

Newbery Medal Acceptance Speech

Gifts from Fellow Travelers

Lynne Rae Perkins



I'd like to read you a poem. It was written by Denise Levertov; a friend of mine copied it out and gave it to me for Valentine's Day one year, and I keep it, framed, in my studio.

It's called "The Secret."

Two girls discover
the secret of life
in a sudden line of
poetry.

I who don't know the
secret wrote
the line. They
told me

(through a third person)
they had found it
but not what it was
not even

what line it was. No doubt
by now, more than a week
later, they have forgotten
the secret,

the line, the name of
the poem. I love them
for finding what
I can't find,

and for loving me
for the line I wrote,
and for forgetting it
so that

a thousand times, till death
finds them, they may
discover it again, in other
lines

in other
happenings. And for
wanting to know it,
for

assuming there is
such a secret, yes,
for that
most of all.

In Michigan, where I live, there are mushrooms called morels that pop up through the earth for a few unpredictable weeks in the spring, sometime after the snow

*Lynne Rae Perkins is the winner of the 2006 Newbery Medal for *Criss Cross*, published by Greenwillow Books. Her acceptance speech was delivered at the ALA Annual Conference in New Orleans on June 25, 2006.*

has turned to rain and the sun has started to warm up the soil. They're a delicacy; all the local restaurants have ads in the newspaper offering to buy morels, and they feature dishes made with them.

Morels are a democratic delicacy, because they are free if you can learn how to find them.

Even people who don't especially like to eat morels like to hunt for them. When you see a car parked on the side of the road in the springtime, with nothing nearby but a tree-covered hill, you know that the driver of the car is in those woods looking for morels. People have secret spots they return to every year, and while they may be only too happy to hand you a grocery bag filled with morels, they will never tell you where they found them.

There is an art to finding morels, which are brown and wrinkled and blend in with the rippled bark and the fallen twigs and the dried-up leaves and the mottled lumps of dirt. They are nearly impossible to see. Until you see them. There are people who say they can find them anywhere, and other people (including me) who almost never find them.

It's an art most often described in mystical terms:

"You look for them by not looking for them."

"You have to unfocus your eyes."

Even resolute Polish Catholics become Zen masters when it's time to hunt mushrooms in Michigan. As for me, I tromp, focusing and unfocusing, looking and not looking, through last autumn's leaves flattened by the winter's snow, and I find myself thinking of the line from Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood* about Bessie Bighead watching for Gomer Owen, "who kissed her once by the pigsty when she wasn't looking and never kissed her again although she was looking all the time."

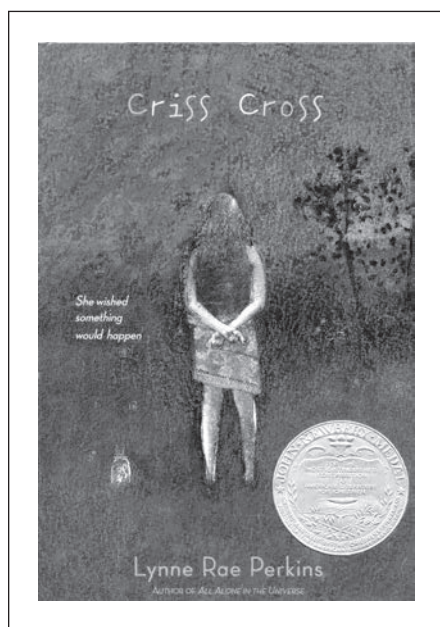
I think the secret of life does that. It hides, brown and wrinkled, among the dead leaves and broken twigs and the lumps of dirt. It kisses you when you aren't looking.

Okay, not always—sometimes it hits you over the head. With a baseball bat.

But I think a lot of us—most of us, maybe—are looking. Even if we're looking by not looking. Looking all the time. Believing there is such a thing.

We come across little pieces of it, all six-and-a-half billion of us blind people coming across gray and wrinkled pieces of the elephant in the room that is life, that is the world.

When we arrive here, as babies, we come into such very particular situations, which can be so very different from each



other. But we don't know how particular our situations are because we don't have anything to compare them to. Our world is the whole world; it's all that we know. We are pretty busy just figuring out how it all works and how we fit into it: what pleasures are there for us, what we will try to steer clear of. For a long time, our world grows larger as our parents, or those who are standing in for them, allow it to. We depend on them to help us understand it.

But all along, bit by bit, we begin to meet the world that is beyond our parents' explanations. We encounter people with ideas that contradict what we have been taught; we get new information that doesn't seem to dovetail with what we already know. We begin to try to

understand the world for ourselves. And we begin to be aware that we have our own ideas that are in some way separate and different from the ideas of those around us.

