

Writing Is Naming the World

Avi

Crispin: The Cross of Lead
Hyperion Books for Children
2003 Newbery Medal Winner



Award Acceptance Speeches

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I have lived a life of books. Family tradition says that at the age of five I breathlessly announced, “I can read! I can read!” Perhaps the book was *The Poky Little Puppy*. Maybe it was *The Story of Ferdinand*. Both were books I adored.

By the time I left high school I had already decided to be a writer. When assembling our senior yearbook (my school was so small we only needed a year-pamphlet), classmates used Shakespeare to define me by placing right next to my graduation picture Prospero’s words: “[I was a] poor man, [but] my library / Was dukedom large enough.” Indeed, I worked in libraries some twenty-five years.

Now, at the age of sixty-five, instead of contemplating retirement, I’m receiving from you the honor of this award. In so doing you have energized me, deepened my commitment—and alarmed me. For, once the immediate hubbub of the announcement subsided, all I could think was, “Oh my God! The next book better be really good!”

For most of us who write novels for young people, to win a Newbery is manifestly the summit of achievement. Its brightness seems to illuminate all of one’s work. Indeed, the award is described as honoring the “most distinguished” work of children’s literature.

I hope you won’t think me churlish when I say in all honesty I am not comfortable with that word, *most*. Here tonight are many writing colleagues of mine who, I assure you, write as well as if not better than me. The notion that

my book is better than the work of Nancy Farmer, Patricia Reilly Giff, Carl Hiaasen, Ann M. Martin, or Stephanie S. Tolan is doubtful. No question, there are kids out there who will like their books better than mine. More power to them. The democracy of reading taste, particularly among the young, is something I applaud.

Let’s not forget that enduring books, such as *Charlotte’s Web*, *Tuck Everlasting*, and *Hatchet*, did not win a Newbery. Nor have extraordinarily gifted writers like Walter Dean Myers won this award. Nor has the children’s own choice (if one looks at bestseller lists), the nefarious Lemony Snicket, won this award. In the past year the Boston Globe–Horn Book Awards, the National Book Awards each selected different books. And what about all those state awards? To all this I say, bravo!

In a culture that is forever proclaiming (and selling) this or that as the best-ever, a culture that promotes unanimity and conformity, I say let us celebrate diversity of every kind. Let us revel in the fact there is so much good writing for young people that we can-

I may be the ship’s skipper, but it is my pilot—my editor—who recognizes the dreaded shoals of clichés, the bays of bathos, the perils of prolixity, who guides the boat to a safe harbor.

not agree on a single best book. Let us celebrate how rich in talent we are. Why look back to a golden age of writing for young people when we are living in one right now?

We writers cherish the award because no one sits down to write a Newbery book. Indeed, no one deserves to win in a field where so many fine writers write so many fine books. It comes as a gift—a mix of luck, the right moment, the right people, and, I’m proud to say, a good book.

But, since you have bestowed this award on me, it appears I must answer the question that I quickly discovered is part of the established ritual attached to this prize: how did it feel to win?

I was in Philadelphia for most of ALA Midwinter, introducing another book. I was sick with some kind of flu and dared not eat for three days. It was bitterly cold, too, so I spent as much time as I could in my hotel room with a blanket around my shoulders working on a laptop on one project or another. The image of the lonely, sick writer in his garret almost fits.

When I was obliged to take part in proceedings and chanced upon Newbery committee members, they turned away in haste, eyes averted—as if I were some pariah. How humiliating! How depressing! I was so happy to get on the plane home that I arrived at the airport two hours early. Why stay for Monday's announcements and become even more depressed? Had I not recently worried that *Crispin* had not done as well as I thought it might? Had not my wife said to me as I left for Philadelphia, "If you think you might win an award, stay another day." And had I not answered, "Honey, if I were really smart, I'd stay home and write something good."

Where was I when the call came? I was sitting where every self-respecting writer who is also a parent should be at 5:30 in the morning—at my desk, working, editing my college-age daughter's application for a summer job.

