



Newbery Medal Acceptance Speech

Someone Else's Ordinary

Clare Vanderpool



Photo Credit: Annmarie Algya

Clare Vanderpool is the winner of the 2011 Newbery Medal for *Moon Over Manifest*, published by Delacorte Press, an imprint of Random House Children's Books. Her acceptance speech was delivered at the ALA Annual Conference in New Orleans on June 26, 2011.

Thank you for this incredible honor and for the opportunity to express my gratitude tonight. I'm also happy to address the questions that abounded in San Diego five months ago: "Moon over what?" "Clare who?"

I come from a family of optimists. My parents are both Depression-era children—one born on a farm and one raised in a little house next to the railroad tracks. They raised my siblings and me with a can-do attitude. "You'll figure it out. You can make it work. Keep at it. Anything is possible." And I believed them.

Their approach to life is what gave me the wherewithal to write a book. To work hard at it. To try and try again after many attempts and many rejections. Figure it out. Make it work. Keep at it. Their confidence and their optimism allowed me to dream big and set lofty goals.

But even with that spirit, that optimism, that determination, I never set out to win a Newbery. I never even dreamed of it. And I have always dreamed big! Just not that big.

So I'd like to say a few words of thanks.

To my parents for helping me see that the cup is more than half full—it is overflowing.

To my incredible agent, Andrea Cascardi, for being the one to say, "Yes!" to my query. For her enthusiasm, her guidance, and mostly her friendship.

To Michelle Poploff, my editor extraordinaire, for asking all the questions that needed to be asked, challenging me when it wasn't quite there, and making my first experience in publishing an absolute joy.

To my group of writer friends—Dian Curtis Regan, Deb Seely, Lois Ruby, and Christie Breault—for their support, encouragement, and loving criticism of the book during the many years in which I was the only "yet to be published" author in the group. Without them, I would still be an aspiring writer.

To my sister, Annmarie, because this would not be nearly as much fun without her.

To my family. My children—Luke, Paul, Grace, and Lucy. My husband, Mark. You are the reason my cup is overflowing.

And especially to the Newbery committee. Thank you for honoring my book in this incredible way. For spending time in my story, living among the people of Manifest, and loving them. They're not much for medals or pageantry, but I'll be happy to accept this award on their behalf.

The Call

Someone asked me recently if winning the Newbery is as wonderful as having a baby. That analogy falls a bit short, but it *is* like having a baby if you didn't know you were pregnant. There are no months of preparation. No pre-Newbery vitamins to build up for the big event. And no book called *What to Expect When You Win the Newbery* to guide and instruct. It's a bit shocking and overwhelming.

On the morning of January 10, I was going about my business of cleaning up the kitchen when the phone rang. It was Cynthia Richey, the chairperson of the Newbery committee. She said I had won the Newbery Medal.

She could have said, "You have been selected to man the first space shuttle to Mars," and I would have been less

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shocked. And I probably would not have cried. Or she could have said, "You're having a baby! Today!" And I would have been more prepared. I know how to do that. In fact, I've still got a name or two I could have pulled out of a hat very quickly.

But that's not what she said. Actually, I can't tell you exactly what she said because after she identified herself and



Clare Vanderpool (left) receives her Newbery Medal from 2011 Newbery Committee Chair Cynthia K. Richey at the Newbery/Caldecott/Wilder Banquet. Photo Credit: Alexandra and Michael Buxbaum.

mentioned the words “Newbery Medal,” my brain couldn’t absorb it all at once.

So what does one do with that kind of information? I looked at my husband with tears in my eyes and shared the news. Mark is a very understated man. You can tell him the house is on fire and he’ll stand up, stretch, and say, “Well, I guess I’d better put it out.” But this time even he was excited!

We went down the street to tell my parents. My mom cried and my dad beamed. He said, “That is just wonderful!” “Thunderation!” “Hot diggity dog!” and things of that nature. Then after all that he said, “So, Mary Clare, what is the Newbery?”

I texted the boys, went over to school, and jumped up and down with the girls. Then my sister came down to my house. You know the one: Annmarie. She’s mentioned in the acknowledgments as being two-thirds Abilene. We watched the live broadcast as other awards were being announced. The Printz. The Caldecott. The Newbery Honor books. Then as the tension mounted to the announcement of the Medal, she and I looked at each other with a shared sense of dread. What if there had been a mistake? I had already told my parents. Then they announced *Moon Over Manifest* and Annmarie and I breathed a sigh of relief. It was on the Internet. It must be true.

The Writer

So back to the question of “Moon over what?” And “Clare who?” Allow me to introduce myself. I am a mom. I am a writer. And I am from Kansas. If you have a map of the country and throw a dart directly at the middle and you’re just a little off, you’ll hit Wichita. I begin by telling you where I’m from because place is very important to me. I don’t know if I am typical in this regard, but I am very much a product of my geography. The neighborhood, the pool, the sledding hill (it’s Kansas, so a good sledding hill is a pretty big deal).