The extreme example of this, of course, is if you are one of those children raised by wolves, but it happens to most of us, I think. We realize that the world is larger than anyone told us. We find out that our parents are human beings, with strengths and limitations, that they don't know everything.

Some of them are aware of this even before we tell them. Others are harder to convince.

Either way, we head out on the road that is our own life.

So, what is it like out there?

It's scary and exciting, lonely and crowded. Noisy. Boring, sometimes. It's heart-stoppingly beautiful, with unexplainable ugliness. There is kindness, cruelty, and indifference, there is serendipity, and there is being in the wrong place at the wrong time. I could go on.

It's a lot to try to make sense of, and often the tools we have seem so inadequate. If we are lucky, we might find at times that someone is walking along next to us, and they say, "You're not crazy; I see it, too." Or they say, "Did you ever notice how . . ." and for a moment the discombobulated mechanics of the world organize themselves according to some principle we hadn't perceived before, and we even see that we are a part of it, we are connected.

We pocket these moments and string them up like beads on a rosary. Like clues to a mystery. They are gifts, given freely to us by our fellow travelers, and they come in many forms. A conversation. A meeting of glances. An embrace. A song on the radio. A story.

Stories entered my life early on—stories that were told on the porch or at the kitchen table. I heard the events of our family's life reshaped creatively to make them more interesting or to support a point of view.

In what seemed to be a completely unrelated development, reading also entered my life early on. My sister Cathie taught me to read when I was four and she was six. She had learned to sound out words, and she showed me how to do it, too. I don't remember this myself; it was one of the stories I heard.

I do remember finding both the drawings and the poetry of *Go, Dog. Go!* to be deeply compelling.

The stories and the reading seemed separate because the stories were so social, while reading was, on the surface, a solitary pleasure. My parents read newspapers and magazines; they only occasionally read books. I think my attraction to reading books was seen as a harmless eccentricity, good in the sense

But if we only receive gifts, if we keep them all to ourselves, life dries up. If we share what we receive or give a gift of our own, however poor we think it is, life grows.

that it was related to doing well in school. I was largely unguided, free to float down the stream of whatever reading materials came my way. I read *TV Guide* and *Little House on the Prairie* and the Childcraft encyclopedia with equal involvement.

I also watched TV and movies, and listened to music and rode my bike and had friends and stayed awake all night at sleepovers. Our family went on vacations to the seashore.

But books had a special place, an important place. I don't think I could have said why.

In junior high, when I went to the bookmobile I would pick out the thickest books I could find; if they had small, dense type and a lot of unfamiliar words, all the better. I can still picture my copy of *David Copperfield*. (This is because I still have it.) I'm sure a lot of what I read went over my head. When I reread these books now, I can hardly believe they are the same books I read then.

When I think about junior high, I think

about it as the time when the rules I had been taught no longer seemed to apply. There was a new social order, and I didn't like it or my place in it. I felt suddenly insufficient, and the advice I received on this topic, while given with love and the intent to reassure, did not often seem to help me find a satisfying way to be in the world I actually lived in. This, of course, was something I had to learn for myself over a long time.

Books, though, acknowledged that life was complex. They offered up the possibility that other things besides what was happening, could happen. And I think now that though I didn't fully understand it at the time, they showed me that whatever you encounter, if you can meet it with honesty, intelligence, compassion, and humor, on some level you win. To

tell the truth in an interesting way, a way that allows for real sorrow, a way that allows for real laughter, is to open a door where there had seemed to be only a wall. This is the opposite of spin, which paints a picture of a door and hangs it on the wall in a gilded frame.

I was looking for doors. Sometimes I found them. They appeared in different forms: a conversation with my dad. A song on the radio. A feeling of familiarity with someone I had only just met. A story that offered possibility. The secret of life in a sudden line of poetry.

I remember being smitten with the novels of Kurt Vonnegut, with sentences such as, "Her smile was glassy, and she was ransacking her mind for something to say, finding nothing in it but used Kleenex and costume jewelry." Or, "Her face . . . was a one-of-a-kind, a surprising variation on a familiar theme—a variation that made observers think, *Yes—that would be another nice way for people to look.*" I remember being struck by these sentences, these thoughts, these stories about the imaginary island of San

Lorenzo and one of the moons of the planet Saturn and feeling that they had something to do with my life, the life I was actually living.

All of these ideas, songs, and stories helped me to meet the world that was larger than, while also contained in, the specific little town where I grew up.

