

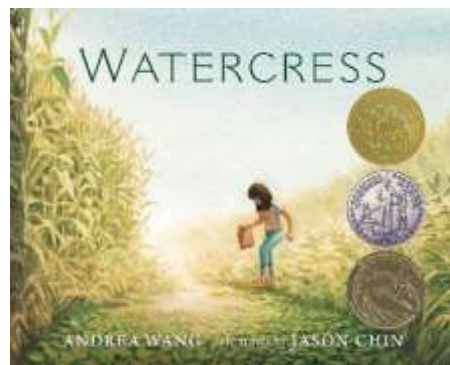


Randolph Caldecott Medal Acceptance Speech



Jason Chin received the 2022 Randolph Caldecott Medal for *Watercress*, written by Andrea Wang (Neal Porter Books/Holiday House). He delivered his acceptance remarks during the Newbery-Caldecott-Legacy Banquet held Sunday, June 26, 2022, at the ALA Annual Conference in Washington, DC.

Good evening. It is a particular joy to be addressing you in person, as the two previous recipients of the Caldecott Medal were not able to do. On that note, because they missed out on their ballroom full of applause, I think we should give it to them. Please join me in congratulating Kadir Nelson for *The Undefeated*, and Michaela Goade for *We Are Water Protectors*.



I'd like to congratulate all the award recipients this evening. Especially my fellow Caldecott award recipients: Micha Archer, Shawn Harris, Corey R. Tabor, and the late Floyd Cooper. Your books are important and beautiful, and I know they will find many, many readers in the years to come.

I've enjoyed drawing for as long as I can remember. As a kid I particularly enjoyed drawing castles, dragons, and knights in shining armor. My drawings consumed my attention, and I'd leave the real world behind for the imaginary world that was coming to life on the page.

In 1987, when I was seven years old, my family moved to a small town in New Hampshire. That October, a special guest came to my elementary school. All of the students were buzzing about her.

It was Trina Schart Hyman, and that was the day I learned about the Caldecott Medal, which she had won two years previously for *Saint George and the Dragon*.

Her presentation was magical. I sat in the audience enthralled by her humor, her books, and her art. Here was a woman who was famous for doing the thing that I loved and whom all of my peers admired. It was a ringing endorsement of the value of art and artists.

As the years passed, my interest in art only grew. When I was in high school, I decided to call Trina up and ask for help. She graciously took my call and invited me to her house. When I arrived, I was greeted by a beautifully illustrated sign that read, “This is a smoking establishment. If you have a problem with that, you can leave.”

We talked for an hour or so. She smoked the whole time. We talked about my art. She asked about the stories I liked. I ended up yammering on about *Star Wars* and Joseph Campbell, and she saw a kid who was happiest when dreaming up imaginary worlds. In retrospect, I think she saw a kindred spirit, and when we were through, she said, “When you make some more art, come by and show me.”

I continued to visit her every few months throughout my high school years. I joined her Monday painting group when I was home from college. She was my mentor and role model.

I observed how Trina lived in her stories. She formed personal connections with her characters. She dreamed about them. She knew their histories, secrets, and passions. In a sense, she *became* her characters, and this deep empathy gave her artwork vitality and emotional honesty.

As a college student, I took Chinese history classes to learn more about that side of my heritage. My father had taught me that Chinese artists attempt to capture the essence of their subjects in their paintings, but it was after reading an essay by Simon Leys that I made the connection between Chinese art and Trina. In the essay, he wrote about an artist who painted bamboo:

Nothing should come between the painter and the thing he observes...If [the painter] could achieve natural perfection in his art, it was because...*he himself had become a bamboo.*

It was like the two sides of my heritage pointing me toward a universal truth: to breathe life into your art, put your whole self into it and become one with what you are painting. This became a guiding principle for me, and if there is one book where it came to the fore, it is *Watercress*.

When my editor, Neal Porter, sent me the manuscript, I was impressed by the many layers of emotion Andrea had packed into the spare text. I knew it was special, but I was also hesitant. Was I ready to dive

into this story, to live with these characters, and dream about them? Was I ready to take on the responsibility of illustrating Andrea's lived experience?

