

The 2000 Newbery Medal Acceptance Speech

By Christopher Paul Curtis

First I'd like to extend my congratulations and joy to my fellow Newbery honorees, Audrey Coulombis, Tomie dePaola, and Jennifer Holm, and to Caldecott winner Simms Taback and honorees Molly Bang, Jerry Pinkney, Trina Schart Hyman, and David Wiesner. And an especially hearty "Go Ahead, Bruh!" to one of my heroes, the winner of the first Printz Award, Mr. Walter Dean Myers, upon whose shoulders I stand.

What an honor! This is the speech so many authors dream about making, and I admit that ever since *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* won a Newbery Honor in 1996, I've hoped that one day I would be standing in front of the gathered throng of the ALA accepting this beautiful medal.

Several firsts are taking place here tonight, some very well known, others not so well known. Among the latter is:

I've done quite a bit of research on the subject and I feel quite confident in saying that I'm the first person with dreadlocks to be presented with the Newbery. Actually what I have are not dreadlocks; dreads are much more organic, much wilder. What I have are more accurately known as Nubian Locks. Webster's defines Nubian as "originating in or pertaining to North East Africa." But ever since I received a phone call from San Antonio, Texas, at 9:20 A.M. Eastern Daylight Savings Time on January 17, 2000, the word *Nubian* has acquired an entirely different spelling. From now on, for me, Nubian will no longer be spelled N-U-B-I-A-N, but N-E-W- (as in Newbery) B-I-A-N.

So many family members and friends, old and new, are responsible for my being here today, and you can only imagine how thrilled I am that many of them are here to share this moment. If I were to start



photo courtesy of James Keyser

naming them this would be a very long night indeed, but I would like to make special mention of Lynn Guest, my Aunt Joan and Uncle George, and my sister, Cydney. The four of you have made everything so much easier for me, thank you! Also to Liz Ivette Torres, Mikial Wilson, Michael, Lonnie, and Ara Curtis, Lindsey Curtis, Terry Fisher, Janet Brown, Aunt Nina and Uncle June and all of my wonderful siblings, my cousins, my aunts and uncles—thank you for years of kindness.

Thanks to the many teachers and librarians I have met over the past five years for making me feel so special. Pauletta Bracy, Joan and Ray Kettle, John Jarvey, Gary Salvner, Smoky Daniels, Jean Brown, Elaine Stephens, Kylene Beers, Teri Lesesne, Lois Buckman, Len Hayward, and the many other people who have so warmly opened their schools and libraries to me, thank you for making me feel at home whether I'm in Cleveland, Chicago, Saginaw, or Houston.

And to my family members at Random House, Pearl Young, Terry

Borzumato, Beverly Horowitz, Kevin Jones, Michelle Poploff, Jeannette Lundgren, Tim Ditlow, Craig Virden, and particularly Andrew Smith, Mary Raymond, and Melanie Chang. I've seen how hard all of you work, and I know I've seen only a tenth of what you do. All of the Curti (the plural of Curtis) thank you.

And to my children, Steven and Cydney, thank you for your contributions to both of the books. Steven, you are directly responsible for the *Watsons* going as smoothly as it did. You're the best first reader an author could ask for. And Cydney, many people have told me that their favorite part of *Bud* is the song that you wrote. "Mommy Says No" is a classic. Thank you so much.

I also would like to extend my sincerest thanks to Carolyn Brodie and this year's committee for their selection of *Bud, Not Buddy* as 2000's medal winner. I once judged a short story contest with forty entries, and after reading the tenth one I thought I'd lose my mind. I'm amazed at the dedication, the time, and the strength it took for these members to complete their assignment. Thank you from the bottom of my heart. I'm well aware of the incredible honor that has been bestowed upon me.

I'd also like to thank the Newbery committee from 1996 for honoring *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* and, more importantly, for not holding a grudge. Let me explain.

