

# The 2002 Newbery Medal Acceptance Speech

Linda Sue Park

I would like to begin by proposing that we officially add a second “r” to the spelling of “Newbery.” That way none of us ever has to see it misspelled again.

I understand it is traditional in this speech to discuss “The Call,” so I am going to do that now and get it over with—because it was not one of my shining eloquent moments. I had gone to bed the night before with my fingers crossed for what I thought was the far-fetched possibility of a Newbery Honor for *A Single Shard*. That was as far as my dreams took me. So when Kathy Odean introduced herself and said something like, “We’re delighted to tell you that *A Single Shard* has been named the 2002 Newbery Award book,” I was utterly unprepared. I thought she must have said “hon-ored.” “Award?” I said. “Yes,” she said, “we’re so excited, we think it’s a wonderful book.” “The Award?” I said again. “Yes, the Award,” she said. “That would be the winner, with the gold sticker.”

At that point my knees buckled, which had never happened to me before. And I remember thinking, “I’ve read this! ‘Her knees buckled’—so this is what it feels like!”

Kathy also explained that the speakerphone wasn’t working, so she was the only one who heard me make a complete fool of myself in three words or less. About fifteen minutes after I’d hung up, the phone rang again. “Hi, this is

**Linda Sue Park** is the winner of the 2002 Newbery Medal for *A Single Shard*, published by Clarion Books. Her acceptance speech was delivered at the ALA Annual Conference in Atlanta on June 16, 2002.

Kathleen Odean again,” and I was sure she was calling to say that there had been a mistake. But instead she said, “The speakerphone is working now, and we all want to hear you.” So I am honored to have received The Call twice in one day!

Since that day I have been asked many times how I came to write a book worthy of that precious sticker. I would like to begin my answer here tonight by telling a story.

Once upon a time there was a young Korean couple. They had been in America for only a few years, and their English was not very good. They were living in the Chicago suburbs, and a city newspaper ran on its comics pages a single-frame cartoon that taught the alphabet phonetically. The young woman cut out every one of those cartoons and glued them onto the pages of one of her old college textbooks. In this way she made an alphabet book for her four-year-old daughter. And so it was that on her first day of school, that little girl, the daughter of Korean immigrants, was the only child in her kindergarten class who could already read.

That was how my life as a reader began—like so many stories, with a mother. Mine continued with a father who took me to the library. *He took me to the library.* (That was the Park Forest Public Library in Park Forest, Illinois.) Every two weeks without fail, unless we were out of town, he spent an hour each Saturday morning choosing books for my siblings and me.

A few years ago, I was thinking about how my father must have known very little about American children’s literature when we were growing up. So I asked him, “How did you choose books for us?” “Oh—I’ll show you,” he said. He left the room for a few moments and came back

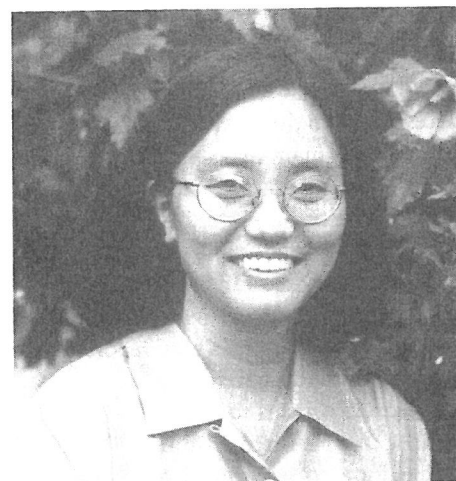


Photo by Klaus Pollmeier

Linda Sue Park, winner of the 2002 Newbery Medal.

with a battered accordion file and handed it to me. Inside were dozens of publications listing recommended children’s books—brochures, flyers, pamphlets—and most of them were issued by ALA.

