Doug Salati received the 2023 Randolph Caldecott Medal for Hot Dog (Alfred A. Knopf, an imprint of Random House Children’s Books). He delivered his acceptance remarks during the Newbery-Caldecott-Legacy Banquet held Sunday, June 25, 2023, at the ALA Annual Conference in Chicago.

I’d like to start by saying I’ve always been a better drawer than a writer.

I’m also a better listener than a talker.

So. Lucky you!

I am here in this place once occupied by my heroes, artists whose work defined the visual vocabulary of my childhood with, as Marcia Brown called it, their “emotional richness.” I have had difficulty putting into words what it means to be a part of this day and a part of this history. There are so many connecting points and people that have led me to be in this room with all of you—so many gifts I’ve been given. I imagine that you, too, all have important people in your lives that have ultimately guided you here. I am grateful to be here together.

When making a picture book, the line is not always straight, the path is not always clear, and movement is not always in a forward direction. From its first inspiration to its publication day, Hot Dog spans ten years of growth, change, and transition. The book is a very personal piece of work, my first attempt at taking on the mantle of author-illustrator. It represents my ongoing decision to commit to this profession and, come what may, follow the ups and downs of this path. I have been fortunate to find the most wonderful people along the way. Brilliant, supportive, encouraging mentors, teachers, and friends noticed what I was attempting to do, or to become. Everyone, and certainly every creative person, should be so lucky.
Hot Dog can be interpreted as precisely that: being with a friend who gives you their attention, who understands and sees you clearly, who accompanies you on your journey to being yourself. You, in turn, find clarity with your own thoughts and feelings, relax enough to allow for the possibility of play and discovery, and find the space you need to enjoy and appreciate this beautiful and overwhelming world. Then give back to it.

What a gift that is.

I have been given many gifts over the course of my life, which brought me, and us, here together tonight. I would like to share five of them with you.

#1: The gift of storytelling

Being read to is a fundamental joy that many of us never grow out of. I remember being four, listening to the words as my eyes darted around the details of the pictures. Like alchemy, the two came together in my mind, creating something richer than the sum of its parts. My mother had already been teaching in her public-school classroom for fourteen years before my sister and I came along, and as part of her continuing professional development she enrolled in a graduate course on children’s literature taught by a passionate librarian who took the subject seriously. It invigorated my mother’s interest in the art form of the picture book and the power it can hold for a young audience.

She sought out the best books to supplement materials for her class. We’d read from the stacks she brought home from our local library, which had a dark oak staircase and creaky steps that led to the well-stocked children’s section on the second floor. Books by Tomie dePaola, Trina Schart Hyman, and Maurice Sendak. Anita Lobel, John Steptoe, and Ed Young.

Listening to stories, then becoming a reader myself, grew into storytelling through song in the chorus room, learning about rhythm, tempo, and harmony. In drama club I would read scripts, memorize lines, and bring a scene to life onstage. I like to think my teachers understood that the stakes could be high when you are a kid trying to figure out who you are. They knew there was safety and camaraderie in creative spaces, and making art helped us to take chances, to try out new ideas and identities, and express ourselves in new ways.
#2: The gift of space

Around ten years ago, I finished graduate school, but wasn’t sure what would follow. One day in the mailbox, I received a letter offering me a place in a residency program, The Sendak Fellowship. I thought that there had been some clerical error because I wasn’t a published illustrator yet, but when I called the director, Dona Ann McAdams, to explain, she assured me it wasn’t a mistake. It took place the following summer on a high, rolling piece of farmland that overlooked the Green Mountains of Vermont. The stress of city life, my anxieties about making a living, all of that melted away. In its place came peace, calm, and possibility.

There, I continued working on sketches for a picture-book text that my partner, Matthew Farina, had written for me as a birthday gift. I also made a first attempt to write a story about a dog I had met a few years before on the beach.

The other Fellows and I were treated to visits by luminaries in the field, including Barbara McClintock and Tomie dePaola. I remember how grateful I felt to Barbara for taking the time to come down to my studio and look over the sketches for *Lawrence in the Fall* and how meaningful it was that she called it a “significant” story. Meeting Tomie was like reading his books—a little mischief, a lot of joy. Tomie was happy that I knew Trina Schart Hyman’s work well, and I was thrilled to learn they had been close friends. We kept in touch once I returned to the heat and the noise and the crowds of my normal life in New York, clinging to the experience I had just had. Short emails, phone calls, and visits when Tomie was in New York City helped me hold onto the bliss of the residency. We’d talk about his influences, his work, and being a gay man when he was growing up versus what it was like for me.

During one phone conversation, Tomie claimed that he couldn’t figure out how to make the pictures for a manuscript he had written and asked if I wanted to give it a try. You know as well as I do that Tomie could have drawn it. He was giving me the generous gift of a direct, tangible opportunity to learn on the job.

# 3: The gift of process

When I pick up a favorite picture book from childhood, or see one recently published, shining out from the shelves of the bookstore, they look as if they sprang fresh from the artist’s fingertips—radiant, perfect, effortless. A drawing the d’Aulaires made comes to mind, of the goddess Athena springing fully formed
out of Zeus’s head. A pounding headache! A crack of the skull! Then—poof! There she is, resplendent in robe and armor.

