist in a life well lived. Sometimes all there is to do is to switch to a different gear and push on, always with the hope of a better day.

I am so grateful that this novel resonated with readers and with this year's Newbery selection committee. I am so delighted that the Suárez family will live in books forever. I'm so honored to accept this award and to have my book join such auspicious company among the previous medalists.

My appreciation is boundless. First and foremost, I feel so indebted to Kate Fletcher, my editor, who took a risk on me all those years ago when she was first starting to acquire and when I was first starting to publish. I am so grateful for her good questions and her calm and thoughtful guidance as I reach inside, sometimes where I don't really want to go. I cherish all we've shared over the years together. Our crazy bike-taxi rides on the streets of Manhattan, the missed flights, the tough schedules, and even the wardrobe failures we've seen together. What a journey, Miss Kate.

I am so thankful to Team Meg at Candlewick Press: Karen Lotz, John



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Mendelson, Jennifer Roberts, Susan Batcheller, Andie Krawczyk, the utterly heroic Phoebe Kosman, Kathleen Rourke, Anne Irza-Leggat, Pam Consolazio, and all the staff who labor on my behalf. Thank you for all the ways you patiently entertained my ideas for this book, but mostly, collectively, for setting a high bar for what it means to create beautiful books in this industry and what it means to develop authors with respect and great care over time.

Many thanks to Joe Cepeda for saying yes to designing the cover. I am a huge admirer of his work, and it is an honor to be linked in this way.

A huge thanks to the Andrea Brown Literary Agency, specifically to Jennifer Rofé, who is my fiercest advocate. Thank you, Jen, for pushing me to ask and dream and reach even when I think I can't get there.

I am sending love and thanks to my many friends and colleagues in the children's lit community. How I appreciate our conversations, the mo-

ments when we give each other advice and lend an ear. How meaningful it has been to feel your love and support not only right now for this medal, but during all the years that have led up to it. This is especially true of the many friends who've been in the trenches of getting more voices to the table, particularly my fellow Latinx book creators and also those I've met through *We Need Diverse Books*. The work is hard and fraught *and* essential to the children we write for. What a privilege it is to know and learn from and work with you.

Thank you to the librarians and teachers and booksellers who have brought my books to readers and have made my career. For all the ways you treat authors as stars, *you* are really the ones moving mountains. And in this, a special shout-out to my friends at REFORMA and at the Ezra Jack Keats Foundation who turned eyes toward my early work. And now, most especially, a thank you to Ellen Riordan and her entire committee—Mary Dubbs, Sondra Eklund, Robbin

Ellis Friedman, Eric Gomez, Pamela Archer Hamlin, Gregory Lum, Abby Morales, Lalitha Nataraj, Alma Ramos-McDermott, Stephanie Malosh Rivera, Sue Rokos, Dr. Terrell Young, and Emily Mroczek—for the hours of deliberation and for choosing my book to represent children's literature in this lasting way.

And of course, to my husband and children, who are here tonight—maybe feeling bad about all the trash they talk about my bike? Thank goodness I thanked you in private because we all know I couldn't possibly get through this in public without a meltdown. It must have been grueling to watch the sausage-making that is the shaping of a writer's career. Thank you for believing it could happen. Here we are, fam, on this happy day. Thank you for being the very core of everything that I am.

Good night.

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