



Newbery Medal Acceptance Speech

Of Kites, Moles, and Other Interesting True Stories

Laura Amy Schlitz



Laura Amy Schlitz is the winner of the 2008 Newbery Medal for Good Masters! Sweet Ladies!: Voices from a Medieval Village, published by Candlewick. Her acceptance speech was delivered at ALA Annual Conference in Anaheim, California, on June 29, 2008.

Dear friends, a cadre of perceptive and passionate readers has decided that my book is good. This is earthshaking. As a writer, there is nothing in the world I want more than this: that my work should be good. And now, in my joy, I am supposed to speak to you, and this is dangerous, because I am apt to be both maudlin and grandiose. I must remind myself that *good* is an approximate term. A second grader once asked me for “a really, really good book,” and I asked him, as librarians do, what he considered a good book. He eyed me with thinly veiled impatience and replied, “Medium-long with poisonous snakes.” By his standards, *Good Masters! Sweet Ladies!* falls short. It is medium-long, but there is only a glancing reference to poisonous snakes.

So I must catch hold of myself and try not to be vainglorious. I must remind myself that the Newbery Medal comes with strings attached. The biggest string—a rope thick enough to hang a writer—is the speech. Whenever I’ve dreamed, as writers do, of winning the Newbery, my dream has always ended with the sad conclusion that I never would. And then I’ve comforted myself: “Well, all right, I’ll never win the Newbery, but at least I won’t have to give one of those speeches.”

Thus the whirligig of time brings in his revenges.

My friends, you deserve a good speech: something coherent and profound. But even if I trusted myself to be profound, being coherent poses a problem. I have a storyteller’s mind—a deranged junk drawer, clogged with memories and metaphors. I deal in mental pictures: a carousel horse, a devil in a green coat, a girl balancing a basketful of eels on her hip. I brood over these images until I divine their stories.

When I first conceived of my Newbery speech, I found myself haunted by three anecdotes. These stories have something to do with what I want to tell you. So—sweet ladies, good gentlemen—let me begin there. Let me tell you about playground duty, a kite, and having moles removed.

We’ll start with playground duty, and Tessa. At the time of my story, Tessa was in second grade. She was an appealing child, with brown eyes and a round sweet face. I was on playground duty when Tessa’s friends flocked up to me, telling me that Tessa was stuck on the playhouse roof and afraid to come down.

So I went to help. The playhouse had a peaked roof eight feet high, and the edge of the roof was five feet off the ground. Tessa perched on the ridgepole, not crying. I suggested that she hold onto the ridgepole, turn around backward, and let her feet dangle, so that I could grab her legs. She looked dubious. I couldn’t blame her: Coming down backward means coming down blind. So at last I held out my arms. “Just pretend it’s a sliding board and come on down. I’ll catch you.”

For some reason, this solution struck Tessa as workable. She grimaced, let go of the rooftop, and slid.

I caught her. But I had neglected to take into account the fact that the average second grader weighs fifty-five pounds, and a fifty-five-pound weight gathers momentum on an inclined plane. That small, soft-limbed child hit me like a cannonball. My knees gave way and I staggered, wondering what irreparable damage I had done to my spine. I fell—hard—onto my well-upholstered rear end.

But I didn’t drop Tessa. And since I am well-upholstered in front as well as in back, she fell softly and scrambled to her feet as nimbly as a little squirrel. We asked each other if we were hurt. Neither of us was. Then Tessa met my eyes and said, “Thank you,” with a purity and grace I have never forgotten.

Why does this memory come back to me? I think it has something to do with the fact that winning the Newbery was like catching that fifty-five-pound, entirely lovable child. The stars danced. My knees buckled. I wasn’t sure what had happened to me.

I also think this story has something to say about the way librarians feel toward

children. We do our best for them. We try to help them when they're stuck and catch them when they fall—even if we never have quite enough books about poisonous snakes.

Now for the moles.

Several summers ago, I had moles cut out of my forehead. I ended up with an intriguing scar, a red-stitched crescent like a third eyebrow. My schoolchildren demanded, "What happened to your face?"

I was ready for them. One must be truthful with children, but a good scar war-rants a story. "Do you want the true story or the interesting story?" I asked.

