



Children's Literature Legacy Award Acceptance Speech



James E. Ransome received the 2023 Children's Literature Legacy Award for his significant and lasting contribution to literature for children. He delivered his acceptance remarks at the Newbery-Caldecott-Legacy Banquet held Sunday, June 25, 2023, at the ALA Annual Conference in Chicago.

Thank you, American Library Association, for honoring my work with this incredible award. But, just to be clear, the Children's Literature Legacy Award is for my previous body of work—correct? Because I'm not done yet! I have plans, ideas, and contracts, so, God willing, I plan to be around a lot longer.

Now that we've cleared that up, I'd like to proceed with my thank yous.

And my first goes to my family. Lesa Cline-Ransome, my wife and my collaborator in all things. The longer, more in-depth thank-you, which includes the number of sacrifices you have made, will come later in my speech, just as you requested. (I'm not sure I was supposed to add that last part...!) I am sincerely grateful for my other four loves, my children, Jaime, Maya, Malcolm, and Leila. Thank you for bringing the deepest joy into my life that I'm not sure you'll ever truly understand. Thank you to my parents, my siblings, and my cousins, who all watered the creativity in me when I was just a seedling.

I would like to thank the many publishing houses I have worked with. Of course, a special thank-you goes to the late Richard Jackson and Orchard Books for being the first to take a chance on a newbie illustrator fresh out of Pratt Institute, still wet behind the ears, and trusting me with Angela Johnson's book *Do like Kyla*, still in print today after thirty-three years. And Golda Laurens, my first art director, who held my hand and taught me so much about illustrating books for children.

With a career that spans thirty-three years, there is a long list of wonderful editors, art directors, and

others I have worked with during my journey. I would like to recognize just a few of my most recent publishers, art directors, and editors, who allow me to explore and seek new places with visual storytelling.

Mary Cash and Kerry Martin from Holiday House; Paula Wiseman and Laurent Linn from Simon & Schuster/Paula Wiseman Books; Caitlyn Dlouhy and Sonia Chaghatzbanian at Atheneum/Caitlyn Dlouhy Books; Nancy Paulsen and Cecilia Yung at Penguin Random House; and Karen Wojtyla and Michael McCartney at Margaret K. McElderry Books. Thank you all for letting me fly creatively.

I would like to give a special acknowledgment to all of the authors who have allowed me the wonderful opportunity to visually narrate the pictures for your manuscripts.

And finally, a big thank you to all of my fellow artists, friends, and family members who show up, travel, and support me in so many ways. The educators, the librarians, the students who write letters, the parents. Everyone who has read aloud and put books in a child's hands, I thank you all for being a part of this incredible dream that I am living. I truly believe that without the support I have been given throughout my career, I would not be standing here today.

I am so deeply honored to accept this award, and I am grateful to the committee for choosing little old me. I know the names and the works of the giants who have been honored in previous years, so I am especially humbled to have my name listed among theirs. All of this is more than I could have ever imagined, and I have a pretty big imagination!

This past February I attended the thirty-first African American Children's Book Fair in Philadelphia along with forty other authors and illustrators. As we all gathered to take a group photo, I leaned in to congratulate author Amina Luqman-Dawson on winning the Newbery for her incredible book, *Freewater*.

Amina graciously smiled and shook my hand and kindly asked me my name. But once I introduced myself, her expression changed. I remembered that I had a very similar expression on my face when I met Tom Feelings and Virginia Hamilton when I first entered publishing. Amina's hand went limp in my hand as she blushed. And I thought: She has to be kidding. This woman just won the Newbery!

Amina went on to tell me what an honor it was to meet me, and I told her the feeling was mutual. I shared that the Great Dismal Swamp, where her story *Freewater* takes place, is not too far from where I grew up in North Carolina. I had discovered the place from artwork by Whitfield Lovell, who created an installation called *SANCTUARY: The Great Dismal Swamp*.

Later I discovered that Amina received her BA from Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York, the town where I lived for ten years and just a short distance from my current home. I also discovered we both love vanilla ice cream with caramel topping. I hope that I'm not scaring anyone in here, but it's all to point to the fact that it's pretty fascinating the things you can discover from a quick Google search.

Here we were, two people who had never met, but I learned in meeting her that we shared a connection through the books that I illustrated.

I'm not telling you this story to suggest that somehow I am a celebrity or someone who deserves admiration, but to illustrate the power of story. But what was even more powerful was that it was books that connected us. In addition to reading about Amina's love of ice cream, I also discovered how she recaptured her own love of children's literature in reading to her young son, and shortly after she began writing *Freewater*.

My journey to this stage began in a place many of you have never heard of, and that includes those of you born in the state of North Carolina, where I am from. I grew up in the small, rural town of Rich Square, North Carolina, where I lived alone with my grandmother Ruby G. Ransome. We didn't have much. My grandmother didn't drive and she couldn't read or write, but she always found enough money and a way to make sure I had comic books to devour and enough pencils and paper so that I could spend my days copying the images that I saw on those pages. So, I entertained myself with television, *MAD* magazine, and drawing. The only library I had access to was at my elementary school, and the books I checked out were the only ones in our home. To this day, I am a very slow reader and a horrible speller, but books and pictures always captivated me. On my own, I ordered paperbacks from the back of *MAD* magazine and the order forms of our class's *Weekly Reader*.

