

Newbery Medal Acceptance

Cynthia Kadohata

I was looking recently at my increasingly messy night table, and I noticed a white strip sticking to the wood. I scraped at it and realized it was a piece of soft, foamy tape that I had been wrapping on my broken glasses. But because I didn't want to appear on the *Today* show with tape on my glasses, I'd finally gotten them fixed in a mall in the frenzied hours after the call from the Newbery committee. I ended up wearing my contact lenses on the show, but I still would like to thank the committee for the fact that I can now unembarrassedly go out in public with my glasses.

Reading some speeches by former Newbery winners, I noticed that Christopher Paul Curtis mentioned he was the first Newbery winner to wear dreadlocks. That got me thinking about what might be my own first, or what might distinguish me from the others. The answer

I might be receiving a phone call soon. On the other hand, like just about everybody else in children's books, I knew who Susan Faust was. When the phone rang at 4:26 A.M., I thought it might be a friend who lives in Japan. Her son had just started school in America, and she had been calling a lot with concerns over his big move.

When I heard the words, "This is Susan Faust," I don't know if you would say I screamed exactly; it was really more of a screech such as you might hear from a seagull. When Susan said I was the winner of the Newbery, the seagull seemed to become completely hysterical. It flapped its wings and jumped up and down. Susan talked, I screamed some more, and we hung up.

I believe she told me not to tell anyone about the Newbery yet, since the public announcement hadn't been made. I'm ashamed to admit that I quickly called my brother and sister. My brother sleepily said, "Is it an emergency?" I said, "It's a good one." He said, "Did you win the lottery?" I said, "It's better."

After that a number of people called to talk to the seagull. They told me I was flying to New York that day to be on the *Today* show the next morning.

As I talked on the phone I kept noticing how the floor needed vacuuming, just as it had the day before. I thought, *Everything's exactly the same, yet everything's totally different.*

My boyfriend, George, came with Sammy and me to New York. We missed our first flight and ended up settling into our New York hotel room at two in the morning. Sammy and George seemed to be snoring within minutes. I remember feeling annoyed at how noisy they were. I had set the alarm for seven so I could shower before the car picked me up the next morning.

Every so often that night I would glance at the clock and think things like: *If I fall asleep by three, I can get four hours of sleep.* What if I'm only imagining all this? It would be so embarrassing if I only thought I'd won the Newbery, and I really hadn't. But if I were imagining



photo courtesy of George Miyamoto

Cynthia Kadohata is the winner of the 2005 Newbery Medal for *Kira-Kira*, published by Atheneum Books for Young Readers. Her acceptance speech was delivered at the ALA Annual Conference in Chicago on June 26, 2005.

came quickly. I believe I hold the distinction of receiving the earliest Newbery phone call ever.

My son, Sammy, was seventeen months old in January, and he doesn't always sleep well. On the Sunday night before "the call," I went to bed as exhausted as ever. It wasn't a situation where I thought

all this, I wouldn't be in New York. But what if I'm not really in New York? Wait a second. Obviously, I'm in New York. . . . If I fall asleep by 3:30, I can get three-and-a-half hours of sleep. The last time I remember seeing the clock, it was 3:40.

When I arrived at the studio the next morning, Kevin Henkes was sitting on a couch. I sat next to him. Two weeks earlier, I had been on the phone with the royalty department at Simon & Schuster, begging them to overnight a check to me, and now I was sitting next to *the* Kevin Henkes. Was the world going completely insane? I seem to remember several people shaking my hand and saying, "I've read Kevin's book, but I haven't read yours."

Later that day I walked back and forth several times from various goings-on to my hotel room. The temperature in New York was thirteen degrees, and I was dressed California-warm and wearing shoes with heels. By the end of the day, I was loaded down with a bouquet of white roses, a battery-operated Teletubby, and a bag full of Simon & Schuster books for Sammy. My shoes were growing tighter every second. George was wearing only a windbreaker. Sammy was completely covered up in a pile of coats, scarves, and blankets. The only way you knew he was in the stroller was by the wailing emanating from beneath the blankets. We must have looked pretty pathetic, because several people asked whether we needed help. And, this being New York, some people just shouted out their advice: "Get that baby inside!"

At the hotel, Sammy didn't care much about the Newbery. He wanted to be fed. He wanted to play in his bath. He needed to work off some energy walking up and down the hotel hallway. That night he and George again seemed to be snoring within minutes. And again I lay in bed awake, with thoughts nearly exactly the same as I'd had the night before.