My hesitation was brief. The text was too good and the privilege of being trusted with it too great. I took the risk, trusting in Neal and our wonderful art director, Jennifer Browne, to help me through the process.

Neal decided to introduce Andrea and me early on. She shared her family history, and I told her about mine. Our conversations gave me important insights into the characters I was beginning to illustrate, and also put me at ease. I felt that I had her permission to do the book.

Doing research is my way of entering a book, and meeting Andrea was the beginning of this process, but there were many more questions to answer. What does corn look like? What does a '67 Pontiac Tempest look like? What was the great famine like? The questions and my search for answers drew me deep into the story and into the lives of the characters. I read books and oral histories, visited museums, and scoured photo repositories.

I spoke to my father about how, as a child, he too was embarrassed by the Chinese food his family ate. I spoke to Chinese Americans in my community about their experiences. And I plumbed the depths of my own memories, recalling times when I felt like I didn't belong and when I was "ashamed of being ashamed."

The characters in *Watercress* are a patchwork of Andrea's memories and my own. They were informed by our family histories, by friends' stories, by oral histories, and by the stories on display in museums and shelved in libraries.

Throughout the process I received invaluable guidance from Neal and Jennifer. *Watercress* is the tenth book we've done together, and over the years we've developed the best kind of relationship. I trust them and they trust me, despite my creative meanderings and missed deadlines.

They were patient with me as I spent months trying in vain to make the art for *Watercress* in pastel, Neal ending each of our conversations with these words of reassurance: "Don't worry, we'll get there."

We did, of course, but not until I let go of the pastel and returned to watercolor. That's when everything started to fall into place. The medium opened the possibility of incorporating techniques from both Western and Chinese art. I would borrow from Chinese bamboo paintings for my corn and bamboo. I would allude to the cloud-enveloped mountains in Chinese landscape paintings. The palette would include references to Chinese culture and 1970s American style. I would use Chinese brushes and Western brushes, and the whole thing would be a symbolic merging of two cultures.

I finished the art at the end of March 2020, just after the country went into lockdown. Everyone at Holiday House was working from home, and yet somehow, despite the extraordinary circumstances, they managed to make a beautiful book. When I held it in my hands for the first time, I was blown away. The art on the page looks better than the real thing. Then I read it and saw how Andrea's words elevate my art. This book succeeds because the words and the pictures and the design and the production all come together to tell Andrea's story.

When I was painting, I was focused primarily on the inner lives of the characters; their grief, embarrassment, shame, and loneliness. These difficult emotions were the heart of the story. To me, they were what the book was about. Neal told me it was also about hope, but I confess, after living in the story for so long, I didn't see that clearly and just took his word for it. It wasn't until hearing from readers that I truly understood.

Since the book's publication, we've heard from readers from a variety of backgrounds who identify with the story. We've heard from immigrants and non-immigrants alike who foraged with their families. One reader wrote to Andrea to say that she, too, was embarrassed by her mother, an immigrant from Hong Kong, when she would stop to gather free food in small-town Kansas. It turns out that Andrea wasn't as alone as she thought.

At a recent school visit in Vermont, an African American student approached me and said, "I just moved here from Maryland." She just wanted to let me know. I think Andrea's story made her feel seen. She, too, was learning to fit in, in a new place.

And a teacher shared this quote from a second-grade student. After listening to the book, the student said: "This is a life lessons book. Be happy with what you have, be proud of who you are."

Be *proud* of who you are. Wow.

This child saw the hope in the story more clearly than I had.

Watercress shows us the importance of sharing stories and their power to heal. Stories give young readers the context and language with which to understand their own lives. Stories about difficult subjects like loss or shame give children the opportunity to talk about these hard things. Kids experience hard things, even though we wish they didn't, which is why these stories are so important to share.

Just as we need to hear stories, we also need to be able to tell them. *Watercress* is about a girl trying to fit in, but it is also the story of a mother's grief. When the mother shares *her* story, she begins to heal. Helping kids to share their own stories is essential, because, as my father says, "The only thing worse than suffering is suffering alone."