At the Fellowship, I also met Lynn Caponera, who I have to thank for dispelling the misconception that picture books are created in one fell swoop. She brought me on to assist The Maurice Sendak Foundation in completing an inventory and cataloging of Sendak’s picture-book art. Here, in boxes and protective sleeves, was tangible evidence that an artist does not simply spring forth, fully formed, instantly wielding their power as a storyteller. There are notes, dummies, drafts, revisions, preliminary sketches, final art. There is apprenticeship and collaboration, a daily act of dedication to the work, lifelong passion and commitment. There is travel and research. There is looking to art history, to music, literature, and nature. There is movement, growth, and a perpetual wish to develop as a person and as an artist. Nothing is static. There, in the archives, was an artist’s expansive, layered, and evolving life, decade after decade. I am so grateful to Lynn and all of my colleagues at The Maurice Sendak Foundation for this life-changing opportunity, and my own apprenticeship, of sorts, with Sendak’s work.

#4: The gift of community

When I was younger, I would daydream about growing up and living by myself in a hollowed-out tree in the middle of the woods like Sam Gribley did in My Side of the Mountain because I wasn’t quite sure where or how I fit in.

Instead, I moved to New York City.

I read more about the lives and work of my favorite picture-book makers and delighted in learning that many of them were gay, too. On some level, I wish I had known that sooner. Hearing about their identity and the fullness of their lives helped me to be more accepting of myself and more excited for my own future and creative interests. Visibility and community continue to matter.

In the city, I found the right people at the right time while working at the School of Visual Arts. I started with continuing education courses with Rachael Cole and Sara Varon, and eventually I enrolled in a program there, which would expand my professional and personal community in ways I couldn’t predict—including future studiomates who visited as guest critics.
A few years ago, I moved into a shared workspace with Sophie Blackall, Brian Floca, and Rowboat Watkins. They were hard at work, in the thick of their latest projects with busy calendars and lives in full swing. And yet, they took the time to show their enthusiasm at every stage of the making of *Hot Dog* with insightful comments, impromptu critiques, and persistent lunch-table inquiries. There were discussions about rhythm, pacing, page-turns, and temperature. One of the founding studio members, Johnny Marciano, has recently returned, and Dasha Tolstikova has joined in, and they all inspire me deeply. Thank you also to Ruth Chan and Cecilia Ruiz for keeping me laughing and motivated while the story was still just a few words on the page. I am so grateful to you all.

#5: The gift of relationships

Rotem Moscovich has been on the scene from the start of my career; she attended my thesis exhibition to plant the seeds of the work we’d do together, and I’m so grateful that she did. Thank you, Rotem, for providing a path to my first contract, which gave me the confidence to take the leap into spending more and more time making picture books.

I have had the good fortune to know Rachael Cole as a teacher and mentor, friend, and neighbor. Thank you for the morning walks in the park and for helping to hone the book’s layout, design, and flow.

Rotem, Rachael, and I set to work on *Hot Dog* just as New York City was shutting down. The lively city streets and subway scenes that I was drawing in the book did not, for that moment, exist in real life. It was a comfort to be connected to each other and to have this project to focus on. I will remember their dedication and drive to help keep me moving forward and to be open to discussing even the smallest of details.

Thank you to Carol Naughton, the fantastic director of production, and every member of the dedicated Knopf and Random House team for publishing and promoting the book.

Thank you to my agent, Erica Rand Silverman, for keeping me from spinning my wheels in the sand, for listening with care, and for being a true advocate for my work. Thank you to the entire Stimola Literary Studio team.

Thank you to my friends from Oneida, Saratoga Springs, Rochester, and New York City.

Thank you to my parents, Carol and Al, and my sister, Jenn, for always cheering me on.
Thank you to my partner, Matthew, who makes our lives better and brighter in immeasurable ways. You bring clarity when I am clouded with doubt and teach me how to dwell in possibility every day.

Thank you to the Ezra Jack Keats Foundation for their early acknowledgment and support.

Thank you to Christopher Denise, Michaela Goade, Jason Griffin, and Janelle Washington for your beautiful and uplifting work.

Thank you to all the librarians keeping books on shelves so that every child can feel seen and supported on their path, whatever that may be. Access to books shouldn’t be a gift—it should be a given. For those doubting their place in the world, a book can have enormous impact.

It is the greatest gift to get to try something new. To move to a new city, to visit a new place, to become a new, more truthful version of yourself, to find new forms of expression through your art. To chair Dr. Rob Bittner and each member of the 2023 Caldecott Award Selection Committee: it is a gift to have my work recognized in such a tremendous way. I will always be grateful for this honor you’ve given me.

Thank you.

Doug Salati photo © Erin V. Carr

2023 CALDECOTT HONOR BOOKS

Ain’t Burned All the Bright
written by Jason Reynolds; illustrated by Jason Griffin
Caitlyn Dlouhy Books/Atheneum Books for Young Readers, an imprint of Simon & Schuster Children’s Publishing
Berry Song
written and illustrated by Michaela Goade
Little, Brown Books for Young Readers, a division of Hachette Book Group

Choosing Brave: How Mamie Till-Mobley and Emmett Till Sparked the Civil Rights Movement
written by Angela Joy; illustrated by Janelle Washington
Roaring Brook Press, an imprint of Macmillan Children’s Publishing Group

Knight Owl
written and illustrated by Christopher Denise
Christy Ottaviano Books, an imprint of Little, Brown Books for Young Readers, a division of Hachette Book Group