The 2001 Newbery Medal Acceptance Speech

Richard Peck

Delegates to the American Library Association, members of the publishing community, members of the 2001 Newbery committee to whom I am so grateful, ladies and gentlemen:

Unaccustomed as I am to public speaking, I invoke my valued colleague, San Francisco's own, incomparable Peggy Rathmann. If she had not already said it to you before me, I would say it now. It takes a village to write my books.

I am grateful to my agent, Sheldon Fogelman, to whom my obligations go beyond the contractual.

I am grateful to Mary Tapissier, my British publisher at Hodder and Stoughton.

I am grateful to George Nicholson, once of Holt, Rinehart, and Winston. After the tense and silent summer of 1971, I took a first manuscript to him, hoping for advice. On the following morning, early, George rang up to say, "You may start your second novel."

I've just kept going, hoping to have the next book accepted before the last book can be reviewed.

I am here because of a colleague who was not nearly such a slow starter as I. She is S. E. Hinton. In the spring of 1973 she was unable to speak to the Indiana Library Association. I was called off the bench and onto the field to pinch-hit. I've never left it. That evening began nearly three decades of visits to young readers and their librarians who always, somehow, can tell me what my next book will be about.

I am grateful to librarians because they are the local representatives of all writers, living and dead. I'm twice grateful to those librarians willing to write grant proposals in their own time, grants for author-in-the-school programs. As a result, I never see a "typical" school. I see a school with a librarian willing to move heaven, earth, and the classroom teachers to bring writers and young readers together. It is always a librarian who fears no parent, because you can communicate with children or you can fear their parents, but you cannot do both.

Author-in-the-school programs mean a great deal to me, because if a living writer of anything had entered the classroom when I was in seventh grade, it would have given me permission to dream.

Many a better writer has accepted the Newbery Medal over these past eighty years. Many a better writer has been denied it. But no writer ever admired his writing colleagues more than I do, or learned more from them. They are names that should be on the lips of every American parent: Patricia Reilly Giff, Katherine Paterson, Paula Danziger, Will Hobbs, Walter Dean Myers, Lois Duncan, Sonya Sones, M. E. Kerr, Kate DiCamillo, Jerry Spinelli, Cynthia DeFelice, Chris Crutcher, Michael Cadnum, Graham Salisbury, Lois Lowry, Sharon Creech, Judy Blume, Marc Talbert, Jacqueline Woodson, Paul Zindel, Joan Bauer, Jack Gantos, and many, many more. Their work towers above the ruins of an educational system, public and private, in an era when literacy has become an elective and the librarian and the writer may be the only teachers in many young lives. Being a writer never improved anybody's mental health, and so I'm grateful for the companionship and therapy of my colleagues.

Only one hard truth beclouds this evening. I am the first writer to meet this moment after the lifetime of Robert Cormier. After his lifetime, but not after his life.

I'm here because of another colleague in our writers' village: Harry Mazer. In the fall of 1995, Harry sent forth a decree. He asked his colleagues to write short stories for a new collection he was anthologizing. It was to be a collection of gun stories. As you know, it became a book called *Twelve Shots.*

Now, I have not personally squeezed off a round since the rifle range at Fort Carson, Colorado, in January of 1957. And I had to wonder in my heart just how many librarians are members of the National Rifle Association, however much you may personally admire Charlton Heston. In fact, I wondered if Harry was slipping. But of course he wasn't. He'd included a postcard to send back, saying, Yes, I'll do you a story, or, No, I won't. I itched to send that postcard back saying, "Dear Harry, I'll give it a shot."

Trying to imagine what kind of stories Harry would get, I envisioned a lot of male-dominated yarns about how I killed a bear and it made a man out of me. In fact, a lot of overserious stories. So I gave myself an assignment. I'd write a comedy about a female character, just to give Harry's collection some balance.

I looked up from my desk, and there in the door stood Grandma Dowdel with a 12-gauge double-barreled Winchester shotgun loose in her trigger-happy hand.

I called my story "Shotgun Cheatham's Last Night above Ground." Then I ran it past my editor at Dial Books for Young Readers, Cindy Kane. She thought there was a book in it, a gather-

Richard Peck is the winner of the 2001 Newbery Medal for *A Year Down Yonder,* published by Dial Books for Young Readers. His acceptance speech was delivered at the Annual Conference of the American Library Association in San Francisco on June 17, 2001.

ing of short stories building to a novel. That book became *A Long Way from Chicago*, which brought me to the Newbery-Caldecott dinner of 1999, though farther back in the room. When a book comes that far, the editor says what Cindy did: "We'll need another book about Grandma Dowdel, and we'd like it by Thursday." Thus, *A Year Down Yonder* began to be.

