

Robert F. Sibert Award Acceptance Speech

On Inspiring Parade Balloons

Melissa Sweet



Melissa Sweet is the winner of the 2012 Robert F. Sibert Award for Balloons Over Broadway: The True Story of the Puppeteer of Macy's Parade, published by Houghton Mifflin Books for Children, an imprint of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing. She delivered her acceptance speech at the American Library Association Annual Conference in Anaheim, Calif. on June 25, 2012.

One night last January, I dashed the few yards in the falling snow from my kitchen to my studio to prepare for work the next day. I was paying bills at my computer when the phone rang.

No one calls me at night, so I thought it was a telemarketer. But it was Andrew Medlar of the Sibert Committee. He told me they had chosen *Balloons Over Broadway* for this year's Sibert Medal. I thought, "Did I just use my cranky *I think you're a telemarketer* voice . . . and did he just say 'medal?'" Somehow I mustered a "thank you" to the entire committee on speakerphone. What a warm gift on a cold winter's night!

Andrew told me I could only tell my husband and the dogs. (*How did Andrew know I have dogs?!*) I raced back to my house and toasted Tony Sarg with my husband. I will never forget the joy inside my bright kitchen in contrast to the dark, snowy quiet outside.

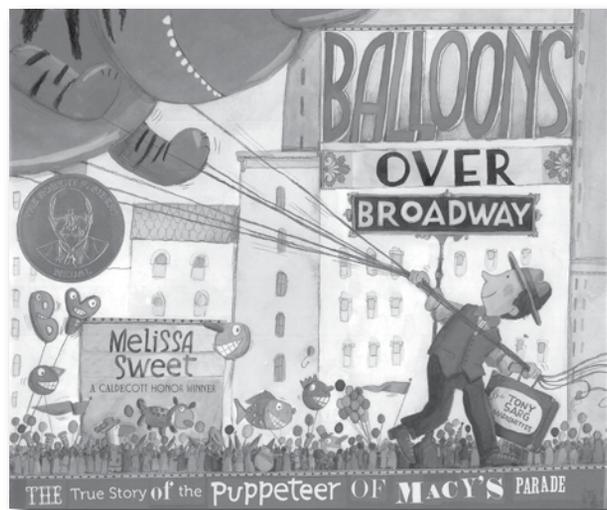
Tony Sarg was introduced to me in another life-altering phone call.

An art director I work with described him as a brilliant illustrator, a puppeteer, and the man who invented the Macy's Parade balloons. I had the same reaction most people do—I'd never heard of him!

But there was a collection of his work in Nantucket where he once lived, and four days later, I was at the Nantucket Public Library copying newspaper clippings.

Over the next five years, I pieced together his life by talking to puppeteers, finding out the inner workings of Macy's, and even corresponding with a man in his nineties who worked for Sarg at the 1939 World's Fair. The more I researched, the more enamored I became with Sarg.

As I tried to find the story that would illustrate the essence of his genius, my editor, Ann Rider, posed a pivotal ques-



tion: Was anything ever difficult for Sarg—did he struggle in any way?

I hadn't yet considered what it was like to be Tony Sarg. To find out, I began making toys and puppets with the same materials Sarg would've used. My studio was mayhem! But as my work became more three-dimensional, it began to feel like Sarg's world. My publisher never questioned how tricky it might be to pull this off, but encouraged me to make the art that inspired me.

Because the final art was too heavy and delicate to ship safely, I packed my Mini Cooper to the gills and drove in a fierce rainstorm to my publisher's offices in Boston. The art director, Rachel Newborn, and the production team of Crystal Paquette and Donna McCarthy met me at the door. From there, they worked their magic.

I want to thank everyone at Houghton Mifflin Harcourt for creating a book even more beautiful than I envisioned. And most importantly, I want to thank Ann Rider. The pleasure and privilege I have in crafting a book with her is immeasurable.

Thank you Bob Sibert, Committee Chair Andrew Medlar, and the entire Sibert committee for this distinguished award. I am honored that you not only chose a book about a man who continues to light up our imaginations, but a picture-book that celebrates the creative process that inspired him. ☺