The next evening we were back in Los Angeles. During the car ride home from the airport I felt a sort of quiet elation; it was maybe the first time since Monday that I felt quiet inside myself. The freeway was calming, like water rushing around me. Just as I was starting

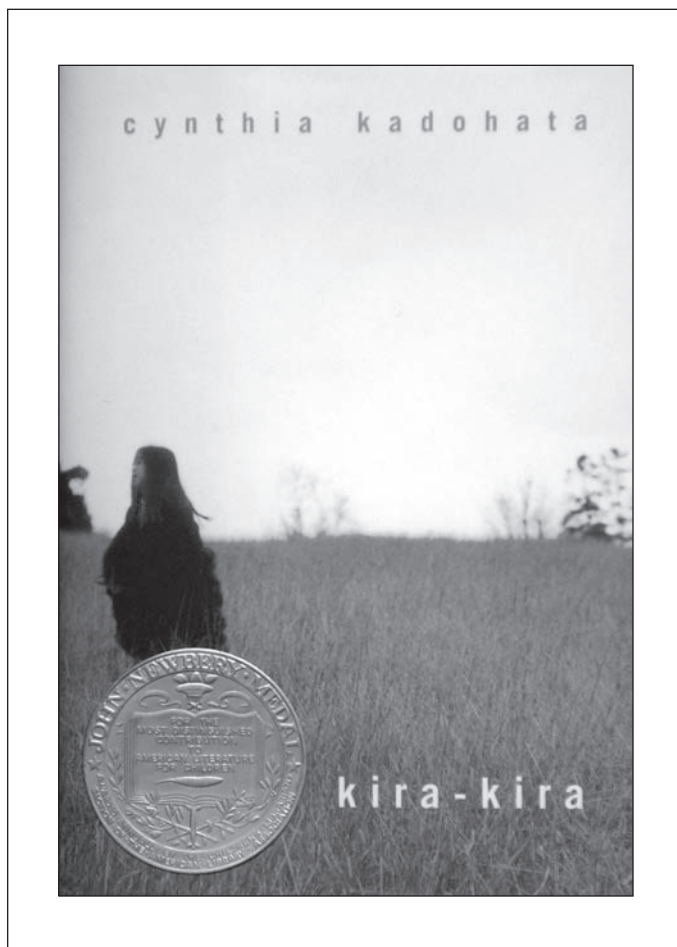
tried to kill me in a long time." But this was different. This was the Newbery. The astonishing thing about the Newbery is that it spans your life: you first read a Newbery book as a child and you're still reading Newbery books when you retire. So the very word "Newbery" encompasses the world you live in today and the world you left behind.

People have asked me, "Where did you get the idea for your novel?" I have basically been answering, "From the world I left behind."

My first real-life home was Chicago, where I was born in 1956. My family moved to Georgia for a while, then to Arkansas for seven years. As in *Kira-Kira*, I really did talk with a heavy Southern accent. My sister's name was Kim, which I pronounced "Kee-uhm," and I never said, for instance, "You should see that cloud," but rather, "Y'all should see that cloud." And the entire staff at the hospital really did come to look at my brother because they had never seen a Japanese baby before.

My father says we were raised rather freely in Arkansas. We didn't wear diapers when we played in the back yard, just did our thing whenever and wherever we felt the need. When my mother told my father to make us soft-boiled eggs, he fed us raw ones instead because, he says, "You didn't seem to care one way or the other." My nickname was Nee, and I liked dogs, playing chess, reading, and complaining. Today I like dogs, reading, and complaining.

When I think of my father in Arkansas, I think, *my father worked*. When I think of my mother, I think, *my mother read*. When my mother began taking us to the library, she discovered a love of reading at the same time we did. Someone once said to me, "The problems between your parents began when your mother started reading." My mother quoted Kierkegaard and the Bible with equal fervor to my sis-



to feel satisfied, and maybe even self-satisfied, regurgitated orange airplane food appeared all over my clothes. Sammy looked up at me with a puzzled expression and orange lips.

I looked at George. He too seemed puzzled. He said, "Monday was supposed to be a perfectly normal workday."