As a teenager, when I moved North to live with my mother in northern New Jersey, I entered a completely different world. Here I attended a suburban high school that had eight art teachers and

offered photography and filmmaking classes, drawing, painting, and an outstanding art program that saved me. It was my high school art teacher, Charlie Bogasat, whom I count as my first art father, who took the time to rewrite my badly written college essay. And he, along with my other art teachers, inspired me to go to Pratt Institute, where many of them had attended.

And during this time of my finding my artistic footing came the soundtrack of my life: George Clinton, Parliament and Funkadelic, Bootsy and the Funkateers, and all the others who jammed with him. The rap music of Public Enemy and Boogie Down Productions, blues, gospel, jazz, and R&B, all of which now fill my studio as I work and remain a large part of my practice and my soul.

I carried this music with me to Pratt, where I met my wife, Lesa Cline, thirty-eight years ago at a Prince “Purple Rain” party. We were in our sophomore year when I asked her to dance, and I haven’t let go of her since. This Boston girl changed my life, transformed me. First by becoming my best friend and then lifelong partner and collaborator. It is so thrilling to watch her grow beside me in her writing as I have grown in my illustration. Thank you for being my soulmate, supporter, counsel, my foundation, and for giving me a copy of *The Patchwork Quilt* illustrated by Jerry Pinkney while we were dating in college to inspire me.

This is a celebratory night, but it is also a little bittersweet when I reflect on Jerry Pinkney. He was my mentor and friend and the person to whom I dedicate this award for opening his heart, studio, and family to me. He was not just another art father, but more like a true father to me, and I miss him dearly. Jerry, and first seeing his work in *The Patchwork Quilt*, opened a world for me, and he is the reason I stand here today. When Jerry Pinkney gave his own Legacy speech in 2016, he said,

I lived out those days with the coding “you can” and “you can’t.” Art was definitely a “can’t.” Not only were there no artists in my family, but in those early years, there were no models of such a career in my entire universe.

Thank you, Jerry Pinkney, for being my model and making me feel like I belong.

My goal has never been to influence a group of artists or future bookmakers. But I have always hoped to touch the minds and souls of people and to help them understand each other and in some small way remind them of the beauty of us, and of family, and what we were and what we can be. And in that way become a part of the way they live their lives.

Books, reading, and art should have an emotional tug on us and change us or reframe the ways we see the world. That is certainly what the books of Tom Feelings and Virginia Hamilton and, of course, Jerry Pinkney did for me.

I hope that my pictures make young folks interested in the words. It was photographs and the art in the comic books I read as a child in North Carolina that made me want to read the stories. Even to this day, an interesting picture is what grabs me first, then the words come because I want to know more about the pictures.

Now, this would be a perfect time to step up on my soapbox and turn this into a speech about why books should not be banned. I hate giving speeches, and I typically let the pages of the books that I have illustrated speak for me.

This award tells me that I belong to a community. A community in which I am a small part of teachers, librarians, support staff, booksellers, all the folks in the publishing houses, writers and illustrators, and each of us has a hand in creating great, intriguing works of literature for young people to create a more literate world.

I want my artwork to be a bridge to the works that hang on museum walls. I hope that seeing the paintings in the books that I illustrate helps young people to feel more comfortable when they walk into a museum. After all, books are often the first form of art young people see.

Making literature for young people is also having the opportunity to introduce unsung and hidden heroes into their lives. In the books *Hardcourt: Stories from 75 Years of the National Basketball Association* and *Gridiron: Stories from 100 Years of the National Football League*, writer Fred Bowen and I introduce today's young people to sports legends. And hopefully my wife Lesa and I have aided in making more people familiar with the lives of Joseph Boulogne, Chevalier de Saint-Georges, Satchel Paige, Venus and Serena Williams, Harriet Tubman, Major Taylor, Louis Armstrong, Benny Goodman and Teddy Wilson, Robert Battle, and Adolphe Sax (and how saxophones made their way into the hands of jazz musicians). Many of these books came out before the movies on the same subjects, which often makes me wonder if movie producers are also reading our books.

Thank you again to all of those who do the work every day to celebrate the art of books, the beauty of reading, the power of literature, and the blessing of how stories can change the world. And that, friends, is why books should not be banned.

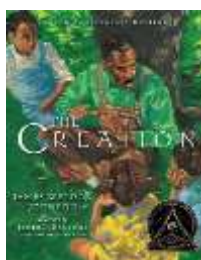
Thank you.

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Select Titles by James Ransome



The Story of the Saxophone
Holiday House, 2023



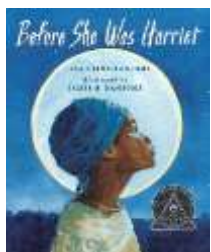
The Creation
Holiday House, 1994



The Bell Rang
Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2019



Uncle Jed's Barbershop
Simon & Schuster, 1993



Before She Was Harriet: The Story of Harriet Tubman
Holiday House, 2017