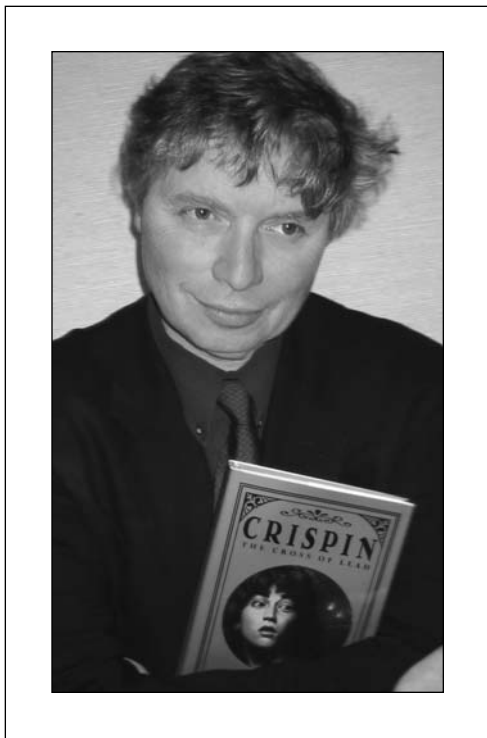
In truth, when I got the news I was surprised, elated, humbled, and deeply moved. Once I accepted the news—it took a bit to believe—what did I do? I burst into tears. It required some time for me to sort out the meaning of those tears. Were they tears of grief? No. Tears of joy? Not really.

I have thought hard: The only vaguely comparable moment of ecstasy in my writing career occurred when I hooked up my first computer and discovered how to use a spell checker.

Indeed, those were tears of relief. My

world was telling me an extraordinary simple but powerful thing: I had been recognized as a good writer.

Why relief? Because, friends, writing is hard. And writing very well is very hard. Never believe any writer who suggests otherwise. Scratch the surface of any successful author and you'll find just below—



Newbery Award winner Avi

in fetal position, sucking a thumb—is an insecure writer. Writing well for all of us is always a struggle.

How has the award affected me? First off, it immediately cured me of the flu. My daughter secured a better summer job (on her own). My wife said I was mellowed around the house—for about a month.

To the extent that I thought about it, I had always believed that winning a Newbery might be like standing on a summit and having the world at your feet. It's not been that way at all.

Instead of an isolated, windswept, and splendid peak, I felt as if I had stumbled into a dark room. The lights go on and I discover a surprise party—for me. People shout, "Surprise!" and laugh at my bewilderment and joy. Who is there? All my friends, publishing colleagues, and you

librarians, who are all excited with me, who, once the surprise is over, go on to have a really great party. To hear from so many writing and publishing friends that they were glad I had won was deeply satisfying and provided the sense of community and camaraderie we in publishing cherish.

At such a literary celebration, there is a natural tendency to focus on the individual author, the celebrity name on the book, even as our culture commemorates the myth of the isolated writer. There is some truth to both images. I work best in our Colorado mountain retreat surrounded by miles of stone-still wilderness. At nine thousand feet, there is none of civilization's chatter save what's in my head. But I am hardly working alone.

I think we need to celebrate more the collaborative nature of bookmaking. For of course there is another name affixed to the books: the publisher's name. Its one name encompasses many. While I have no qualms about saying the story is mine, every book that bears my name is an intensely cooperative work of art in which I, the author, play a part. It's no different in your libraries. There's the reference librarian front and center. The great skills of the technical service people are out of sight to the general public. But that reference librarian could not function without those others.

Bookmaking is a complex art and business. Many are involved. Most are invisible. It's a little like that credit listing at the end of a movie. You see the many names only if you bother to stay. A book does not provide such a list. All the same, there are dozens of real people involved.

To begin, I have the remarkable Gail Hochman as an agent. She's astonishing for any number of reasons. First, she holds the record for being New York City's fastest talker. Second, she's one of the city's smartest folks. She's also kind, funny, and—not beside the point—the best agent in town.

Then there are book designers, illustrators, marketing people, publisher, assistants, copyeditors, publicists, proofreaders,

printers, binders—folks who are passionate about what they do but who, I suspect, are underpaid for all the care they put into their work. They, too, are skilled book makers who deserve our thanks and admiration, as do even the book reviewers. And of course there are thousands of booksellers and librarians who bring our books to the kids.

And while we writers travel upon the rough terrain of the earth in search of a destination, our editors—like astronauts—see the world whole. I may be the ship's skipper, but it is my pilot—my editor—who recognizes the dreaded shoals of clichés, the bays of bathos, the perils of prolixity, who guides the boat to a safe harbor.

Throughout my career I have been blessed with good editors. Over the years there have been some twenty-five of them. My early years were with the truly fabulous Fabio Coen of Pantheon Books. With Richard Jackson I have engaged in creative daring and gained a special friend.