I had never seen George as stressed as he'd been the previous three days. Let me explain something about George. He has the body type, the courage, and the heart of a bear. He is a police officer. People have shot at him. He once crawled into a fiery building to save a woman. He has chased killers through the streets. He once said to me wistfully, "Nobody has

ter and me. She made us read *Scientific American* articles we scarcely understood. I remember one article about peer pressure and another about monkeys who became warped because they didn't have love. One of my favorite childhood memories is of when my mother became obsessed with the stars. She made charts of the constellations and lay with us in the backyard at night to look at the clear skies of our small Arkansas town. One of the family activities I remember most vividly is burning our garbage together in the incinerator in back at night, the ashes sparkling through the air as the fire warmed our faces. All of that is part of my real-life home, as well as my home as a writer. Out of our homes, I believe, grow our stories.

My father worked as a chicken sexer, separating the male from the female chicks at hatcheries. Some weeks he worked one hundred hours, and some days the only time we saw him was when he was asleep. I remember peeking into my parents' bedroom at 2 P.M. and giggling as he snored.

As an Army veteran, my father had learned chicken sexing under the GI bill after the war. Because of the brutal hours in his profession, he took amphetamines to stay awake and tranquilizers to go to sleep. But he made enough money to buy us a house. Later, when my parents divorced, he said he laid in his tiny apartment with sheets on his windows and believed that his life was over.

When I say *Kira-Kira* grew from "the world I left behind," I'm usually referring to those years in the South. But in writing this speech, I realized another impetus from a world left behind. One day, near the start of what I expected to be my senior year in high school, I walked off my Hollywood, California, high school campus and didn't return. Something I haven't mentioned in interviews is that I was a high school dropout. And I believe the way I felt when I dropped out was a little the way Katie Takeshima felt when her sister got sick, like she didn't know what to do or where to go. My English teacher, Mrs. Stanley, had given me an A. But mostly my grades were bad, my attendance was worse, and I had just been told by the administration that I

was being held back a year. Mrs. Stanley was one of those people you meet every so often in life who seem to have been sent from a divine source to guide you. But Mrs. Stanley retired, and I didn't return to high school.

My mother worked as a secretary by day and attended law school by night. When I told her I'd dropped out, she told me I had to either go back to school or get a job. Thus began my brief careers as a salesclerk and a hamburger waitress. I was a bad salesclerk, but I like to think I was a splendid waitress, with just the right balance of good manners and sassiness.

I started out tonight by discussing what distinguished me from other Newbery winners. I believe what we all have in common with one another and with everybody in this room is that we search out libraries like heat-seeking missiles.

After I'd dropped out, I sought out the library near my home. Seeking it out was more of an instinct, really, not a conscious thought. I didn't think to myself, *I need to start reading again*. I felt it. I rediscovered reading — the way I'd read as a child, when there was constantly a book I was just finishing or just beginning or in the middle of. I rediscovered myself.

At eighteen I began attending a two-year college. I decided to major in journalism because I thought it was more "practical" than English. To quote Joan Didion, "Was anyone ever so young?"

Many of the students at the journalism program in the two-year college were older. Most were like me: people with a lot of confusion and a little hope.

After finishing the program at the two-year college, I transferred to a university. The students were different: younger, with a little confusion and a lot of hope. One summer during school I worked as a salesclerk at Sears. I proudly told the other salesclerks that I wanted to

be a writer. They laughed loudly, and one said, "What are you going to write about, working at Sears?" And I confess I thought they had a good point. What would I write about? Other people suggested I "write a bestseller."

A couple of years after I got my degree in journalism, I moved to Boston to be near my older sister. But before I left Los Angeles, I decided to take a bus trip through parts of America. I think I felt I needed to conjure up some spirits. Whenever I wrote anything for college, I would listen to music or smell perfume from long ago, anything to conjure up the writing spirits.

So I bought a month-long Greyhound pass and started with a ride to Oregon, which I'd never visited.

I remember walking on the beach talking to a former Coast Guardsman who had recently returned from being stationed in Alaska. As we strolled on the sand, he told me that his best moment ever was saving the life of a five-year-old boy. He gave me a green glass fishing float that he said he had found on a beach in Alaska. He believed the float had traveled across the Pacific Ocean. I still have that float. I like to think it once belonged to a fisherman in Russia or Japan.

I met an old woman on the bus who said she had left Oklahoma during the Dust Bowl years to pick fruit in California. She said she was sick and in her eighties, and this was the last trip she would ever take. She told me she'd known a lot of people who'd died over the years. I told her I'd never known anyone who'd died, and she was so surprised she threw her head back and it hit the window. I told her she'd lived a fascinating life, and she said I wouldn't think so if I'd been there. She

emanated kindness. We hugged when she got off at Amarillo, Texas, and she said something like, "I hope you have a nice life." That was nearly a quarter of a century ago. In fact, I can imagine myself saying something similar today to a young girl on a bus, trying to understand who she is and why, and where she should go.