Christopher Paul Curtis is the winner of the 2000 Newbery Medal for *Bud, Not Buddy*, published by Delacorte Press. His acceptance speech was delivered at the Annual Conference of the American Library Association in Chicago on July 9, 2000.

In January of 1996 there was talk that my first novel might receive some recognition from the Coretta Scott King committee and, less likely, from the Newbery committee as well. I had read somewhere that the committees called the authors who had won on Sunday night before an announcement was made to the general public on Monday morning.

That Sunday evening in the Curtis household was horrible. The phone never rang. I even picked it up several times to make certain we had a dial tone. Finally at 11:00 I called it a night. Kay stayed up, sure that the time difference was delaying any word. The last thing I said to her as I went upstairs was, "Aww, who wants those old awards anyway?"

The next morning I headed off to the library to write. At around 9:00 the phone rang, waking Kay up. It was Mary Beth Dunhouse from the Newbery committee. I have to explain here that Kay is not a morning person. She doesn't really begin to wake up until ten-ish, so in her defense she wasn't really sure what was going on.

Ms. Dunhouse told Kay *The Watsons* had won a Newbery Honor and asked if I was home. Kay told her, "No, he's gone to the library to write." When Ms. Dunhouse relayed that fact to the librarians, they screamed wildly! Around this time, the call waiting clicked. As I've said, Kay was still half-asleep. She said to Ms. Dunhouse, "Could you hold for a minute, there's another call coming in."

It was Carolyn Garnes of the Coretta Scott King Committee. Kay finally woke all the way up and began chatting enthusiastically with Ms. Garnes. About ten minutes into that conversation, Kay remembered the other line. When she went back, the Newbery committee was long gone.

So as you can see, I really am grateful that librarians didn't hold that against me.

Not that I'd ever suspect that they would. I've been involved with librarians all of my life, and I, just like Bud, have always known where to go for a sympathetic ear or for information or for the key to the magical world of books. Libraries and librarians have always played such an important role in my life.

A rite of passage for me occurred at the Flint Public Library. My siblings and I used to spend Saturday mornings at the library with my father. We'd go into the children's section while Dad, who at the time was in Labor Relations, went to the part of the library that was filled with books about unions and contracts. One day Dad took David and Cydney into the youth section and told me to come with him. We walked across the hall into Adult Fiction and Dad said, "You're a good enough reader to start here now."

From that day on I remember the pride and accomplishment I felt when on Saturdays we'd go to the library and David and Cydney would turn left into the world of Dr. Seuss and *Harold and the Purple Crayon* and I'd turn right into the world of Langston Hughes and Mark Twain.

Both of my books were written in the Windsor, Ontario, libraries. When I started writing *The Watsons*, I found that once again the children's section was the place where I was most comfortable. I'd write for three or four hours every day and was always made to feel right at home by everyone who worked there. One of the librarians in particular, Terry Fisher, took me under her wing.

One of the most difficult things for a new author to do is to find someone who can offer informed criticism of your work. When I'd finished *The Watsons*, I figured, Who better to review it than a children's librarian? Terry was the logical choice. I asked her if she would read my manuscript, and even though she had no idea if the 220 pages I handed her would be the least bit readable, she never hesitated, she said of course.

A couple of weeks later I was back in the library and steeled myself to get Terry's criticism. I walked over to her desk. She looked up at me and tried to say something, but instead she was wracked with sobs. She finally said she loved my book, and I nearly broke into tears, too.

And now this.

I don't even have to look at the table where she is, because I'll bet you dollars to doughnuts that she's crying all over again, but Terry, could you please stand up? Thank you, once again, for all of your

encouragement and support. You are such a librarian!

One of the proudest moments of my life happened this year, and once again the library was involved. In late January I received a call from the Flint Public Library and was told that if a millage tax didn't pass in Flint, the same library that my father took us to on Saturdays, along with every other public library in the city, would be permanently closed. I was asked if I'd be willing to make a commercial for the millage. I said yes, but first I called my editor, Wendy Lamb, and told her what was going on. The next day, Craig Virden, my publisher at Delacorte Press, sent a substantial check to the Friends of the Library Fund. I also called my agent, Charlotte Sheedy, and the next day Charlotte also sent a very generous check to the fund. In two days, the fund's advertising budget tripled. I am so proud to be involved with people like Charlotte and Wendy and Craig. The millage passed overwhelmingly.