Bless them; they wanted both. "Here's the true story," I said. "I had moles removed. Moles are like pimples, but sometimes they turn into little cancers, so the doctor cut them off."

The children were unimpressed. "What's the interesting story?"

"Oh, well, the interesting story is this," I answered.

* * * * *

I do not go camping. I like my comforts—indoor plumbing and air-conditioning and locks on the door. But my friend Faith is wild about camping, and last summer she talked me into an overnight camping trip.

We went to West Virginia. There were signs on the campground warning us about bears, which excited me, because I have a great yearning for bears. When Faith and I went walking, we saw the claw marks on the trees. Black bears of both sexes mark trees by rubbing and clawing them—scientists don't know why.

One of the marked trees held a few black hairs. I pried them out of the bark and twined them around my finger like a ring.

Night fell. Faith slept beneath the stars, but I zipped myself into the tent and fell asleep.

In my dream, I walked through the woods. I was searching for something—I don't know what. I came to a clearing that was almost a perfect circle. Moonlight poured into the clearing like milk in a bowl. At the edge of the clearing, there was a moving shadow: someone's dog, I thought at first, a Labrador or a Newfoundland. Then the bear smelled me. She lumbered forward, meeting me in the center of the clearing.

I say she, because she was a female. When she rose on her haunches, she was exactly my height. We stood face to face, so close that I could smell her. It was a rank and powerful odor. I could see into her eyes, and they were bloodshot, furious.

"Give me back my hair," she said to me. She made no sound. Nevertheless, I knew what she meant. I had stolen her hair, and I had no right to it. I held up my hand with the ring on my finger.

"Give me my hair," she said again.

I stood my ground. You must recall that this was a dream. "I want to be bear," I said. And that is true. I am an ordinary woman, a tame woman, but there is a part of me that longs to be as wild and unaccountable as a bear.

The bear didn't answer. It's always hard to know what a bear is feeling, because their facial muscles are rigid. "I want to be bear," I said again. I tried to say it in a way that would tell her that I respected her, loved her. But bears don't care about respect. She growled. I knew that if I defied her, she would tear off my face.

So I began to unwind the hair from my finger. But I went on begging. "Give me something else," I entreated her, "so I can be bear."

She raised her left paw—bears are left-pawed. The tip of one claw raked my face, slicing open my flesh. The blood began to trickle down my cheek. That's when I woke up.

I was safe. The tent was sealed. But when I put my fingers to my forehead, I found that my skin was wet with blood—and the ring was gone from my finger.

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I told the story many times, and the children always said: "Is that true?"

"No," I said, "I had moles removed." And they said, "Oh."

But here's the real point: the children passed the story on. Not the true story—which every child forgot—but the bear story. I overheard two children talking when I was in the stacks. "She didn't really see a bear," one child said skeptically, and the second said, "Yes, she did. She said it was a true story."

Thus the surreal holds sway over the real. Fiction trumps fact. The true story was pointless, so the children forgot it. But the bear story was mysterious, numinous, and it stayed with them. Dramatic narrative creates meaning, and what is meaningful takes root in memory. That's why, when I decided to write about the Middle Ages, I chose to teach history through story. It's also why—like most librarians—I secretly favor fiction over nonfiction. Facts are necessary, facts are useful, facts are fascinating. But stories enlarge our lives. They awaken us to color and depth and pattern. They help us make sense of a random world. And the imaginary bears—which are endangered, make no mistake about that—dig their dens in the fiction section. They like the wilderness.

Last story. I have never been able to get a kite in the air. Lithe, active people get kites in the air, and if I am present, and if they are kind, they let me hold the string. I love the feeling of a kite, but I've never been able to fly one. They won't go up. I run as fast as I can, but the kite drags behind me like the broken muffler of a car.

When I turned fifty, I made up my mind that I was going to fly a kite. I went to the kite store and bought a purple and scarlet parafoil. The clerk in the kite store assured me that all I needed was a wind; small children, he promised me, could fly this kite. I cross-examined him, flattening him against the cash register. "You really think," I said sternly, "that I can get this kite in the air?" "Lady," he said to me, "you're gonna come back

here; you're gonna be screaming at me because I didn't let you buy two of 'em."

