Newbery Medal Acceptance Speech

Telling Lies for a Living . . . and Why We Do It

Neil Gaiman

Neil Gaiman *is the winner of the 2009 Newbery Medal for* The Graveyard Book, *published by HarperCollins Children's Books. His acceptance speech was delivered at the ALA Annual Conference in Chicago on July 12, 2009.*

In case you were wondering what I'm doing up here—and I think it's a safe bet that right now *I* am, so that makes at least two of us—I'm here because I wrote a book, called *The Graveyard Book*, that was awarded the 2009 Newbery Medal.

This means that I have impressed my daughters by having been awarded the Newbery Medal, and I impressed my son even more by defending the fact that I had won the Newbery Medal from the hilarious attacks of Stephen Colbert on *The Colbert Report*, so the Newbery Medal made me cool to my children. This is as good as it gets.

You are almost never cool to your children.

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When I was a boy, from the ages of about eight to fourteen, during my school holidays, I used to haunt my local library. It was a mile and a half from my house, so I would get my parents to drop me off there on their way to work, and when the library closed I would walk home. I was an awkward child, ill-fitting, uncertain, and I loved my local library with a passion. I loved the card catalog, particularly the children's library card catalog: it had subjects, not just titles and authors, which allowed me to pick subjects I thought were likely to give me books I liked—subjects like magic or ghosts or witches or space—and then I would find the books, and I would read.

But I read indiscriminately, delightedly, hungrily. Literally hungrily, although my father would sometimes remember to pack me sandwiches, which I would take reluctantly (you are never cool to your children, and I regarded his insistence that I should take sandwiches as an insidious plot to embarrass me), and when I got too hungry I would gulp my sandwiches as quickly as possible in the library car-park before diving back into the world of books and shelves.

I read fine books in there by brilliant and smart authors—many of them now forgotten or unfashionable, like J. P. Martin and Margaret Storey and Nicholas Stuart Gray. I read Victorian authors and Edwardian authors. I discovered books that now I would reread with delight and devoured books that I would probably now find unreadable if I tried to return to them—*Alfred Hitchcock and the Three Investigators* and the like.

I wanted books and made no distinction between good books or bad, only between the ones I loved, the ones that spoke to my soul, and the ones I merely liked. I did not care how a story was written. There were no bad stories: every story was new and glorious. And I sat there, in my school holidays, and I read the children's library, and when I was done, and had read the children's library, I walked out into the dangerous vastness of the adult section.

The librarians responded to my enthusiasm. They found me books. They taught me about interlibrary loans and ordered books for me from all across southern England. They sighed and were implacable about collecting their fines once school started and my borrowed books were inevitably overdue.

I should mention here that librarians tell me never to tell this story, and especially never to paint myself as a feral child who was raised in libraries by patient librarians; they tell me they are worried that people will misinterpret my story and use it as an excuse to use their libraries as free daycare for their children.

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So. I wrote *The Graveyard Book*, starting in December 2005 and all through 2006 and 2007, and I finished it in February 2008.

And then it's January 2009, and I am in a hotel in Santa Monica. I am out there to promote the film of my book *Coraline*. I had spent two long days talking to journalists, and I was glad when that was done. At midnight I climbed into a bubble bath and started to read the *New Yorker*. I talked to a friend in a different time zone. I finished the *New Yorker*. It was three a.m. I set the alarm for eleven, hung up a "Do Not Disturb" sign on the door. *For the next two days,* I told myself as I drifted off to sleep, *I would do nothing but catch up on my sleep and write.*

Two hours later I realized the phone was ringing. Actually, I realized, it had been ringing for some time. In fact, I thought as I surfaced, it had already rung and then stopped ringing several times, which meant someone was calling to tell me something. Either the hotel was burning down or someone had died. I picked up the phone. It was my assistant, Lorraine, sleeping over at my place with a convalescent dog.

"Your agent Merrilee called, and she thinks someone is trying to get hold of you," she told me. I told her what time it was (*viz and to wit*, five-thirty in the bloody morning is she out of her mind some of us are trying to sleep here you know). She said she knew what time it was in LA, and that Merrilee, who is my literary agent and the wisest woman I know, sounded really definite that this was important.

I got out of bed. Checked voice mail. No, no one was trying to get hold of me. I called home, to tell Lorraine that it was all bosh. "It's okay," she said. "They called here. They're on the other line right now. I'm giving them your cell phone number."