Soon after graduating from high school, much to my mother's dismay, I began working in an automobile factory in Flint called Flint Fisher Body Number One. The factory was historic, for in 1936 and 1937 the workers took over the plant when General Motors refused to recognize a union.

One of my political science professors at the University of Michigan-Flint, Dr. Neil Leighton, made this period come alive. His descriptions of the tensions and fears and tremendous danger to which these auto workers were exposed seemed the stuff of high drama to me. I knew there had never been a book for young readers about the Sit-Down Strike, so in early 1996 I began researching the labor movement and the Great Depression.

By November of '96 I'd written three chapters of the novel when Kay, Steven, Cydney, and I went to Grand Rapids to my family reunion. At the reunion, the main topic of conversation was my father's father, Herman E. Curtis, who in the 1930s led a big band called Herman E. Curtis and the Dusky Devastators of the Depression. The stories of Grandpa's exploits had everyone dying with laughter.

When I went back to the library in Windsor to write, I began taking notes

about my grandfather; the notes turned into vignettes; and the vignettes finally overwhelmed the Sit-Down Strike book and evolved into *Bud, Not Buddy*.

One of the questions I was constantly asked between the time that *The Watsons* was published and the time that *Bud* came out was a variation of, "Goodness, your first book did so well, what on earth are you going to do to top that?"

Early on I made a conscious effort not to try to top that.

I remembered the fun I had writing *The Watsons* and decided that *Bud* would be no different. I decided I had a story to tell, that I was going to tell it the best way I could, and that I'd give no consideration whatsoever to how it would be received. I figured Wendy Lamb could worry about that.

Here's another first that is taking place tonight. Many very famous people have been quoted and had their names dropped in past Newbery speeches, but Craig Virden has confidently agreed to provide either a six-figure advance and a two-book deal or one of the typically high-salaried, glamorous jobs in the world of New York publishing to anyone who can conclusively prove that the person I'm about to quote from has ever been cited in a Newbery speech before. Mr. Sylvester Stewart. No need to rummage through old copies of the *Horn Book*; Mr. Virden's money is safe. Sylvester Stewart is better known as Sly, from Sly and the Family Stone.

Sly said,

Lookin' at the devil,
Grinnin' at his gun.
Fingers start shakin', I begin to
run.
Bullets start chasin', I begin to
stop.
We begin to wrestle, I was on the
top.
I want to
Thank you falettinme be mice
elf
Agin.

The pertinent line is the last one, "I want to thank you for letting me be myself again."

I'm not exactly sure what Sly had in mind when he wrote that, but it rings of the highest truth to me tonight. I really do have the need to tell several people thank you for letting me be myself, starting right at home.

To my mother and father, Herman E. Curtis, Jr., and Leslie Lewis Curtis, thank you for letting me be myself. It wasn't until I had children of my own that I truly understood my parents. It wasn't until I too worried about what the world had in store for my young black children that I appreciated my mother's protectiveness. And protective she was.

Momma was convinced that our neighborhood in Flint was the poison capital of North America. As such, we were not allowed to go out trick-or-treating. Momma had it on the highest authority that every apple given out at Halloween had a razor blade in it, that every Hershey bar had been dusted with enough rat poison to bring down an elephant, that each NutChew was chock-full of the ground-up glass from a six pack of Faygo Red Pop. This is not to say that we didn't go trick-or-treating, just that we didn't go *out* to go trick-or-treating.

So we wouldn't feel totally left out of the festivities, Momma developed a brilliant plan. What the Curtis children would do was gather in a whiny, pouting group, go to a closed bedroom door in the house, yell "trick or treat," and, lo and behold, Momma would open the door and drop some candy in our bag. We'd then wait while she moved to the next bedroom and the sad little scene played itself out again. By the time we reached the bathroom door, I've got to tell you, the thrill was gone and all whining about going trick-or-treating ceased.

