



Wilder Award Acceptance Speech

A Warm “Thanks to You”

Katherine Paterson



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Katherine Paterson is the winner of the 2013 Laura Ingalls Wilder Award. Her acceptance speech was delivered at the American Library Association Annual Conference in Chicago on June 30, 2013.

When Martha Parravano called me one Sunday afternoon back in January to say that her committee had selected me as the 2013 Laura Ingalls Wilder Medal recipient, I was both surprised and thrilled. And before I go any further, I do want to say thank you to Wilder Committee members Martha, Darwin Henderson, Heather McNeil, Margaret Tice, and Sylvia Vardell for this lovely honor.

Martha said, amidst the chorus of cheering in the background, that I must watch the awards announcement the next morning. Unfortunately, when I got up on Monday, the house was freezing cold, and I soon realized that the furnace, despite a full oil tank, had gone on the blink. When I called the company, they said that lots of homes in central Vermont were out of heat that morning and they would try to get around to our house before nightfall. So my husband and I huddled in the one room with an electric heater. I brought my laptop downstairs from my study so we could watch the awards announcement together, but that far away from the router, the Wi-Fi refused to work.

John can no longer do the stairs, so when the hour approached I left him in the care of our part-time helper and went upstairs in the chill to watch the webcast alone. Although hearing myself announced as the Wilder recipient warmed the cockles of my heart, the rest of my body was pretty cold, so as soon as the broadcast ended I rushed back to the one warmish room. At about four in the afternoon, the phone rang. “So when were you going to tell us?” demanded my son John. “Do I have to find out on Facebook that my mother has won the Laura Ingalls Wilder Award?”

I felt apologetic enough to go back up to my chilly study and e-mail all the children. I got an immediate reply from my son-in-law Stephen Pierce: “So. Let’s see . . . no heat, no email, sounds like you’ve got a Little House in the Big Woods thing going.”

By nightfall the furnace was humming again, but then, without any warning, all the lights went out. It was several hours before the electricity was restored. I began to feel that the shade of little

Laura Ingalls had indeed decided to haunt her latest award recipient. Well, all I can say, Laura, is “rest, rest, perturbed spirit.” I’m doing the best I can standing here tonight, not only in your shadow but in the very long shadows of all the previous winners of your award.

The Japanese have a wonderful expression: *o kage sama de*. I was told initially that the English equivalent is “Thanks to you.” But, as is often the case, a great deal is lost in translation. The word *kage* is the word for “shadow” in English. *O* and *sama* are both honorifics, and *de* is an article that can indicate either place of action or means. So my own translation of the phrase is: “By virtue of your most honorable shadow.” Now isn’t that a lot more elegant, not to say eloquent, than a simple “Thanks to you”?

During the last forty-three years, I’ve had the benefit of many generous shadows, beginning with my very first novel. I began to write *The Sign of the Chrysanthemum* when no one wanted to publish the stories or articles I was writing. But it occurred to me that if I could write a story or an article in a week, I should be able to write a chapter in a week, and if I did that, by the end of a year I’d have a novel, and I would have accomplished something, even if no one wanted to publish it.

Well, for a couple of years, no one did. I suppose I should have recognized that a story for young people set in twelfth-century Japan would be a hard sell, but I was a little bit homesick for Japan and the days when I was a competent single woman and not the harassed mother of four tiny children. As I wrote the book in the slivers of time allotted me, I could, for a few minutes, leave dishes and diapers behind and enter the exotic world of Heian Japan.

After the seventh or eighth rejection, a miracle happened. A young Sandra Jordan (yes, *that* Sandra Jordan) found my book in the slush pile of unsolicited manuscripts, liked it, and took it to her boss to read. Her boss, Ann Beneduce, had just returned from a visit to Japan. I’m sure Ann had no illusions that my book would be a bestseller, but she felt American children should have a chance

to read about feudal Japan, and she thought the author of the book should have the chance to write other books.

Ann Beneduce turned my manuscript over to an editor just coming off maternity leave, and since 1970, that editor, Virginia Buckley, and I have worked together on sixteen novels. It is by virtue of the most honorable shadows of these three great women that I stand on this stage tonight. Truly, Sandra, Ann, Virginia, *o kage sama de*.

My guess is that most of you in this room tonight have never read *The Sign of the Chrysanthemum*. Looking at it from the distance of forty years, it's not hard to see why the book had trouble finding a publisher. This was well before the flourishing of young adult literature as we know it today. Not only were the time period and setting exotic, but my book told of a thieving bastard looking for the father he never knew.

The closest thing to a heroine in the story ends up in a brothel, and my teenaged hero is powerless to rescue her. A bit of trivia that I enjoy sharing with folks who want to know the difference between books for adults and books for the young is that in 1973 when my book was published, the number one adult bestseller of the day, with forty-six weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list, breaking all hardcover sales records since *Gone with the Wind*, was the tale of an overachieving seagull.

When I told my husband that the Laura Ingalls Wilder Award was to be given in Chicago, he said: "Well, give my regards to Chicago." John is no longer able to travel with me, but our whole family remembers our first trip to ALA in Chicago when *Bridge to Terabithia* was the Newbery recipient. We love Chicago. And if it had not been for the loving shadows of my husband John and those four terrific children, I would not be here again.

I look out at you tonight. Some of you weren't even born when I began the long journey to this stage, and few of you are as old

as I am. But my thanks are due to all of you and all the librarians and teachers who through the years have shared my books with the young. Many of those children would never have found my books without your help. *O kage sama de*.

So tonight while you celebrate the 2013 Newbery, Caldecott, and Wilder honorees, we are also celebrating all of you who make our lives as writers and illustrators possible—you who believe in what we are trying to do and whose aim in life is to nourish the lives of the young. You know the children and youth in your care and you know books, so you are able, time after time, to put the right book into the hands of the right child. The children you touch will have the chance to be more than mindless consumers. The books you introduce to them will help them grow to be thinking, compassionate members of the human race. And if our democracy survives, it will be in no small measure by virtue of your most honorable shadows.

Tonight I'm going to repeat something I said in Chicago in 1978. It relates to another Japanese expression. That night I explained the Japanese word that is on the dedication page of *Bridge to Terabithia*.

The word is *banzai*. The literal meaning of the word is "ten thousand," as in, "Live ten thousand years!" Or "Live forever!" It was originally the salute to royalty, which in our own time has become more like the hooray you yell for your favorite sports team.

On that magical night in 1978, I said: "It is a cry of triumph and joy, a word full of hope in the midst of the world's contrary evidence." It was the word I wanted to say, not only through *Bridge to Terabithia* but through all of my books. And it is again my salute to each one of you tonight whose lives are bridges for the young. Hooray! And may your courage, your tenacity, and your caring live for ten thousand years.

Banzai! &

"You know the children and youth in your care and you know books, so you are able, time after time, to put the right book into the hands of the right child. The children you touch will have the chance to be more than mindless consumers. The books you introduce to them will help them grow to be thinking, compassionate members of the human race."