I was not yet sure what was going on or who was trying to do what. It was 5:45 in the morning. No one had died, though, I was fairly certain of that. My cell phone rang.

"Hello. This is Rose Treviño. I'm chair of the ALA Newbery committee . . ." Oh, I thought, blearily. Newbery. Right. Cool. I may be an honor book or something. That would be nice. "And I have the voting members of the Newbery committee here, and we want to tell you that your book . . ."

"THE GRAVEYARD BOOK," said fourteen loud voices, and I thought, I may be still asleep right now, but they probably don't do this, probably don't call people and sound so amazingly excited, for honor books. . . .

" . . . just won . . ."

"THE NEWBERY MEDAL," they chorused. They sounded really happy. I checked the hotel room because it seemed very likely that I was still fast asleep. It all looked reassuringly solid.

You are on a speakerphone with at least fifteen teachers and librarians and suchlike great, wise, and good people, I thought. *Do not start swearing like you did when you got the Hugo Award.* This was a wise thing to think because otherwise huge, mighty, and four-letter swears were gathering. I mean, that's what they're for. I think I said, *You mean it's Monday?* And I fumfed and mumbled and said something of a *thankyouthankyouthankyouokaythiswasworthbeingwokenupfor* nature.

"I wanted books and made no distinction between good books or bad, only between the ones I loved, the ones that spoke to my soul, and the ones I merely liked. I did not care how a story was written. There were no bad stories: every story was new and glorious."

And then the world went mad. Long before my bedside alarm went off I was in a car on my way to the airport, being interviewed by a succession of journalists. "How does it feel to win the Newbery?" they asked me.

Good, I told them. *It felt good.*

I had loved *A Wrinkle in Time* when I was a boy, even if they had messed up the first sentence in the Puffin edition, and it was a Newbery Medal winner, and even though I was English, the medal had been important to me.

And then they asked if I was familiar with the controversy about popular books and Newbery winners, and how did I think I fitted into it? I admitted I was familiar with the discussion.

If you aren't, there had been some online brouhaha about what kinds of books had been winning the Newbery Award recently, and about what kind of book should win the Newbery in the future, and whether awards like the Newbery were for children or for adults. I admitted to one interviewer that *The Graveyard Book* winning had been a surprise to me, that I had assumed that awards like the Newbery tend to be used to shine a light onto books that needed help, and that *The Graveyard Book* had not needed help.

I had unwittingly placed myself on the side of populism, and realized afterward that that was not what I had meant at all.

It was as if some people believed there was a divide between the books that you were permitted to enjoy and the books that were good for you, and I was expected to choose sides. We were all expected to choose sides. And I didn't believe it, and I still don't.

I was, and still am, on the side of books you love.

* * *

I am writing this speech two months before I will deliver it. My father died about a month ago. It was a surprise. He was in good health, happy, fitter than I am, and his heart ruptured without warning. So, numb and heartsick, I crossed the Atlantic, gave my eulogies, was told by relations I had not seen in a decade just how much I resembled my father, and did what had to be done. And I never cried.

It was not that I did not want to cry. It was more that it seemed there was never any time in the maelstrom of events to just stop and touch the grief, to let whatever was inside me escape. That never happened.

Yesterday morning a friend sent me a script to read. It was the story of somebody's lifetime. A fictional person. Three quarters of the way through the script, the fictional character's fictional wife died, and I sat on the sofa and cried like an adult, huge wrenching sobs, my face running with tears. All the unwept tears for my father came out, leaving me exhausted and, like the world after a storm, cleansed and ready to begin anew.

I'm telling you this because it's something that I forget and need to be reminded of . . . . And this was a sharp and salutary reminder.

I've been writing now for a quarter of a century.

When people tell me that my stories helped them through the death of a loved one—a child, perhaps, or a parent—or helped them cope with a disease, or a personal tragedy; or when they tell me that my tales made them become readers, or gave them a career; when they show me images or words from my books tattooed on their skin as monuments or memorials to moments that were so important to them they needed to take them with them everywhere. . . . When these things have happened, as they have, over and over, my tendency is to be polite and grateful, but ultimately to dismiss them as irrelevant.

I did not write the stories to get people through the hard places and the difficult times. I didn't write them to make readers of nonreaders. I wrote them because I was interested in the stories, because there was a maggot in my head, a small squirming idea I needed to pin to the paper and inspect, in order to find out what I thought and felt about it. I wrote them because I wanted to find out what happened next to people I had made up. I wrote them to feed my family.