In addition to being protective, my mother and father have always been supportive and encouraging. I remember writing an article for a school paper in the sixth grade. I brought it home to do the final touches, and when I was done I gave it to Momma. After reading my work, she said, "Oh dear, I wish you'd left this at school, your teacher is going to think it was written by an adult." I've had a starred, boxed review in *Publishers Weekly* and glowing reviews from *The*

New York Times, but neither of them has meant as much to me as those words from my mother. Momma, thank you for letting me be myself.

Wendy Lamb, who is blessed with the perfect name for children's literature, thank you for letting me be myself. I never understood or appreciated how much a book is a collaboration between an author and an editor until Wendy took both of my books in hand and improved them immensely.

I've worked in an automobile factory for thirteen years, I've hauled garbage, I've mowed lawns, I've worked for the census, I've been a maintenance man, I've unloaded trucks and spent hours sorting through and recycling paper, but I think I'd rather go back to any one of those jobs than be an editor. I can't imagine a more difficult profession. Not only is a good editor technically on top of what she is doing, she also must be able to deal with a writer, a person who can range from frighteningly insecure to unbelievably cocky. Often in the same conversation.

After seeing how hard she worked on my books, I asked Wendy why the editor wasn't at least given an acknowledgment on the copyright page. She told me that the editor's job was to be invisible, merely another set of eyes for the author. And Wendy's touch *has* been invisible.

After each of my books has been published, I think to myself, "Why is Wendy Lamb making that big, cushy, typically high New York publishing house salary? It doesn't seem to me like she did very much on this book." Then I make the mistake of reading through our correspondences or, worse, reading the actual first draft of the book.

I end up saying things such as "Wait a minute, I could swear *I* was the one who thought of doing it that way," or "Ooh, that's right, Wendy *did* say it would make more sense if Buphead said . . ." or "Yikes, she's right again, 'booger' is mentioned a couple of dozen times too many on this page."

I remember going to Wendy's office for the first time and being absolutely crushed. I screamed, "Wendy, I thought I was the only one!" I was shocked to see that she actually worked on other people's

books! Though I didn't want to believe it, the evidence was irrefutable. On her desk was a well-thumbed-through Graham Salisbury manuscript, and in a pile that nearly reached the ceiling was a stack of fourteen or fifteen novels. I rushed over to see whose they were and can still remember the searing pain in my heart as I cried out, "Oh, Wendy! Not Gary Paulsen! Tell me it's anyone but Gary Paulsen!"

I'd always pictured Wendy sitting around in her office napping or biting her fingernails or playing solitaire while she waited for me to send her my latest rewrite, but I guess the old saying is true, the author's always the last one to know.

Wendy Lamb, thank you for pulling *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* out of a pile of nearly four hundred other manuscripts entered in your contest, the Delacorte Press Prize for a First Young Adult Novel, and thank you for letting me be myself.

Finally, Kaysandra Anne Yasmine Sookram Curtis. KayBee Baby, thank you for letting me be myself. In 1993 Kay took a tremendous leap of faith and said to me, "Look, I know you hate your job, and I don't think you're doing everything you can with your life. I've read some of the things you've written, and I bet you could be a writer. So why don't you take a year off work and see if you could write a book?"

Kay got me writing and is probably the person most responsible for me standing here tonight. That's an easy story to tell, but it leaves a lot of the gory details out, and believe me there are gory details when you take a year off work to write a book. Perhaps the biggest gory detail is fear. There was the fear that the year would be wasted, the fear that I wouldn't be able to produce anything worthwhile, and the all-encompassing fear when I realized I was being given a chance to have no excuses. There was also the fear of admitting to people that I was going to try to make a career as a writer. I knew that the looks this would draw from friends and family would be somewhat akin to the way they'd look if I announced I was quitting my job to be either a brain surgeon or a ballerina. But Kay even had me covered there.