Real life is too contrived for fiction. The Delacorte editor of Harry Mazer's *Twelve Shots* has since become my editor at Dial: Lauri Hornik. In their discreet directiveness, Cindy Kane and Lauri Hornik are the best of editors. I thank them and Harry Mazer for this medal.

With another Grandma Dowdel book due, I saw I'd made a grave error in a career full of them. I'd let Joey, the narrator of *A Long Way from Chicago*, grow up. He was in World War II. And so a sequel was out of the question. Happily, Joey's younger sister, Mary Alice, was waiting in the wings. She told a different story. Joey expressed his awe at the power of a mighty grandmother and, perhaps, of all women. Mary Alice tells of finding in an unexpected place the role model for the rest of her life.

Now people ask, "Was Grandma Dowdel your grandmother?" Even librarians ask. We writers aren't given much credit for creativity. Did my grandmother fire off both barrels of a shotgun in her own front room? Did she pour hot glue on the head of a hapless Halloweener? Did she spike the punch at a Daughters of the American Revolution tea? Well, no. When you're a writer, you can give yourself the grandmother you wish you'd had.

And who is Grandma Dowdel? Since nobody but a reader ever became a writer, Grandma Dowdel marches in a long tradition. She is the American tall tale in a Lane Bryant dress. There's more than a bit of Paul Bunyan about her, and a touch of the Native American trickster tradition: she may just be Kokopelli without the flute.

But the setting for the stories is real, the town where my own real-life grandmother lived, a place called Cerro Gordo, named by the men coming home from the Mexican War. It was a town in Illinois cut in two by the tracks of the Wabash Railroad where people stood in their yards to watch the Wabash Cannonball go through.

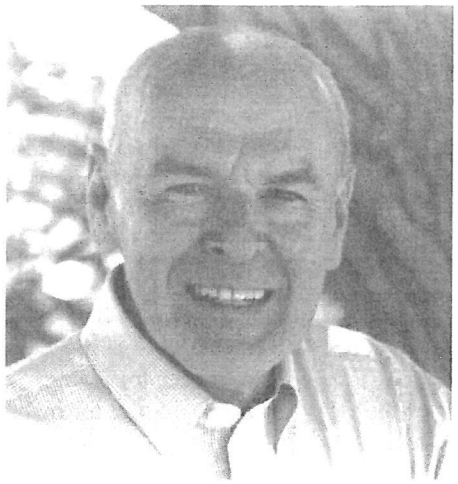
A novel is a community, within the covers of the book. The smaller the town, the more meaningful is every inhabitant, unless that small town is a suburb.

Grandma Dowdel isn't the first of the great, granite elders to stalk through my pages. There's an elderly character in every one of my books: Uncle Miles in *The Ghost Belonged to Me,* Madam Malevich in *Are You in the House Alone?,* Polly Prior in *Remembering the Good Times*. And very shortly now in a new book called *Fair Weather,* a gnarled old codger named Granddad Fuller.

These ambulatory ancient monuments are there to offer wisdom and balance to a self-referential youth culture. They are extended family for young suburban readers and for young readers in cities where the elderly fear the streets. Most of all, the old survivors in my stories embody the underlying message in all fiction: that in the long run you will be held responsible for the consequences of your actions. A serious message, and so a comedy is called for.

Our readers find their role models and their lawgivers in their peer group leaders. Mary Alice finds hers in an elder, where I found mine. From my father, I learned nostalgia as an art form. My stories are set where he grew up, a paradise lost to him on the battlefields of World War I. Like all soldiers returned, he found the past wasn't where he'd left it. That only fueled his stories of boyhood until they merged in my mind with the stories of Mark Twain. I still see the stories of both these men through the mesh of a sun-warmed screen door on long-vanished, never-ending summer afternoons.

I am here this evening because I came from a home where no screens glowed, a home where there were bedtime stories because there was bedtime. I'm here because my mother read to me before I could read for myself. She had no intention of sending an ignoramus to first grade, and so she filled me up with words and opened the door to the alternative universe of storytelling, of fiction.



