



Award Acceptance Speeches

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American Library Association
Annual Conference
in Orlando, June 2004*

We Do Not Do Battle Alone

Kate DiCamillo

*The Tale of Despereaux: Being the
Story of a Mouse, a Princess, Some
Soup, and a Spool of Thread*
Candlewick Press
2004 Newbery Medal Winner

About thirty miles west of Orlando is a small town called Clermont, and in that town is a library called the Cooper Memorial Library. When I was seven years old, the librarian there, a certain Miss Alice, stepped out of her office one day and stood beside me and put her hand on my shoulder and spoke the following words with a great deal of force and volume.

"Kate," Miss Alice said to the person at the circulation desk, "is a True Reader! Therefore, the four-book maximum will be waived for her! She may check out as many books at a time as she likes!"

Miss Alice's hand trembled on my shoulder as she said these words. Or perhaps my shoulder trembled beneath her hand. I cannot say.

All I know for certain is that her words, spoken so passionately, so fiercely, shaped me and helped me define who I was. Who was I? I was a True Reader!

I know, emphatically, that Miss Alice's words are a part of the miracle of my presence here tonight. I also know, emphatically, that it is a miracle that I am here tonight at all.

And, in keeping with the nature of miracles, I am properly awed by it. I cannot explain it. I can, however, joyfully point to the many people who are a part of the miracle: Kara LaReau, my patient and daring editor who read the first seven pages of this book and said exactly the words I needed to hear: "More, please;" everyone at Candlewick Press who believed in my small mouse; Timothy Basil Ering, who brought the mouse to life; my mother, who read to me; my friends, who listened to me. Thank you.

And to the Newbery committee: thank you, thank you, thank you. Thank you to each one of you for this miracle. Thank you, all of you, for believing in the power of stories.



Kate DiCamillo

Speaking of stories, I would like to tell you one. I grew up in Florida, but before Florida, until I was five years old, I lived in a house on Linden Lane in Philadelphia. The house was a large mock Tudor, and within it there were two stairways: the front stairs, which were light and bright and grand, adorned with a chandelier and lit further by tall windows above the landing; and the back stairs, which we called the servant stairs. These stairs ran from the kitchen to my brother's bedroom, and they were dark and dismal and full of cobwebs and smelled of mildew and rot.

Also, according to my brother, the servant stairs were inhabited by trolls and witches. Because of this, my brother kept the door in his room that led to the stairs closed. He shoved a chair up against the door. He checked often to make sure the chair stayed in place. But sometimes, on weekend mornings, when he believed that the trolls and witches were sleeping, my brother would pull the chair aside and open the door and run down the servant stairs and emerge, triumphant and out of breath, into the kitchen.

I was four years old at the time of this story. My brother was seven, and we had a father who was a storyteller and a joke teller. Also, our father could laugh like a witch. The sound was terrifying: a high keening, a cackle that was almost, but not quite a scream. The witch's laugh made me shiver. It made my brother's teeth chatter, and this disgusted my father. He considered my brother a coward, and he told him, often, that he was too afraid of too many things. One Saturday, my father said to me, "Let's fix your brother. We'll give him a *real* scare. We'll hide in the servant stairs. And when he runs past us, you grab him, and I'll laugh like a witch."

Now you have to understand: no one knew better than I did how afraid my brother was of those stairs. No one knew better than I how much the witch's laugh terrified him. And the combination of those two things—the dark stairs; the witch's joyful, murderous scream—would, I thought, be enough to kill him.

No one knew better. But this is what I said to my father: "Okay."

I knew that if I said, "Let's not do this; it will scare him too much," my father would say, "Oh, you're just like him. You're a big scaredy-cat, too. What's the matter with you guys? You're no fun."

I wanted my father to think that I was brave. I wanted my father to think that I was fun. And so I said nothing.

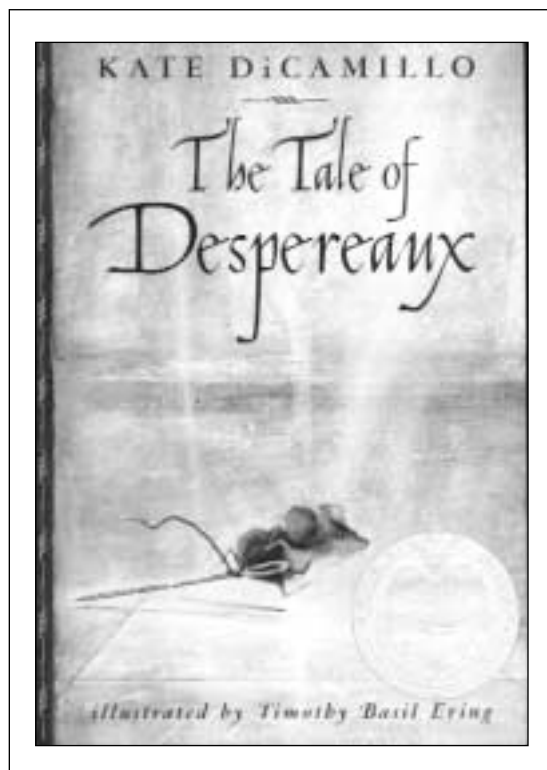
Instead, I stood at the bottom of the servant stairs. I held my father's hand. I listened as, upstairs, my brother moved the chair aside and opened the door. I could have called out to him. I could have warned him. But I said nothing as he descended the stairs toward us.

I was four years old. And I knew that I was committing an act of great treachery.

That's it. That's the whole story. And it's not, I know, much of a story, but I'm telling it here because there are people who believe that stories for children should not have darkness in them. There

are people who believe that children know nothing of darkness. I offer up my own four-year-old heart, full of treachery and deceit and love and longing, as proof to the contrary.