When money would allow, we would make our one family trip a year to Toronto to attend the Caribbean festival known as Caribana. In 1993 we ended up at a party with a group of five or six other couples. My worst nightmare developed right in front of my eyes—everybody began taking turns telling what they did for a living. Before I could excuse myself and run to the bathroom to hide, all eyes turned to me. I hung my head and whispered, "I'm a writer." I don't know which was worse, the embarrassing silence that followed my announcement or the snicker that someone couldn't contain. All the women in the group looked sympathetically at Kay.

Kay never missed a beat, she said, "That's right, he's a writer and a very good one and one day all of you are going to know who he is." The women in the group still looked at Kay with sympathy, but now it was sympathy colored with a touch of pity.

In 1993 an essay I'd written and an early draft of *The Watsons Go to Birmingham* won Avery and Jules Hopwood Awards at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. While I waited on stage to accept my prizes, Kay sat next to the mother of another winner. I don't know what their conversation was, but afterward the woman came up to me and said, "You know, with a wife like that you don't have any choice but to be a success as a writer."

I didn't understand what the woman meant at the time, but now I do. It's much like Bud Caldwell's mom told him: with the right love and care and hope, miraculous things can happen. A confused, lost Bud can blossom into a beautiful flower; an unhappy, unfulfilled factory worker can bloom into an author who realizes his dream, can become someone who doesn't have to just *imagine* what it feels like to stand before a gathered throng of the ALA and accept this beautiful medal.

Kay, thank you for providing that love and care and hope. Thank you for letting me be myself.

In January of 2000 there was talk once again that my novel might receive some consideration from both the Coretta

Scott King committee and the Newbery committee. This speculation does not make for an easy Sunday night's rest.

On the morning of Monday, January 17, Kay took our daughter, Cydney, to school, leaving me to field any calls that came in. Nine o'clock came and went. At about 9:10 I repeated my lines from four years earlier: "Aww, who wants those old awards anyway?" At 9:16 the King committee called, and at 9:32 the Newbery committee called.

When Kay came home around 10:00, I'd had plenty of time to compose myself. She opened the door, found me sitting on the couch reading, and said, "You didn't hear anything?"

I said, "Well, just as a hypothetical let's say I won honors from both committees again. Would that mean I could be excused from doing all housework for the next year?"

Kay said, "Huh. You'd have to win the gold from both of them before that would happen."

After we hugged and cheered and cried, Kay said, "You know I was only kidding about the housework, don't you?" Thank you, Kay, for letting me be myself.

Bud Caldwell coped with life by developing a set of Rules and Things for Having a Funner Life and Making a Better Liar Out of Yourself. Christopher Curtis has coped with the attention and exhilaration of winning the Newbery and Coretta Scott King Awards by developing a set of Rules and Things for Keeping Your Ego in Check and Your Feet Firmly Planted on the Ground.

Rules and Things Number 541:

Don't Worry about Getting a Big Head. Friends, Family, and Total Strangers Will See to It That There Is No Way in the World You Will Be Allowed to Become Too Full of Yourself.

Two examples. *Time* magazine started its article about me by stating that I am six feet two inches tall and weigh 240 pounds. When I was interviewed by *Essence Magazine*, the reporter told me he'd seen those statistics, and he stated, "I don't know why they had to put that in

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I listened to *klezmer* and Jewish liturgical music, looked at old family photographs, and did all I could to immerse myself in this old-world culture. I wanted to reflect its emotional life, yet I needed it all to be upbeat. I sang. I danced. I did the *troika*.