They were gifts from fellow travelers. But if we only receive gifts, if we keep them all to ourselves, life dries up. If we share what we receive or give a gift of our own, however poor we think it is, life grows.

We learn this in fairy tales. The two brothers who refuse to share their "beautiful" pancakes and wine with the gray old man have incapacitating woodcutting accidents. The youngest brother, who is considered a fool, offers to share his cake made with water and baked in ashes and his bottle of sour beer, and he finds that they have been transformed into fine cakes and wine—and the gray old man also directs him to the golden goose. If you share what you have, the roles of giver and receiver reverse themselves, like alternating current. There is a connection and electricity.

Writing and drawing are two of the ways I respond to the world. There are so many ways, so many wonderful ways, but words and pictures have always been important to me, so that's what I do. A lot of what I write and draw will never see the light of day, and that is fine; it's as it should be.

But as I go along, I find that there are stories and pictures and ideas I want to share, and so—at the risk of adding one more metaphor to this whole heap that is about to topple over—I put my pancake baked in the ashes into a bottle called a book and toss it into the ocean. Actually, since I live in the Midwest, I have to send it to Virginia Duncan in New York City, who tosses it into the ocean for me.

And then I steel myself for the very real possibility that it will get lost out there. It's a big ocean, I say to myself. And such a little bottle. The important thing, I say, is to do it, whether anyone sees it or not.

But writers write because they want to

connect. The agenda of a writer is simple. It is "I want to tell you something." Maybe it's a joke. Maybe a story. Maybe the secret of life. Or all three. So, try as I might to pretend it doesn't matter, I toss my bottle out there with the hope that it will be found, and even more, that someone who finds it will care about it. I have asked myself sometimes, how many people do I need to find it and care about it? And the answer I have come up with, in my moments of lowest expectations, is five or six. I've thought, if you really, really connect with five or six people, what more can you want?

And then in January of this year, I got kissed when I wasn't looking. In one short phone call, I learned that my five-person quota had been exceeded by two hundred percent, to fifteen people. And not just any fifteen people, but fifteen librarians—who in my experience are among the top one percent of humans on the earth in terms of being smart, funny, thoughtful, and principled.

That would have been enough.

But what this phone call also meant was that in a very concrete way, I get

to be a fellow traveler. I get to share my pancake. I get to say to someone who may be feeling as out of sorts as I did, as I still sometimes do, "It's okay. You're not crazy. I see it, too. But have you ever noticed . . . ?"

It takes two people to make a book—a writer and a reader—and it's not clear-cut who is doing the giving and who is receiving. The roles of giver and receiver go back and forth like alternating current, when there is a connection.

It takes two people to make a book—a writer and a reader—and it's not clear-cut who is doing the giving and who is receiving. The roles of giver and receiver go back and forth like alternating current, when there is a connection.

I'd like to thank the American Library Association, ALSC, and Barbara Barstow and the Newbery Committee from the bottom of my heart for giving me this immense opportunity to make that connection.

And because what I just said about it taking two people to make a book was a patent understatement of the truth, I also thank Virginia Duncan, my editor; Sylvie Le Floc'h, my designer, who made my book beautiful; and every wonder-

ful person at Greenwillow Books and HarperCollins Children's Books.

I thank Bill and Lucy and Frank.

And I thank those of every persuasion, from Polish Catholic to Zen master, who have shown me doors when I couldn't see them.

Thank you all. 🐾

INCOMING PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE, continued from page 6

ence in the lives of the children we serve, even though we may never know it.

And Wadham's story shows us that it is possible for all of us to dream big. In an era of dwindling budgets, particularly for the arts and for libraries, he found a way to make things happen by working with similar-minded organizations and businesses within his own community. It took five years for his dream to become a reality, but Wadham's persistence paid off.

There were many special guests in attendance at the Saturday afternoon perfor-

mance, including Mora, who was seeing the play for the first time. Also in attendance were children from a local homeless shelter, whose visit Wadham had arranged. They, too, were seeing the play for the first time. Their involvement in the performance was obvious, particularly when they called out encouragement to the actor playing Tomás as he was struggling to sound out the words he was reading.

After the performance, they all gathered around the author and the actors to have their picture taken. Each one left with

a personal copy of *Tomás and the Library Lady*.

Much has changed about libraries since those early days of the women in their crisp, white dresses, since Gaulke first offered a young boy refuge in a small public library. But our passion for connecting children with good books has not. For youth services librarians, every day is Day of the Children and Day of the Books. 🐾