



# Newbery Medal Acceptance Speech

## Don't Think. Write.

Rebecca Stead



*Rebecca Stead is the winner of the 2010 Newbery Medal for *When You Reach Me*, published by Wendy Lamb Books, an imprint of Random House Children's Books. Her acceptance speech was delivered at the ALA Annual Conference in Washington, D.C., on June 27, 2010.*

My favorite Newbery-speech advice came from a Texas librarian who told me to speak for the shortest time allowable and to remember that I am among friends. She's here tonight, and I have given her a flashlight, and when I have been talking for twelve minutes, she is going to give me a few blinks. And after fifteen minutes, she's just going to throw it at me. Because this is the kind of thing a real friend will do for you . . . especially one from Texas.

I wanted to write a great speech. I wanted every person in this room to walk away knowing exactly what the Newbery Medal means to me and how awed I am to have any kind of place in this room full of passion and talent. I wanted your knees to lock with the kind of happiness I felt on the morning of January 18th, and I wanted you to see the lightning bolts of joy that seemed to streak past my dark kitchen window.

But it turns out that it's really hard to write a great speech when I can still barely grasp that the book won the award in the first place. Whenever I think about it, my mind seems to go in four directions at once. And I want to say all of these four things, but I don't want to get hit by the flashlight. So instead of giving one long speech, I'm going to give four short speeches. And they are all mostly about the journey to this place where I am standing right now.

### Speech #1

Philip Pullman has said that your life begins when you are born, and your *story* begins when you discover that you have been born into the wrong family by mistake.

But when does the life of a storyteller begin?

Mine began when I was about six. Up until then, I had half-believed that my mother could read my thoughts. But at some point during first grade, I realized that I was completely alone in my own consciousness. I used to regularly freak myself out by sitting still, closing my eyes, and asking myself the same question over and over until I was in a sort

of trance. The question was, "How am I me?"

What I meant was, "How did my particular self get in here?" Again and again, I would close my eyes and plunge myself into this existential angst. Why did I do it?

I think that, like someone alone in a dark room, I was feeling around for a door. Because I really, really did not want to be alone in there.

And I did find a door, eventually. The door was books.

When I read books, I wasn't alone in the rooms of my own mind. I was running up and down other people's stairs and finding secret places behind their closets. The people on the other side of the door had things I couldn't have, like sisters, or dragons, and they shared those things with me. And they also had things I did have, like feelings of self-doubt and longing, and they named those things for me.

Take Meg, for example. In the first chapter of *A Wrinkle in Time*, she calls herself an oddball and a delinquent, makes a horrible face at herself in the mirror, and complains that she is "full of bad feeling." All of this was a revelation for me.

The people in books told me things that the real people in my life either wouldn't admit or didn't realize I needed to know in the first place. And the more I read, the more I thought about writing my own stories, with my own kinds of truth in them. By the time I was nine, I knew I wanted to write. But I didn't tell anyone, because it was too wild a dream. Instead, I told people I wanted to be an actress, which I thought was much more practical, and I waited. I waited about twenty years. Meanwhile, like a lot of people who secretly want to write, I became a lawyer.

Then one day it dawned on me that it's difficult to become a writer without ever writing anything. So I began to write short stories, and I worked on those stories for years until the universe intervened by telling my three-year-old son to push my laptop off the dining room table. No more stories. And suddenly the whole secret writing dream felt very

worn-out. I asked myself why I had ever wanted to write in the first place.

And then I remembered that door, and what I had found on the other side of it, and I began writing again. But this time, I was writing for children.

## Speech #2

I started writing *When You Reach Me* in 2007, after I read a *New York Times* article that brought two things to the front of my mind—the first was an idea for a book plot about a life-saving time-travel mission, and the second was the memory of a homeless man who stood on my corner a lot when I was growing up. We called him the laughing man.