Anne Dunn and I crafted books that excited readers. Elise Howard trusted my visions and empowered them. I have laughed (and sometimes even worked) with Allyn Johnston and Anne Schwartz. Sally Doherty has always been a demanding editor and a good friend. And how lucky I was to have as editor for *Crispin* Donna Bray of Hyperion Books for Children. She is so smart, so articulate and discerning, so determined to get the best book possible out of me. Like the best of editors, she demands excellence while helping me get there—with a wry sense of humor that is always enabling. And of course she is patient when she has to read yet another of my endless revisions.

As for Hyperion Books for Children, they are in many respects a new kid in the publishing world, just ten years old. The image of Disney (the giant corporate entity) might mislead people, but this is one solid-gold publishing company. Small by today's publishing standards and led by Lisa Holton, they are tight,

focused, and amazingly good at what they do—producing books of the highest quality for kids. I predict I won't be the last Hyperion author to be giving this speech.

My family is deeply involved in my life. Not, I hasten to say, with my work—but my life.

about dogs than anyone in this room.

As for my wife, Linda Wright, she is nothing less than the smartest person I know—my best friend, my wife, my lover. Indeed, the only downside of this occasion is that I don't get to sit by her side.

The other day I was reading about the universe in the newspaper. What I discovered, to my astonishment, is that the scientific community has been able to identify only 4 percent of what the universe consists of. Think of it! Ninety-six percent of the universe is as yet unknown. They call it *dark matter*.

That extraordinary fact reminded me of something I once heard the writer Donald Hall say. He was trying to explain—by way of metaphor—what it is that a writer does, how writing works. It is a concept that, from the moment I heard it, I have cherished.

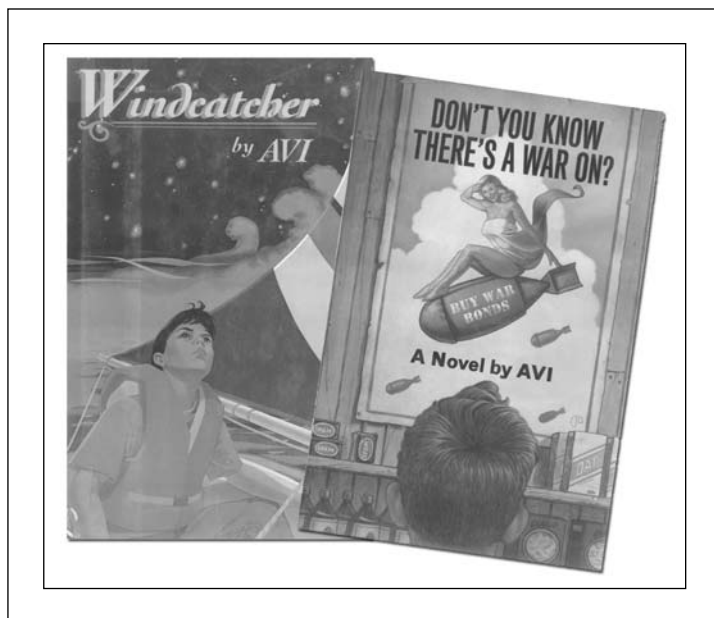
The writer in his writing, tries to create the letter O.

But he does so by writing the letter C. Which is to say there is a gap. Where there is nothing. Dark matter, perhaps. The writer's words on the page create structure, character, and voice—but there are the gaps, the dark matter, the unknown, and the not written. It is the reader who fills this gap.

If the gap is too large, the reader cannot fill it. If the gap is too small, the reader need not fill it. But if the gap is just right, the reader fills it with self and the circle is complete. Thus, writer and reader have joined together to make the writing whole.

In other words, by surrounding what is not written by what is written the writer enables readers to see, feel, and experience some dimension of their own lives in the text.

How does the writer create this dark matter? As I once heard Paula Fox express it, he imagines the truth. Truth is always the



Other books by Avi: *Windcatcher* and *Don't You Know There's a War On?*

Jack, my youngest—though these days he's almost as tall as I am—once said to me, "Avi, sometimes I think of you as my stepfather, and sometimes I think of you as an author. But you know what, I like to think of you most as my stepfather."

In my book, that's the award of a lifetime.