The importance of my library upbringing was brought home to me in an unexpected way with the publication of my first book, *Seesaw Girl*. In the summer of 1999, my editor, Dinah Stevenson at Clarion Books, sent me my first author copy, and as you might imagine, it was the most thrilling moment of my life (that is, until the morning of January 21!). I loved Jean and Mou-sien Tseng’s cover artwork. It was unquestionably the most beautiful book that had ever been published. But . . . but . . . something was niggling at me, something wasn’t quite right, and I had no idea what it was.

A few weeks later, I had my first book signing. A woman with a book bag approached the table and said, “I’m a librarian. I already bought two copies of your book for our collection—would you mind signing previously purchased

copies?" Of course I didn't mind, so she pulled the two books out of her bag and handed them to me.

They were already covered with that clear cellophane, you know the stuff I mean.

And it was like a lightning bolt—that was what had been missing from my first author copy! That transparent cover was what made a "real" book!

A *Single Shard* has so many connections to reading and other books that it's hard to know where to begin. The idea itself was born when I was doing research for *Seesaw Girl*. I have done a lot of research for all of my books, because my childhood was pretty typically suburban American. My family ate Korean food and kept other aspects of Korean culture alive in our home, but I knew very little about Korea itself. And a crucial point, I do not speak Korean, other than those three phrases essential in any language: *anyanghaseyo* (hello); *komopsunida* (thank you); and *pyunsul odisoyo* (where is the bathroom?). I often feel the lack of my ancestral tongue keenly, but on the other hand, I try not to forget the flip side—that when I write, I am writing in my first language.

So I learned about Korea by reading and writing about it, and what I learned was so interesting that I thought I might like to pass it on, especially to young people. I do not believe you have to have children or be around children or act like a child to write for children. But I do believe that good children's writers share two characteristics with their readers: curiosity and enthusiasm. These qualities are what make books for young people such a joyful challenge to write and read: the ardent desire to learn more about the world and the passion with which that knowledge is received and shared.

In my reading I came across the information that in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, Korea had produced the finest pottery in the world, better than even China's, and I decided to set my third novel in that time period. As I was mulling over story ideas, my son said something like, "Why can't you write books like Gary Paulsen's?" He had loved *Hatchet* and wanted me to write an

adventure story, a road book. So that is where the journey part of the story came in.

During the writing of the book, I got hopelessly stuck because I was not familiar with the part of Korea Tree-ear had to travel through. Photographs and maps were simply not enough, and I did not have the wherewithal for a trip to Korea. I was in writerly despair. And just at that time I came across a book called *Korea: A Walk through the Land of Miracles*, by Simon Winchester. He will be more familiar to many of you as the author of the best-selling *The Professor and the Madman*, about the making of the Oxford English Dictionary, but years earlier he had written this book about Korea, which I had purchased and never read and forgotten about. I found it in a box at my parents' house. Not only had the author walked the length of South Korea in 1987, but he had walked *exactly* where I needed him to walk, from Puyo almost all the way to Songdo. He described the landscape and what it was like to walk so far over that specific terrain, and I had what I needed to complete the book. I am happy to have the opportunity to thank Mr. Winchester publicly here, for *Shard* would not have been the same story without his work.

The ending of *Shard* came to me in a single moment: when I saw the photograph of a beautiful celadon vase covered with cranes and clouds in a book of Korean art. I knew in that instant that the character in the book would grow up to make that vase. And for him to make such a remarkable work of art, he would need not only tremendous craftsmanship but also a great love for someone who had something to do with cranes. (By the way, when I first saw that photo, I thought the birds on the vase were storks. In early drafts, Crane-man is called "Stork-man"!)

Much later, after the book was finished, I realized that the story owed a huge debt to another book: *I, Juan de Pareja*, by Elizabeth Borton de Treviño, which won the Newbery Medal in 1966. In that book, the orphaned black slave Juan de Pareja becomes an assistant to the painter Velasquez and is eventually

freed by his master, which enables him to pursue his own painting career. The ending speculates on how a certain Velasquez work came to be painted, just as *Shard* speculates about that vase.