I liked his panache. I believed him. But he was wrong, because I couldn't get the kite up. I tried—twice. Bystanders averted their eyes in pity.

Two years later, I won the Newbery Medal. I decided to go to the ocean to write my speech. The ocean, I believed, would *help*. So I packed my suitcase: fountain pens, ink, thesaurus, wrist splints . . . At the last moment, I tossed in the kite. After all, my life had changed. I was living in a world where anything was possible.

I worked on Monday. On Tuesday, I awoke to the keening of the wind. I hurried through breakfast and headed for the shore with the kite. It was chilly, a gray morning. The ocean was greenish and savage, with the waves breathing hoarsely against the shore. Even the seagulls looked cold. I took the kite out of my pocket. As I unfolded it, the ribbons of the tail began to flutter. I could feel the kite straining to be free. I let go of her, and she soared into the air. Once she was aloft, she ceased to be a kite and became a creature: a nylon falcon, willful and capricious.

It was a miracle. She rose above my head. I gave her a little more string, and she lashed her tail like a tiger. She pirouetted, and I unwound the string. I was flying a kite. I stumbled along the shore, bemused, enchanted, disbelieving. She was smaller than a postage stamp—a motley speck in a furrowed sky.

My hand was cold. I fumbled in my pocket for a glove, and all at once I dropped the spool. It was then that I made a discovery—quite an obvious one, really, but to me it was startling and wondrous. As the spool of string rolled over the sand, the kite faltered and plummeted. Without me, she couldn't soar. She needed the tension of my hand on the string.

I am not built for speed. But I clumped over the sand as fast as I could, try-

ing to catch the uncoiling reel. A tuft of dune-grass snagged it, buying me time. I snatched the spool and yanked the string. The kite began to recover. She went on rising until there was no more thread.

“Flying a kite is a bit like being a writer. Most of the time, the words aren't right, and the prose drags on the ground. . . . When the wind comes—those are the extraordinary, the surreal times. They are worth all the other times.

I flew her for an hour before I brought her in. By now I was feeling superstitious about her, and I thought it would be good luck if I could lure her to my glove like a falcon. It was a bit like Tessa, come to think of it—I wanted to catch her before she hit the ground.

And I did. I pulled her within three feet of me, leaped skyward, and plucked her out of the air.

Why am I telling you this? Oh, because this story makes sense. First of all, the thrill of getting the kite in the air—of doing what could not be done—was like winning the Newbery. Unclouded joy, soaring disbelief. I was holding the wind in my hands.

And also, because flying a kite is a bit like being a writer. Most of the time, the words aren't right, and the prose drags on the ground. We don't know how to get the kite into the air. Flying defies gravity. If there are rules and laws that govern this flight, we don't know what they are. We only know that we have to go to the shore with the kite in our hands, in case the wind is there. When the wind comes—those are the extraordinary, the surreal times. They are worth all the other times.

Can you tolerate one more metaphor? Because I should like to draw your attention to the invisible presence, the secret

protagonist of the kite story: the string. I tell the story as if it's about me—I flew the kite. Then I personify the kite, and it's a falcon. And then I wax rhapsodic about the wind. But the real hero of the story is

the string—which stands for the connection between things. Without the string, I have no hold on the wind, and the kite falls to earth.

And this is the final, the most potent reason for telling you this story. Because the Newbery Medal isn't about my book, or any book. It's about the invisible fellowship of librarians, publishers, parents, teachers, and writers who want to give their best to children. The Newbery Medal is a symbol of our communion. We are threaded together by our commitment to children and the life of the mind. We dance together on one string.

And now it is time to say thank you, and to try to say it simply, purely, as Tessa did. Thank you for coming here tonight—for being readers, for knowing that children and books matter. Thank you, my parents, for opening the world of books to me. Thank you, my friends from the Park School, for helping me write and for helping me rejoice. Thank you, Robert Byrd, for your irresistible artwork—and thank you, Chris Paul, for your stunning sense of design. Thank you, goddesses of the Candlewick pantheon—but especially Danielle Sadler, who dredged this manuscript out of the slush pile, and Mary Lee Donovan, whose faith and compassion are heroic. And last of all, thank you, members of the Newbery committee, for feeding my bears, and granting me my heart's desire. ☺