To provide the full roster from eldest to youngest: There is Shaun, guitarist extraordinary and chef supreme. Kevin, who is one tough marshmallow—and loving parent in his own right. There is Katie, who celebrated her high school graduation by parachuting out of an airplane—as smart, adventurous, and beautiful as they come. There is Robert, always his own man, who will take on any wilderness and conquer it. There is Jack with a heart as big as he is (and he's bigger today than he was yesterday) who—though he hardly knows how gifted he is, in class or on a lacrosse field—is our own All-American. Then there is my six-year-old granddaughter Ruby, who knows more

harshest reality, even as it is the most liberating one. For the paradox of writing is this: the greater the writing, the more it reveals the ordinary. That is to say, great writing reveals what we know, but never noticed before. Great writing identifies that most elusive of all things—that which we have seen but had not noticed, that did not seem to exist until it was named. Nowhere is this done better than with children's books. Let us not forget it was a child who proclaimed, "The emperor has no clothes."

Here's my own key example:

Years ago, when I was a seventeen-year-old boy, living in New York City, I was coming home very late from some high school event. I was in the caverns of the

For what I realized was that I—as is true for everyone in this room—create the world in which I live. Like Adam in the book of Genesis, we name everything. Writing is naming the world.

city, in an empty subway station. It was 2 a.m. I was alone. I was tired. Standing there, I fell half asleep, my eyes still open. All of a sudden I saw a whole new world. In those nanoseconds, my culture, my biology, my sense of self vanished. In their place I saw the world as I had never seen it before—utterly empty, utterly devoid of meaning, a world that had no name, only matter.

It was a true epiphany.

For what I realized was that I—as is true for everyone in this room—create the world in which I live. Like Adam in the book of Genesis, we name everything. Writing is naming the world.

I love to write. Stories have been my passion, my life. What I truly adore is creating stories that, in my own jargon, work—stories that come to life for the reader, that

name the world.

Crispin was my fiftieth book. Since 1975 I've published at least one book a year. Since *Crispin*, I've written and published more. But though I may be tired at the end of a day, I never tire of this great enterprise. I remain in love with the world of libraries, bookstores, and publishing. I have a passion for books, the smell of the ink, the turn of the page; for words; and beyond all else, stories. I love the whole process, from sitting down and writing the first sentence to seeing kids absorbed in my books, my story—not me.

For some twenty-five years I was privileged to have been allowed—as a librarian—to take care of stories. I've been writing some forty-eight years. Best of all, I've been sharing stories all my speaking life.

My friends, we live in a world in which there is so much that is bad. Plain and simple—*bad*. Harm is being done. The young and old are being ignored, kept ignorant, hurt, abused, and killed.

This enterprise—this writing, this reading, this world of children's books in which we are all

engaged—is *good*. Plain and simple, good. My friends, we do no harm. We do good. And that, I think, is a very big thing. Oh yes, we may fail all too often. And I dare say there are a few less-than-sterling individuals among us—though surely none within this room. But—I repeat—we do good. It's not naiveté that proclaims this. It's pride. That's what this celebration is all about—our collective goodness.

For whom do we do good? We do it for kids. Our mission is to bring the marvelous world of literature, of reading, to kids. What a glorious mission it is—helping kids to become themselves—empowering them to name their own worlds.

Here's something about *Crispin* you don't know. The book had an earlier working title, discarded for a variety of reasons, not least of which because I discovered it was the title of a well-known Victorian

novel. But early titles, whatever their deficiencies, often indicate an author's emotional and narrative focus. Think of Robert Louis Stevenson's original title for *Treasure Island*, *The Sea Cook*.

The working title for *Crispin* was *No Name*. It functioned for me as a kind of metaphor for a kid who has no sense of self. There is this exchange in the book between Bear and Crispin in Chapter 25.

"I'll teach you music" [said Bear].

"I won't be able to learn," I [Crispin] said.

"Do the birds sing?" he asked.

"Yes," I said.

"Do they have souls?"

"I don't think so," I said, somewhat confused.

"Then surely you can sing no less than they for you have a soul."

"Sometimes . . . I think I have none."

For once Bear was speechless. "In the name of Saint Remigius, why?"

"I have . . . I have never felt it."

Bear gazed at me in silence. "Then we," he said gruffly, "shall need to make sure you do."

That's all we who write hope to do: create stories that will enable our young readers to find the stirrings of their souls.

I have long believed that as a parent one has essentially just two tasks. One is easy. One is hard. The easy part is to love the child. The hard part is to convince the child that he or she is loved.