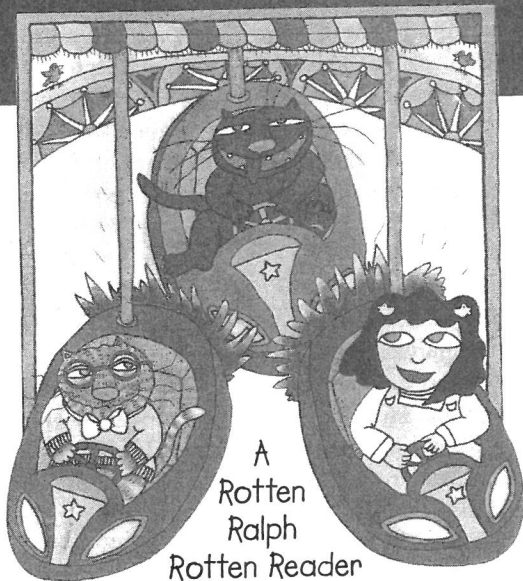
*Juan de Pareja* had been one of my favorite books as a child, and I read it again from time to time, always with great pleasure. Last winter I wrote an article for *Booklist* in which I listed what have proven to be the three most memorable books of my childhood and described what I had loved about them. I was startled to realize that two of the three titles featured black protagonists—*Juan and Roosevelt Grady*, by Louisa Shotwell—and that the third, *What Then, Raman?* by Shirley Arora, was about another dark-skinned child, a boy living in India.

In retrospect, it should not have been surprising. When I was a child, there were hardly any books featuring Asian characters. I did not realize it at the time, but I had obviously responded to the plight of "the outsider" in those three books. The relationship between Korean Americans and African Americans has a troubled history here in the U.S.; sporadic headlines over the years tell the sad story of animosity and even violence between the two. It seems to me that Korean Americans believe they do not have much in common with black Americans. My reading experience as a child proves otherwise, and it would be among my proudest accomplishments if one day my work plays a small part in helping these two groups feel more connected to each other.

Connections. Making connections has always been the most important element of story to me. Connections to another time and place and to my own ethnic background in historical fiction; connections to a character within the text; connections to people around us because of a text. A few years ago, my son and I were not getting along very well. I knew it was normal adolescent/parent stuff, but that did not make it any easier. I would like to read now from an e-mail I sent to another author after my son and I had finally gotten through that difficult time.

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Here in part is what I wrote:

It seems I have only one good memory of our relationship during that eternal year: your books. We talked about daemons endlessly, assigning them to each other, everyone we knew, television personalities, strangers, and so on. . . . We consoled each

other when we lost Lee Scoresby. In a hundred ways the books gave us things to talk about during a time when it seemed any other attempt at communication was doomed to end in raised voices and slammed doors. . . . I admire many things about the series, and about your other books, too. But it is one thing to

admire certain books and another to say they have truly made a difference in a person's life. Thank you most sincerely for the difference His Dark Materials has made in mine.

Most of you will have realized that the author is Philip Pullman, who recently won England's Whitbread Award for *The Amber Spyglass*. His books helped my son and me connect during a time when we needed it most. So it seemed a special serendipity that Mr. Pullman's Whitbread Award was announced on the same day as the Newbery.

Mr. Pullman answered me most graciously, and in another e-mail to a literature group, he closed his message with the exhortation to "Include! Include!" When I read that, my idea of the importance of "connection" was at once broadened. As well as connections—those straight lines of contact—"inclusion" seems equally apt, the idea of widening the circle. Widening the definition of "American" to include people with diverse ethnic roots, and widening the audience for books about all sorts of obscure places and times: these are vital forces in my work.

I write my books on what I call "The Pizza Model." Fifty years ago, pizza was a strange exotic food, the subject of ethnic slurs. Now, not only does it have coast-to-coast acceptance, but American chefs and eaters have made it their own: in Italy you would be hard put to find a Cajun-blackened-chicken pizza topped with mango salsa on a whole-wheat sourdough crust! In the same way, I think of *Shard* as an "American" novel. Its setting and characters may be twelfth-century Korean, but its author was concerned with the search for belonging and the drive to innovate, both very much part of the American experience. This strikes me as a fine parallel to both the Newbery Award itself—named for an Englishman, yet now wholly American—and to American culture as a whole. It is one of our great strengths that we have such a richness of cultures from which to draw in the continuing evolution of our own.