Children's hearts, like our hearts, are complicated. And children need, just as we do, stories that reflect the truth of their own experience of being human. That



The Tale of Despereaux by Kate DiCamillo,
illustrated by Timothy Basil Ering

truth is this: we all do battle with the darkness that is inside of us and outside of us. Stories that embody this truth offer great comfort because they tell us we do not do battle alone.

When I was five years old, we left the house in Philadelphia, but the stairs in that house stayed inside of me. They were carved in my heart, just as the memory of my treacherous act was imprinted there, shaping the person I became.

In Florida, however, two wonderful things happened. I learned to read. And then, safe within the magical confines of the Cooper Memorial Library, I met people in books who had conflicted, complicated hearts like my own. I met people who fought against their own jealousy, rage,

and fear. And each page that I turned, each story that I read, comforted me deeply.

I have wanted, for a very long time, to tell the story of me and my brother and the servant stairs. But it was not until I sat down to write this speech that I realized I had, unwittingly, told the story already. It's all there in *The Tale of Despereaux*: the dungeon stairs and the castle stairs, the chandelier and the tall windows, the sibling betrayal and the parental perfidy.

Despereaux's story turns out differently than mine, of course. And part of the reason that it does turn out differently is that Despereaux reads, in a book in the library, the story of a brave knight. And at the moment when he must make a difficult decision, the mouse decides to act like that knight. He decides to act courageously in spite of his fear.

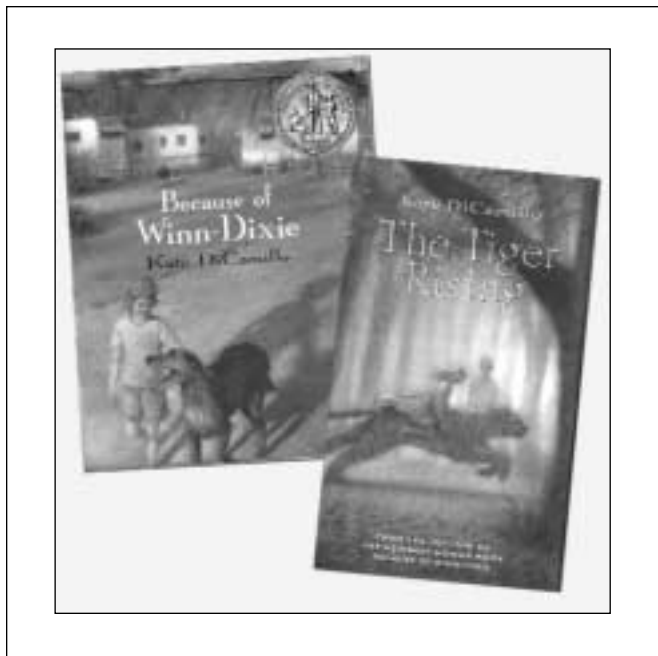
This is the other great, good gift of stories that acknowledge the existence of darkness. Yes, the stories say, darkness lies within you, and darkness lies without; but look, you have choices.

You can take action. You can, if you choose, go back into the dungeon of regret and fear. You can, even though there is every reason to despair, choose to hope. You can, in spite of so much hate, choose to love. You can acknowledge the wrong done to you and choose, anyway, to forgive.

You can be very small, as small as a mouse, and choose to act very big: like a knight in shining armor.

But none of these things, none of these shining moments, can happen without first acknowledging the battle that rages in the world and within our own hearts. We cannot act against the darkness until we admit it exists.

Thirty-five years after I stood at the bottom of those stairs and said nothing, I have started to forgive myself for not speaking up. I have begun, too, to forgive my father for what he did, for making me complicit in my brother's suffering.



Because of Winn-Dixie and *The Tiger Rising* by Kate DiCamillo

This forgiveness that I am slowly approaching is the gift of the stories I have struggled to tell as truthfully as I can. And it is the gift, too, of each truthful, complicated, tragic, celebratory story that I have read.

Four years ago, when he was eight years old, my friend Luke Bailey asked me to write the story of an unlikely hero. I was afraid to tell the story he wanted told: afraid because I didn't know what I was doing; afraid because it was unlike anything I had written before; afraid, I guess, because the story was so intent on taking me into the depths of my own heart.

But Luke wanted the story. I had promised him. And so, terrified and unwilling, I wrote *The Tale of Despereaux*.

Recently I had to make a very difficult decision. I had to be brave, but I did not want to be. I had to do the right thing, but I did not want to do it. Late at night, as I lay in bed agonizing over this decision, a friend called me up. She had received a letter from one of her students. The letter was written by a group of third graders at Talmud Torah in St. Paul, Minnesota, who had just finished reading *The Tale of Despereaux*. Each child said in one sentence what they thought of the book. I'd like to read you a few of those sentences:

"You taught us how to do what is right the way Despereaux did."—Chaim

"You inspired me to have courage."—Jonah

"You inspired us to believe in ourselves."—Gabi

And my favorite:

"I think that it was an all-right book."—Ernie

At the exact moment when I needed it, those kids gave me the courage I lacked, the courage they had gotten from a book that I had written even though I was afraid.

And this, finally, is the miracle of stories: together, we readers form a community of unlikely heroes. We are all stumbling through the dark. But when we read, we journey through the dark together. And because we travel together, there is the promise of light.

Einstein said, "There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is."

Tonight, I choose to believe that everything is a miracle. It is a miracle that I am here. It is a miracle every time I find comfort and courage in books. It is a miracle that we can live in this world long enough to learn how to be brave, long enough to learn how to forgive.

I accept this award tonight. I know that I don't deserve it, but I accept it . . . for all of us—True Readers, Unlikely Heroes—in honor of our shared journey toward the light. ☺

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