Richard Peck, winner of the 2001 Newbery Medal. Photo credit: Sonya Sones

I heard my first stories in my mother's voice. A satisfactory substitute for that technique has yet to be devised because most of who we are is decided in those first five fleeting years of life before we ever see school.

The narrative—language itself—is the gift of the elders. We are the elders now, the youngest writers and librarians among us. In only moments from now—a few semesters—our young readers won't be able to remember the twentieth century.

Powerful forces divorce the young from their roots and traditions: the relentlessness of the video game that is the pornography of the pre-pubescent, a violent virtual reality that eliminates the parent who paid for it. And the peer group that rushes in to fill the vacuum of the teacher's vanished authority and an awesome parental power failure.

We writers and librarians, we people of the word, spot for survivors in a generation who have learned the wrong lesson from their elementary-school years: that yes, you should be able to read and write; yes, you should be literate. But if you're not, you will be accommodated.

Thank you for fighting this good fight, school librarians who know that the beating heart of the school is the library, not the gym; public librarians who may just be the only adults on call for many of the young.

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about it. I hoped that if I gave it my very best, dug down deeper and harder than I'd ever dug before, listened to every bit of advice I could gather, bled, sweated, wept, fasted, and prayed, that I'd *still*, probably fail miserably. I was right about the first two points and, thanks to you, wrong about that final one. By the way, I never actually bled or wept (other than for joy), or fasted—I do admit, happily, to occasional perspiration and to a lot of prayer (especially around the middle of January).

"A writer is only a writer at the moment he is actually writing something." I have always loved this quote, or probably misquote that I remember seeing somewhere in the writings of Charles Bukowski. I love it because when Bukowski said this, I think he was challenging the idea that a writer is really any different than anyone else. All of us struggle to find our place in the world, to find ourselves loveable, to make our marks, however grand or humble our marks might be. Incidentally, I think this is the secret to Shawn McDaniel; he is the ultimate underdog overcoming the ultimate odds and thank you all for giving him the power to do that. But as for the idea that we writers overcome some horrifying unfairness, suffer mightily, struggle bravely against a heartless, unappreciative world, and all those other ennobling fantasies and clichés that some people seem so determined to attribute to we sensitive artistes, well, all can I do is tell you what for me is the truth. And that truth is that writing, the actual process of sitting at a word processor or with a sheet of empty paper and a number two pencil, the physical, emotional, and spiritual act of writing itself, is a great, pure, and absolute joy. Don't get me wrong, it's nice to have readers and be read. It's terrific to see a story or poem take on a life of its own. It's fun to look out at all of you and see you listening to these remarks—but really, to be honest, it's the writing itself that is its own greatest reward. I am never happier than when it is going well and, to paraphrase what a guy once said about fishing, "The worst day of writing is better than the best day of having to work." I promised at the outset of these remarks not to begin listing people by name to whom I am indebted, but there are a few of you I must mention here. I owe so much to my editor at HarperCollins, Antonia Markiet and to my agent, George Nicholson. They are here with us tonight and I can't begin to adequately thank these very first friends to Shawn and me for their unflagging support and bold visions. I owe an incredible debt of thanks to my two sons Sheehan and Jesse Cruz who are my real life heroes. Thanks also to my sister and family. A special thanks to my lovely wife Patti who, as luck would have it, actually *is* lovely. Thank you to Craig T. Nelson and the great people at Family Tree Productions, and to my friends, including my business manager Stacie Wachholz, who help me manage the complex *business* of writing.

Thanks finally, once again, to all of you librarians on the front lines of our schools, colleges, universities, communities, towns, cities, book mobiles, everywhere, fighting illiteracy and the cruelty, meanness, and horror to which illiteracy and its identical twin ignorance inevitably lead. ALA, without your efforts and recognition, there would still be writers, but there would be far fewer readers. God bless you. ●

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Thank you for stealing time from an increasingly intrusive technology to put the right book in the right young hand. Thank you for standing firm and hanging tough against the book censor who is so often the parent of a nonreading child.

Anyone who has reached this podium has traveled a long trail. Few have traveled a longer one than I have, across thirty years and thirty books. I am not a quick study. It has taken me this long to find the key that unlocks a Newbery: a naked woman and a snake. There is no accounting for taste, and I am grateful to the Newbery committee for theirs.

We read to know we're not alone. And that's why we write, too. Thank you for this moment, and for everything you will do for the citizens of the twenty-first century on your next day back on the job. ●