Is it important that I am the first Asian American in seventy-five years to have been awarded the Newbery Medal? In some ways, yes. Seventy-five years is a long time—three or four generations. We all know now how important it is for young people to see themselves reflected in positive images from the culture around them. And I think it is even more important for those in the majority to see images of people of color in a variety of contexts, to move away from seeing them as “other.”

However, I was pleased by Kathleen Odean’s comment that the book’s multiculturalism was not a factor in its selection. Certainly I did not write the book with an overt political agenda in mind. It has also been difficult for me to deal with the idea of becoming a sort of poster child for Korean Americans and for Asian writers in general.

I feel strongly that the author’s bio should be kept separate from consideration of the text itself, so much so that for my first three books I declined to have my photo printed on the back flap. I wanted the books to stand or fall on their own, without help or hindrance from information about my ethnicity. And I still believe that this is the goal—the ideal we must strive for. But the response from Korea and Korean Americans demonstrates that we are still a long way from inhabiting that ideal world. I was stunned and humbled to learn what the award for *A Single Shard* means to so many people, young and old, complete strangers, who have written to tell me how proud they are that a book set in Korea by a Korean American had won this award—how they now feel included in a way that they did not before.

To “include!” also means to widen the experience of all children by giving them books they might not have chosen for themselves, in the hope that they will find their own connections within the pages. You librarians are the ones who have taken on this task, for which every reader and writer in the land is or should be grateful.

In the months since the award announcement, my own circle of inclusion has widened exponentially. I must take time here to thank those at its center: my parents, Ed and Susie Park, who are so proud of me; my brother Fred and my sister Julie and their families, who have supported me in so many ways. My husband, Ben Dobbin, who has given me the two most precious gifts a writer can receive. First, the impetus to write my first book—as I recall, his words were something like, “For God’s sake, would you stop yapping about it and just *write* it!?” And second, the time and personal space a writer needs so badly.

My children, Sean and Anna, have also given me that time and space, which is an even greater gift from a child. And they have given me the privilege of being their mother. I would like to thank Anna here for her unwitting encouragement: when *A Single Shard* was in manuscript, she was nine years old. I read it aloud to her, and every night she said the four words a writer most longs to hear: “One more chapter—please?” Writing friends in Rochester and elsewhere, and the online children’s literature community, have provided companionship to balance the daily isolation. My writing partner, Marsha Hayles, is always at the other end of the phone line with time for sharing,

and my agent, Ginger Knowlton, was a zealous supporter long before the big news.

Most of all I must thank the people at Clarion Books: Joann Hill and Debora Smith in the art department; Marjorie Naughton and Deb Shapiro in marketing; Managing Editor Jim Armstrong; they and all the staff make me feel like my books are the only ones they have to work on.

And no matter how long I speak or how much I write, I will never be able to thank my editor, Dinah Stevenson, sufficiently. She pulled my first book from the slush pile and has guided me every step of the way to this podium. I keep trying to think of new ways to thank her, but in the end I will have to accept what Tree-ear realized, that there are some things that cannot be molded into words.

To Kathleen Odean and the members of the 2002 Newbery Award Committee, thank you for dialing that 585 area code on the morning of January 21—not once, but twice. I will think of you with amazed gratitude every day for the rest of my life.

I would like to close now with an image from Korean mythology. Koreans say that an eon is the length of time it takes for a heavenly spirit to wear a mountain down to a pebble—by stroking it with a feather. I love this image. All of us are here in this world for only a single stroke of that feather—but together we can wear away even the most intractable rock of a problem. And we can make our time count even more by touching the lives of others—especially the young people who follow us. So . . . Connect! Include! ●