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So I felt almost dishonorable accepting people's thanks. I had forgotten what fiction was to me as a boy, forgotten what it was like in the library: fiction was an escape from the intolerable, a doorway into impossibly hospitable worlds where things had rules and could be understood; stories had been a way of learning about life without experiencing it, or perhaps of experiencing it as an eighteenth-century poisoner dealt with poisons, taken them in tiny doses, such that the poisoner could cope with ingesting things that would kill someone who was not inured to them. Sometimes fiction is a way of coping with the poison of the world in a way that lets us survive it.

And I remembered. I would not be the person I am without the authors who made me what I am—the special ones, the wise ones, sometimes just the ones who got there first.

It's not irrelevant, those moments of connection, those places where fiction saves your life. It's the most important thing there is.

* * *

So I wrote a book about the inhabitants of a graveyard. I was the kind of boy who loved graveyards as much as he feared them. The best thing—the very best, most wonderful possible thing—about the graveyard in the Sussex town in which I grew up is that there was a witch buried in it, who had been burned in the High Street.

My disappointment on reaching teenagehood and realizing, on rereading the inscription, that the witch was nothing of the sort (it was the grave of three stake-burned Protestant Martyrs, burned by order of a Catholic Queen) stayed with me. It would become the starting place, along with a Kipling story about a jeweled elephant goad, for my story "The Witch's Headstone." Although it's chapter 4, it was the first chapter I wrote of *The Graveyard Book*, a book I had wanted to write for over twenty years.

The idea had been so simple, to tell the story of a boy raised in a graveyard, inspired by one image, my infant son, Michael—who was two, and is now twenty-five, the age I was then, and is now taller than I am—on his tricycle, pedaling through the graveyard across the road in the sunshine, past the grave I once thought had belonged to a witch.

I was, as I said, twenty-five years old, and I had an idea for a book and I knew it was a real one.

I tried writing it, and realized that it was a better idea than I was a writer. So I kept writing, but I wrote other things, learning my craft. I wrote for twenty years until I thought that I could write *The Graveyard Book*—or at least, that I was getting no better.

I wanted the book to be composed of short stories, because *The Jungle Book* was short stories. And I wanted it to be a novel, because it was a novel in my head.

The tension between those two things was both a delight and a heart-ache as a writer.

I wrote it as best I could. That's the only way I know how to write something. It doesn't mean it's going to be any good.

"It's not irrelevant, those moments of connection, those places where fiction saves your life. It's the most important thing there is."

It just means you try. And, most of all, I wrote the story that I wanted to read.

It took me too long to begin, and it took me too long to finish. And then, one night in February, I was writing the last two pages.

In the first chapter, I had written a doggerel poem and left the last two lines unfinished. Now it was time to finish it, to write the last two lines. So I did. The poem, I learned, ended:

> Face your life
>
> Its pain, its pleasure,
>
> Leave no path untaken.

And my eyes stung, momentarily. It was then, and only then, that I saw clearly for the first time what I was writing. I had set out to write a book about a childhood—it was Bod's childhood, and it was in a graveyard, but still, it was a childhood like any other; I was now writing about being a parent, and the fundamental most comical tragedy of parenthood: that if you do your job properly, if you, as a parent, raise your children well, they won't need you anymore. If you do it properly, they go away. And they have lives and they have families and they have futures.

I sat at the bottom of the garden, and I wrote the last page of my book, and I knew that I had written a book that was better than the one I had set out to write. Possibly a book better than I am.

You cannot plan for that. Sometimes you work as hard as you can on something, and still the cake does not rise. Sometimes the cake is better than you had ever dreamed.

And then, whether the work was good or bad, whether it did what you hoped or it failed, as a writer you shrug, and you go on to the next thing, whatever the next thing is.

That's what we do.

* * *

In a speech, you are meant to say what you are going to say, and then say it, and then sum up what you have said.

I don't know what I actually said tonight. I know what I meant to say, though:

Reading is important.

Books are important.

Librarians are important. (Also, libraries are not childcare facilities, but sometimes feral children raise themselves among the stacks.)

It is a glorious and unlikely thing to be cool to your children.

Children's fiction is the most important fiction of all.

There.

We who make stories know that we tell lies for a living. But they are good lies that say true things, and we owe it to our readers to build them as best we can. Because somewhere out there is someone who needs that story. Someone who will grow up with a different landscape, who without that story will be a different person. And who *with* that story may have hope, or wisdom, or kindness, or comfort.

And that is why we write. &