Later that night on the bus, I opened my eyes and saw smokestacks amid an explosion of greenish fluorescent lights. It was a factory, and it was an astonishing sight rising from the barren flatlands. From somewhere in back a man called out, "This is America!"

What those words conjured up in my heart was a sense of what it meant to me to be an American in general, and in particular, an American writer. It did not mean shared history or even shared values with other Americans, but a shared landscape. What all of us shared were the factories, the deserts, the cities, the wheat fields. That sharing was an immense responsibility we had to one another.

I understood then that I could write about my section of that shared landscape.

One of your first realizations when you win a Newbery is that you didn't win it alone. Many things have to happen over the decades in order to reach the magical moment. Twenty years ago, I was going to grad school and living in the attic of a big house on Pittsburgh's south side. I already had one roommate, and my second roommate arrived one late summer day. Her name was Caitlyn Dlouhy, and she later became my editor at Atheneum Books for Young Readers. Caitlyn alleges that I didn't come down to say hello that first day, and also that the first time she saw me I was wearing a glamorous silk robe—and my glasses were held together with tape.

Caitlyn is one of my closest friends and one of the most beautiful, happy people I have ever known. I wrote this novel because of her prodding. She has changed my life equally with her editing and with her happiness.

I want to thank the Newbery Committee for the incredible honor and the incred-

ible miracle of this award. Not long after they called me I was standing at the edge of a swimming pool watching one pink and one yellow rubber duck float around in the water. Sammy was playing beside me. I watched him for a minute, and when I looked up again I couldn't see the pink duck anywhere. I felt a moment of panic and maybe even despair. I thought, *My God, I'm in an alternate universe now. There is no pink rubber duck in this universe, and I haven't won the Newbery.* Being transported to an alternate universe seemed no more or less amazing than winning the Newbery.

I want to thank George, who has sustained me fervently and whose belief in me has often been greater than my belief in myself. I'd also like to thank everyone at Simon & Schuster, who published a book for no other reason than that they believed in it. In particular, thanks to Susan Burke, Caitlyn's assistant and future editor extraordinaire; Michelle Fadlalla, Jennifer Zatorski, and the entire talented marketing and publicity teams; the magnificent Russell Gordon; Jeannie Ng; Rick Richter; and the incomparable Ginee Seo.

Although my son is still too young to understand this, I'd like to say a few words for him on this night that is so important to me. When I was in Kazakhstan adopting him, another single woman and I told each other that the international adoption process was the hardest thing we'd ever done. Do you know why we said that? Because we hadn't become mothers yet.

My plane ride home from Kazakhstan was scheduled for something like 4:20 A.M. I didn't sleep at all that night. Right before I passed through the airport's gates, I turned to say goodbye to the adoption agency's driver. Before I could say anything, he shouted out the last two sentences I would ever hear from him. The first sentence was, "Once you pass through those gates we cannot help you anymore." He pointed to a door beyond the gates. The second sentence was, "If they take you into that room to shake you down, do not give them more than twenty dollars!" I believe I had about \$1,800 in cash on me, since nearly all transactions in Kazakhstan, including

paying apartment rent and adoption-related fees, were conducted in cash. I passed through the gates, staring fearfully at that door. But the guard smiled at me, and after more than seven weeks in Kazakhstan, I was on my way home.

I had a two-hour wait in the airport, a seven-hour ride to Germany, a four-hour layover in Germany, and a twelve-hour flight to Los Angeles. Sammy cried inconsolably nearly the whole way. On the first flight, I tearfully approached a man I thought I'd heard speaking English and said, "Are you an American? Can you help me?" He was. He did. On the second flight, a man told me that because of Sammy's crying the entire airplane was talking about me. A beautiful and generous family from Finland watched Sammy while I slept.

There were many moments after our return when I told myself, I cannot do this. I am not a mother, and I cannot be a mother. I have three more novels scheduled to be published by Atheneum. In the fourth, I quote from the ancient Chinese philosopher Chuang Tzu. For my son, I'd like to quote from Chuang Tzu now:

Once I, Chuang Tzu, dreamed I was a butterfly and was happy as a butterfly. I was conscious that I was quite pleased with myself, but I did not know that I was Tzu. Suddenly I awoke, and there was I, visibly Tzu. I do not know whether it was Tzu dreaming that he was a butterfly or the butterfly dreaming that he was Tzu. Between Tzu and the butterfly there must be some distinction. But one may be the other. This is called the transformation of things.