And so the book took off on both of these tracks—an impossible mystery played out on the stage of my own New York City childhood. Here was my elementary

*“I wanted to write a great speech. I wanted every person in this room to walk away knowing exactly what the Newbery Medal means to me and how awed I am to have any kind of place in this room full of passion and talent.”*

school, my mom’s apartment, and my lunchtime job at Subway Sandwiches on Broadway. But pretty soon, my younger self began to leak into the story in ways I’d never intended—memories of feeling mean and not being able to help it, of wanting things that I couldn’t even begin to talk about, of that time in life when I started to see more, whether I wanted to or not. And as I wrote, the story became more and more about these ordinary mysteries of life, and less about the fantastic time-travelly one.

I was halfway through the first draft of the book when I became afraid of it. There came a moment of doubt—was I really going to pour all of my inner weirdness into this book? Was I losing my story, or finding it? I wasn’t sure. By the time my fortieth birthday rolled around in January 2008, I had stopped writing the book.

Even as a kid, I have always partly dreaded my own birthday parties, and this is because of the Happy Birthday song. I’d spend days thinking about streamers and little Dixie cups full of candy, but the Happy Birthday song hung like a funky black cloud over all of it. It was twenty seconds of torture. Everyone would be looking at me, and I had absolutely no idea what they expected from me, but whatever it was I was sure to let them down. It was only after a terrible period of anticipation, and then, of course, the singing itself, that I could really enjoy the party.

So for my fortieth birthday, I skipped the big celebration that a lot of our friends were having that year. Just dinner at a good Chinese restaurant, I told my husband. Maybe a little cake. But no singing.

The cake arrived quietly at our table at Shun Lee, and we ate it, and it was good. We were getting our coats on to

go home when our waiter came out with the leftover cake in the cardboard box we’d brought it in. And on top of the box, someone in the kitchen had written my husband’s instructions—my instructions—in pen:

“Table 16: One candle, no singing.”

One candle, no singing: I stood there in my coat, looking at those words and wondering, for the first time, what it was that I was so afraid of.

A week later, I went to a writers’ conference where Laurie Halse Anderson spoke about craft. Her talk was called: “Plot v. Character: Cage Match Smackdown.”

It was a great talk, and at the end of it, Laurie spoke about fear. She told us that sometimes you just have to stop thinking and write.

“Don’t think. Write.” I drank these words down like an antidote—an antidote to the worry that my book was becoming too truthful or too strange. An antidote to the poisonous message written on that cardboard box: “One candle, no singing.”

I walked out of the meeting room, opened my computer, and created a new folder, called “Don’t think.” In that folder, I began writing my book again, and this time I managed to get to the end without worrying too much about exactly what kind of a book it was.

## Speech #3

I recently sat next to my nine-year-old, Eli, on an airplane. He seemed to feel fine during takeoff, but as the plane began to climb, he looked more and more worried. I began to tell him about what keeps the plane up in the air, but he interrupted me.

“I’m not afraid it’s going to fall,” he said. “I’m afraid we’re going to get sucked into orbit.”

This is one of many examples of how adults assume they know what kids are thinking, and of how we are usually wrong. It’s also a pretty good metaphor for how I felt as the morning of the Newbery announcements approached.

We have one phone in our apartment, and it’s a finicky phone. It rings, or not. It’ll take a message when it’s in the mood. Occasionally it goes on what we writers like to call a retreat, and we can’t find it for a day or two.

On the morning of January 18, I woke up early (actually, I woke up earliest, and then earlier, and then just early), aimed myself toward the kitchen to make coffee, and noticed that the phone was not on its charger near our front door. I began to look for it.

I looked in all of the regular places—on the kitchen counter, and in the cracks between the couch cushions. I crawled around looking on the living room floor for a bit, and while I was down there, I began to wonder if I even wanted to find the phone.