My wife pointed out recently that *Watercress* is a very American story. It's a version of a story that nearly every one of us has in our family history: the story of moving to a new place and struggling to fit in. It's not *the* American story, because there is no one American story. Our country's story is a tapestry, woven from the experiences of millions of different people.

Many who want to ban books seem to believe otherwise. To believe that there is only one American story, or at least a correct American story. They seem to want to wish away the great diversity of this country by controlling the stories we are allowed to share and by denying the right of people who aren't like them to tell their stories.

Removing the books about the lives of LGBTQ+ kids or Black kids or members of the Latine or AAPI communities or any other marginalized group sends the clear message that they are not valuable, their stories are not worthy, and that they should be ashamed of who they are. It is reprehensible.

Removing those books also removes an opportunity for other readers to learn those stories and develop empathy toward those communities. Without empathy, resentments deepen, injustice grows, and hate spreads. Books alone won't stop the harassment and appalling violence directed at communities of color, but if we want to build a safer and more inclusive society, we must be able to see the humanity in people who are different from us. Which is why we need books that reflect the whole American story, in all of its

diversity, now, more than ever, and why we must fight censorship with every tool we possess. Each of us must stand up for the First Amendment and against the bullies who want to take away our freedom to read.

By protecting our First Amendment rights, you, the librarians of America, are making it possible for us to continue sharing the stories that connect us, that build bridges and strengthen community. To make it possible for a Black kid from Maryland to see herself in a story about a Chinese family from Ohio illustrated by a Vermonter. To make it possible for Andrea to share her story and to heal, and for children around this country to read it and feel proud of who they are, and share their stories, too.

Thank you to the 2022 Caldecott committee, and to all the librarians who work so hard to spread stories that help us see one another's humanity. You are doing the foundational work of the American experiment.

Thank you to my parents, who always shared their stories and our family history with honesty and pride. For providing for us, for nurturing our interests, and for keeping our heritage alive through stories and through food, including baked beans, char siu bao, and, of course, watercress soup.

Thank you, Trina. Your friendship and belief in me made all the difference.

Thank you to my Books of Wonder family. From you I learned the importance of children's books and about why we do what we do.

Thank you to everyone at Holiday House who had a hand in producing this book and getting it into the hands of readers. This book was a team effort. I played my part, but there were many parts to be played, and the book wouldn't be here without your talent.

Thank you, Lisa Lee, for making the art look so good on the page. Thank you, Terry Borzumato-Greenberg, Michelle Montague, Sara DiSalvo, and the rest of the marketing and publicity team. Thank you, Derek Stordahl, for being the best cheerleader our book could ever have. And thank you, Neal Porter and Jennifer Browne. Your ideas, guidance, and patience were invaluable.

Thanks to my kids and to my beautiful wife, Deirdre Gill. Your strength of character is a guiding light to me and to all who know you. Happy anniversary. I love you.

Finally, thank you, Andrea Wang. Your brave words inspired us all. On behalf of every person who had a hand in this book: thank you for sharing *your* story and letting us help to share it with the world.

Thank you all, and good night.

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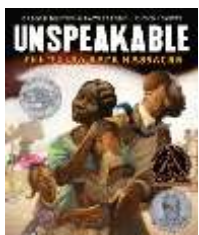
Have You Ever Seen a Flower?

written and illustrated by Shawn Harris
Chronicle Books



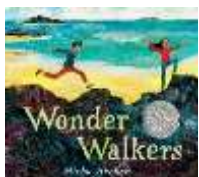
Mel Fell

written and illustrated by Corey R. Tabor
Balzer + Bray, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers



Unspeakable: The Tulsa Race Massacre

written by Carole Boston Weatherford; illus. by Floyd Cooper
Carolrhoda Books®, an imprint of Lerner Publishing Group



Wonder Walkers

written and illustrated by Micha Archer
Nancy Paulsen Books, an imprint of Penguin Young Readers,
a division of Penguin Random House