We can do that, in part, through our great and shared enterprise: the wonderfully old-fashioned—some say obsolete—book. If we create books out of love, then surely to share them is part of that love.

Some of us here are story makers, others are story sharers. One way or another we provide stories for kids that will entertain, move, engage, and teach. Stories that say again and again that yes, life may be hard, or funny, or perplexing, always risky, but in the end, worth the living.

Dear colleagues, dear friends, you have chosen to bestow upon me this remarkable gift, this Newbery award for 2003. Moreover, you have done it most symbolically, for my fiftieth book, in my sixty-fifth year of life. I accept it with the

deepest gratitude. In return I will offer a hope and a promise. My hope is that *Crispin* is not my best book. My promise is that I will always try to make the next one better.

To live a life of books is to know that life is its own sequel. May there always be more to come.

With a heart full of love and gratitude, I thank you. ☺

Funny in Real Life, Funny on the Page

Eric Rohmann

My Friend Rabbit
Roaring Brook Press
2003 Caldecott Medal Winner

What a strange feeling to be up here, standing here speaking to you. For the past few months I have found myself in unknown territory. The truth is, I'm living my usual life, but all things have the tinge of unfamiliarity. Consider me surprised, overwhelmed, perplexed, astonished, exalted, joyful, and humbled by all that has occurred.

In the breakneck, headlong months of making a book, when you are deeply involved with little choices, when you are propelled by the buzzing energy of the work, when moments of panic rise in the shadow of the deadline, there is not a lot of time for wondering what will happen when the book goes out into the world. In the studio, day to day, you ask yourself small questions. Have I put too much red in that blue? Is the leg of the alligator drawn awkwardly? While working, you never consider that one day people will look closely at your finished book—the result of all those decisions, mistakes, and discoveries—and say, I think this deserves the Caldecott Medal. The imagination encourages such fancies, but the work is always more pragmatic. And then you get a phone call early one January morning.

And speaking of that call, the phone rings at half past six, and I rise to answer. (The verb rise may be a touch too active. On this cold, dark January day I awaken slowly, my limbs bending like stale Twizzlers.) Through the cobwebs of early morning, I hear a voice on the other end of the line—a voice way too enthusiastic for 6:30 A.M.

The voice says, “This is Pat Scales of the American Library Association.” My first thought is that I have overdue books.

And then I think I hear, “Your book, *My Friend Rabbit*, is the recipient of the 2003 Caldecott Medal.”

Silence. If this were a movie, you'd hear a ticking clock, raindrops on the windowsill, a heart beating.



Eric Rohmann

I say, “You mean an honor award?”

“No, the medal.”

“The silver?”

“No, the gold.”

I'm *arguing* with Pat, trying to convince her that this can't be, but she's resolute and I fumble for some articulate response, a meaningful reply, some eloquence equal to the moment, but I got nothing. Silence. More ticking clocks. *My* heart beating.

Even now I'm not sure I know how to respond to this great honor with anything resembling coherence.

I must confess that a few years back I dreamed I was speaking before a crowd much like all of you tonight—and I knew it wasn't my recurring anxiety dream about public speaking because this time I was wearing pants. I stood before the audience and an important man in a blue suit announced that I had won the Caldecott—and the Newbery, the Nobel, the Pulitzer, the National Book Award, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and the Heisman Trophy, an Oscar, an Emmy, a Tony, the Stanley Cup, the World Cup, the Grey Cup, the Pillsbury Bake-Off, and Best of Breed, Westminster Kennel Club, a Grammy, a Juno, the Boston Marathon, the Great Texas Chili Cook-off, and runner-up, Playmate of the Year.

Don't kid yourself, there's something in all of us that wants to be visible from space. But there is also a part of us that is ever-cautious and disbelieving. This doubting part of me is well developed, made muscular through extensive use. Artists and writers are lucky this way. We start with a blank sheet of paper, work until we think the thing is finished, then wake the next day and start all over again. If you're serious, the work teaches humility early and often.

Which leads me to another dream. I had this one during graduate school, the night before I was to read my very first story in my first ever writing class. But in the dream I'm in the fourth grade—Mrs. Cerny's room—and I'm late for class.

“Sit down, Eric,” she says.

I look around and don't recognize any of my classmates.

A bearded kid in a fisherman's sweater sits in Nina Oakrant's seat. Another kid, dressed in a white suit, sits behind me at Alan Holtzman's desk. I turn to him. He looks like Mark Twain.