The days leading up to that morning had been full of good wishes and mock-Newbery results, and now, despite my best efforts, I was nervous about something that I had always assumed would stay safely beyond my reach. To me, the Newbery Medal was an impossibility. But, like Eli, I was a little bit afraid that the impossible might actually happen. That the phone might ring. Because along with the wild happiness of that fantasy, there was also a fear that, like someone sucked into outer space, I wouldn't be able to breathe. I wouldn't know what to do. My head might explode.

It was 6:45 a.m. Maybe I didn't want to find the phone. Probably it was never meant to ring in the first place. I poured myself a cup of coffee.

And then the phone rang. My husband came flying out of the bedroom holding it as if it were something on fire. It turned out that he'd put it on my bedside table the night before. I had been too busy staring at the clock to notice.

And then Katie O'Dell was saying that she was about to tell me something that would change my life. A cheer went up—the whole Newbery committee, on speakerphone. I have a distinct memory of hearing it at the same time I looked down at my bare feet on the kitchen floor and realized I couldn't move my legs.

You know what it felt like? It felt like a lightning bolt of joy. It felt like knee-locking happiness. It felt like the longest, loudest round of Happy Birthday in the history of the world. And I loved every moment of it.

## Speech #4

This last speech is about being grateful. The truth is that I could have written all four speeches about being grateful.

The first person I want to thank is a librarian whose name I don't remember. She worked at my elementary school library, where, about thirty years ago, someone left *James and the Giant Peach* out on a table. I picked it up and started reading. James's horrible aunts had just been squashed to death when the library

*“When I read books, I wasn't alone in the rooms of my own mind. I was running up and down other people's stairs and finding secret places behind their closets. The people on the other side of the door had things I couldn't have, like sisters, or dragons, and they shared those things with me. And they also had things I did have, like feelings of self-doubt and longing, and they named those things for me.”*

period ended. Now I had a problem. I was in sixth grade. This book appeared to be for younger readers. How was I going to get it out of there while maintaining my dignity?

I lied to the librarian. For a good two minutes, I explained to her that I had a younger brother at home who might like the book. I have a vague memory of a complex story about why this brother did not attend school. It wasn't a good story, but she nodded at me a lot, and believed every word. Or so I thought.

And this is what I have come to love about librarians. In addition to being some of the smartest, funniest, most open-minded people I've ever met, librarians will do a lot to put a book into the hands of a kid, even if it means nodding enthusiastically in the face of a long and obvious lie. And I want to thank every librarian here for that and for protecting and carrying the stories we all need.

I also want to thank the spectacular people at Random House, who gave this book absolutely everything they had to give, including Chip Gibson, Kate Gartner, Adrienne Waintraub, Tracy Lerner, Mary Beth Kilkelly, Barbara Perris, Colleen Fellingham, John Adamo, Rachel Feld, Alyssa Sheinmel, Judith Haut, Tamar Schwartz, Robert Passberger, Schuyler Hooke, and Joan DeMayo and her truly wonderful sales team.

Next, from the bottom of my heart, I want to express my gratitude to the following terrific people:

Faye Bender, who is my advocate, my guide, and my friend.

Caroline Meckler, gifted editor, who asked for more Julia.

Emily Pourciau, a great publicist, who is also great company.

And Sophie Blackall, for the gift of her gorgeous cover art.

I am grateful to my husband Sean, and my sons, Jack and Eli, for the joy that they bring me, and to my parents, who have made me feel loved every day of my life.

And of course, I am grateful to Wendy Lamb. I met Wendy thirteen years ago in a writing workshop at the 92nd Street Y, where she became the first person (other than my mother) who ever asked to keep something I had written. At the time, I was a lawyer daring myself to write, and I still remember how it felt.

Wendy is an enormously talented editor and a kind human being, and she is also a kind editor and a talented human being. She's the sort of person who brings you a brownie at the exact moment you most need one, and who hides nice notes in your desk drawer. I shudder to think that there might exist some alternate reality in which she and I have never crossed paths.

Finally, to Katie O'Dell and the members of the Newbery Committee—thank you for the knee-locking happiness. Thank you for the lightning bolts of joy. ☺