I grew up in a working-class neighborhood in the Bronx, made up mostly of socially aware Eastern European Jews. Even though it was the Depression, they built their own cooperative housing project. It was called the Coops. The people who lived there were called coop-niks. We were all poor, but it was a very special place for me. We had a community center, science and sports clubs, art classes, and even our very own library. I spent my summers at Camp *Kinderland* (Land of Children) and Camp *Nish-ka-dieget* (No need to worry). These camps were supported by Jewish labor organizations like the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, the IWO, and Workmen's Circle. They were secular camps. You could attend Yiddish classes there, but it wasn't compulsory. It was here in these camps that I was encouraged to develop my talent and to

go to Music and Art High School, even though I hated leaving the neighborhood. Upon reflection, I see my old neighborhood as an extension of the *shtetl* life these European Jews had experienced as children. They left Europe for a new life in America, *Der Goldenah Medina* (Streets Paved with Gold), far away from pogroms, but still with a sense of community, humor, and values learned from generations of family.

I don't know how many *shtetl* communities existed in Eastern Europe (the word *shtetl* does not appear in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*) but they are all gone now. So is my neighborhood in the East Bronx. It is said that Yiddish is a dying language . . . and perhaps that is true. But as long as I can say, "I am making a *gontse megillah* (a big deal) here," and as long as a good number of people here tonight understand me, who knows? Enough already.

I have many to thank here this evening:

To Music and Art High School and Cooper Union who trained me and gave me a free education: my thanks.

To the Caldecott committee: Thank you so much for saying that a book with a novelty aspect is worthy of this prestigious medal and that *yiddishkayt* can be of interest to young children if presented in an appealing way. Thank you for this *mitzve*, and *Ah mazaltov* to you!

To my editor and publisher Regina Hayes: Thank you for seeing the possibility of successfully redoing a story I had published before. It took some *chutzpah* to let me do this. Thank you for your confidence and optimism.

To my art director, Denise Cronin: You are a real *mensch* and just a pure pleasure to work with. Thank you for guiding *Joseph* through a difficult production process.

Thank you Nina Putignano, Janet Pascal, Elizabeth Law, Stephanie McCarthy, and the rest of the Viking staff. Thank you Doug Whiteman for your support. And to my wife, Gail Kuentler, *Az meir binst du shayne, Der einer oif der velt*. And to everyone here tonight: *Zayn gezundt* and may you live to be one hundred and twenty. Thank you. ●

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CURTIS

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there, I'm kind of tall and husky myself, they didn't have to tell everyone that stuff. I mean the brother can't help it if he's got tall genes in his family. The brother can't help it if he likes a sandwich every now and then!" Ouch!

The other example took place in New York City in March. Melanie Chang, my publicist at Random House, and I were walking through the lobby of the Doubletree Guest Suites in Times Square when a woman spotted me and came up to us very excitedly and said, "Oh my God, I don't believe it, aren't you the guy who wrote that book?"

I smiled humbly and said, "Yeah, that's me!"

Melanie asked the woman if she was in New York to attend the NCTE conference.

The woman replied, "No, I'm here on vacation, and I'd heard about your book and picked it up for the flight. I love it!"

"Thank you!" I replied even more humbly.

The woman said, "I've got my copy right upstairs, is there any way I can get you to sign it?"

Melanie told her, "We're going to lunch here in the hotel, we'll be here for the next hour or so."

The woman beamed and said, "Thank you so much, I'll be right back."

I don't know which of us was more pleased—Melanie because the Random House publicity machine was so potent that here was a nonteacher, nonlibrarian who had heard of her author, or me because I'd been recognized in the heart of New York City. I mean it's one thing to be recognized in downtown Flint, Michigan,

but it's a whole 'nother world to have a stranger know you in the Big Apple.

Melanie and I went to the restaurant and sat at a table where our fan could easily spot us. A few minutes later the woman came squealing and gushing to our table and handed me her book.

It was *Monster*, by my hero, Walter Dean Myers.

Once again, thank you, thank you, thank you to the Newbery committee for giving me the freedom to be myself. Thank you so much to the many librarians and teachers who have through their recognition also encouraged me to be myself, and who have permitted three voices from Flint, Michigan—Kenny Watson, Bud Caldwell, and Christopher Curtis—to be heard across this land. ●