At some point, without even realizing it, I became a mother who only dreamed she was not. This is called the transformation of things.

I also need to thank my family. When either second or third grade—I forget which—was coming to an end, I had fallen in love with the reader we used in school. I told my parents that I would not return the book. I loved it too much.

continued on page 61

INCOMING PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE, continued from page 4

For ALSC, it does appear to be the best of times. Our office is completely staffed for the first time in over a year and a half. Our staff is poised to help our member leaders develop and implement a new strategic plan that parallels ALA's *Ahead to 2010* plan, which is scheduled to be adopted at the 2005 Annual Conference. Deputy Director Aimee Strittmatter, who joined our staff in April, will be devising new ways to bring continuing education to those who want to improve their skills in working with children. I've joined your last two presidents in peppering our many committees and task forces with bright

new members who bring fresh energy to our work. Task forces are creating or revising manuals so that committees can work efficiently and exploring new concepts such as creating a mentoring network to help new ALSC members feel at home.

We have started planning for the next National Institute in the fall 2006 in Pittsburgh. Your newly elected officers, who join the ALSC Board at the end of the 2005 Annual Conference, offer commitment and the energy to make ALSC the best it can be. ALSC's greatness rests in its members, so get or remain involved;

learn new skills through our publications or conference programs; and make new friends as you serve on a committee—there are even ways to contribute as a “virtual” committee member if you cannot attend Annual Conference. Let your vision and voice be heard by telling your board or office staff how you want to see ALSC grow in the next year. Finally, we can all bring a sense of perspective and humor to these tasks. Remember, when it seems to be the worst of times, the best of times is right around the corner. ☺

GEISEL, continued from page 41

Applying the guidelines, books published as picture books and easy readers are eligible, if they function successfully as beginning readers.

Schulman recalled that Geisel always insisted that every noun and action be depicted in the art. “He wanted the art to function as clues to the text, to reinforce the content of the text,” Schulman said. So it is fitting that the award criteria

reflect the importance of illustration for beginning readers, and the award will be given to both the author and illustrator.

Klimo said, “A beginning reader functions as a tool to help children learn to read, but Ted Geisel elevated it to an artistic tool.” While beginning readers, by definition, have the practical job of helping children learn to decode, a beginning reader can

be much more than a teaching tool. The committee will be looking for a book that, because of its creativity and artistic merit, can be considered an outstanding contribution to children's literature.

We think Dr. Seuss would be pleased. ☺

For more details on the Theodor Seuss Geisel Award, visit www.ala.org/ala/alsc under “Awards and Scholarships.”

NEWBERY ACCEPTANCE, continued from page 8

I cried. I ranted. I raged. I wanted that book. Finally my parents decided that my mother, who'd taken typing in high school and owned an old manual typewriter she practiced on, should type up the book before we returned it. I still remember the Xs all over her typing errors. A few years later I got a Christmas gift from my family. It was a notepad with the Lucy character from Peanuts. A frown furrowed Lucy's brow. The caption read, “No one understands us crabby people.” That gift proves that somebody did understand me. So I really need to thank my family for their understanding, and I hope that I've returned it.

I also have to thank my dog Shika, who lies by my side every moment that I write.

I've moved many times in my life. Whenever I move to a new place, I call the phone company and the gas company. I don't like to drive so I figure out the transportation system. And I figure out where the nearest library is.

I read voraciously until I finished eighth grade. Then I hardly read at all for three years. I look back on 1973, the year I dropped out of school, with the belief that libraries cannot just change your life but save it. Not the same way a Coast Guardsman or a police officer might save a life, not all at once. It happens more slowly, but just as surely.

I started out tonight by discussing what distinguished me from other Newbery

winners. I believe what we all have in common with one another and with everybody in this room is that we search out libraries like heat-seeking missiles. And another thing we have in common: our parents could not have afforded to buy us all the books we read as children. Our parents walked across the doorway of that first library holding our hands because they knew our futures resided in that building, as I believe the futures of my son and indeed of all Americans reside in those buildings.

Libraries fed our passion as children, and feed it still. ☺