



Geisel Award Acceptance Speech

Stories Stay with Us

By Alison McGhee



Alison McGhee is the winner of the Theodor Seuss Geisel Award for *Bink & Gollie*, which she coauthored with Kate DiCamillo.

Thank you, ALA for bestowing this wonderful award upon us. And thank you, my marvelous collaborators, Tony and Kate and Candlewick Press. Making this book together was a great joy.

Long ago, I took a job teaching Chinese at a big inner city high school. I was new to teaching, and although I loved it, it exhausted me. So for the last half hour of each class on Friday, I read books about China aloud to my students.

Those were peaceful, happy times. I had brought in lamps, and my students sprawled out on the giant pillows I had made, and the lamplight pooled on their faces, and each one, in that light and that time, was beautiful.

Months later, years even, I would see those teenagers walking around in the halls carrying library copies or used paperbacks of the very books I was reading to them.

My first baby was born soon after, and at first he had a tough time being in the world. He needed to be carried constantly or he would scream, so I carried him constantly. The only time we stopped moving was when he sat on my lap and I read picture books to him.

Where the Wild Things Are. *Mike Mulligan and the Steam Shovel*. *Goodnight Moon*. And *Ferdinand*, his favorite, the story about the little Spanish bull who wanted to sit just quietly under the cork tree and smell the flowers.

We spent many hours sitting on that couch, reading picture books. Many years' worth of many. It was our favorite thing, me and my boy.

The years went by, and he grew and he grew. And when he turned eighteen, he texted me: "Mom, would you kill me if I got a tattoo?"

A tattoo. I wanted to tell him don't do it, that I was there when he was born, that his newborn skin was so soft that touching it was like touching air. That I cried the first time a mosquito bit him. That first scar.



Photo Credit: Dani Werner

But he was eighteen now, and 6-foot-4, and his body was his own.

"Well . . . not as long as it's a heart on your bicep with the word 'Mom' in the middle," I texted back.

He saved his paycheck, and off he went to St. Sabrina's Parlor in Purgatory and he got his tattoo. It is not a heart on his bicep with the word "Mom" in the middle.

But it could have been. Because the tattoo he got is a tattoo of Ferdinand, the little bull, sitting just quietly under the cork tree.

What did I learn from those peaceful Fridays reading to my students, and from that tattoo? That children are children for a very short time, and when they grow up, they go out into the world, and they remember the books that were read to them. I learned to choose my words carefully with children because, as Carl Sandburg said, "It is not easy to call those words back." In fact, it is not possible. In our bones and in our blood, the books of our childhoods live on.

I write for children to welcome them to this enormous world, knowing they will need to be brave and strong to live in it. I write for children to give them solace and courage and laughter.

I write for children because I love them. ☺