I love living in Kansas and am always a little befuddled by the need on the part of some to seek out acknowledgment or validation from perfect strangers about where they live. Like when the audience members at a television show clap because the host mentions their hometown. As if being mentioned makes us worthy or of value. Some people feel the need to tout certain aspects of our state to raise ourselves in the esteem of others. We are the home of this industry or that celebrity. I have never understood where this need comes from.

I’ve always been of the mind that if more people know the wonderful things about where I live, they’ll want to move there and then it would become very crowded.

And besides, they never pull out the big guns, anyway. If they *really* wanted to impress the other audience members, they would make it known that Wichita is the birthplace of—wait for it—*mentholatum*. Now I’m going to be in big trouble at home because we will be overrun with tourists and sightseers, and people with chest congestion and runny noses.

I think this connection to place is fairly common. People remember where they were in significant moments of their lives. I can tell you where I was when I finished reading *Island of the Blue Dolphins*—but I won’t because it will embarrass my mom. Okay, I’ll give you a hint. There is a significant amount of porcelain involved.

Instead, I’ll tell you about a special place where I checked out *Island of the Blue Dolphins* and *A Wrinkle in Time* and *The Witch of Blackbird Pond*. My school library was a very ordinary library conveniently located on the gym stage. Isn’t that where every school puts their library? If not, they should.

It was on a stage with red velvet curtains so there was a built-in sense of drama, mystery even. It was elevated in a place of importance like an altar. It had books with cards tucked inside where you could actually write your name and the date. These cards kept a history of the book and its readers, like a family tree. The book might even indicate who donated it. And inside, it had a stamp that said, “This book is the property of Our School.”

It says this book is a part of us, we claim it as one of our own. If it wanders from the fold, we will look for it until it is found. This is the kind of relationship we have with our books. They’re important and are to be protected and revered and kept in a place of honor. Our library was a special place.

So with this love and affection for my home, my place, it was somewhat of a surprise to me that when I set out to write the story that became *Moon Over Manifest*, I found myself feeling a little lacking. I knew I wanted to write a story about place and about home from the perspective of a young girl who didn’t have a home.

But when I considered where to set my story, I found myself wondering if *my* place, *my* home, would be good enough. I am always a bit envious of southern writers. They have swamps and bayous and gulfs. I live in the plains. Southerners speak with an accent, and I imagine they say things like “Well, shut my mouth.” And “Butter my biscuit!” We don’t have an accent, and around my house we say very ordinary things like “Thunderation” and “Hot diggity dog” and “Put a little mentholatum on it.” But that’s so ordinary. Everybody says those things, right?

Don’t get me wrong. There are certain aspects of Kansas that are out of the ordinary. If you pay us a compliment like “That dress looks nice,” we reply with, “Thanks, I got it on sale!” Most of the country asks for a soda. We call it a pop. Still, I’ve lived my life in one zip code and things are pretty ordinary at 67218.

But I do have a certain life experience that changed my perspective. Yes, I may have lived in one zip code, but I’ve traveled through many, many others. Growing up, we toured the country for three weeks every summer in a seventeen-and-a-half-foot Holiday Rambler—a travel trailer. On these trips we saw sights that were very different from my home—canyons, mesas, oceans, everglades. But over time and probably more in looking back, I realized something. That what is to me strange, exotic, extraordinary is just someone else’s ordinary.

From my little window to the world in that Holiday Rambler, I could see that while some of those people have a different view from their back door—mountains or forests or oceans or skyscrapers—we all have a similar experience on either side of that back door. The same hopes and dreams. The same need for community and belonging. There is something comforting about this common experience of being human. And the greatest comfort is how we express that experience. How we give it voice. Through story.

Optimism and perseverance alone does not make a good writer. There has to be some blood, sweat, and tears. Did I work on the craft? Absolutely. This is my first published book, but it is not my first attempt at putting pen to paper. I started writing, really writing, with intent and

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purpose, when my first child was born. He is now seventeen years old. During those years, I did what a writer does. I changed diapers and I wrote. I made peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and I wrote. I read and I wrote. I listened to what others had to say about writing and I wrote. I try to approach my writing the same way I approach everything else in my life. Work hard at it and have fun with it. Enjoy the experience.

But just as optimism is not enough, hard work is also not enough. Somewhere along the way, craft and muse must meet. Somewhere the writer must loosen the reins on plot, character, and conflict and allow the creative process room to stretch and pulse and breathe life into the bones of the story. Perhaps that is what the creative process is. Having a connection to the stories within oneself and giving voice to them.

If I have a particular strength, this is it. I have a strong connection to place and for me there is a story around every corner. And I remember those stories. The ones I’ve been told. The ones I’ve heard in passing. And the ones I’ve made up. They live in me as surely as I live in Kansas.

The Story

As I said, I never set out to win the Newbery. Many years ago, I set out to write a children’s book. I wanted it to be interesting and fun and have characters that I cared about and that the reader would care about. I wanted it to make me laugh and make me cry and do the same for the reader. And I wanted it to say something. Something honest about real people; their hopes, their dreams, their flaws, their goodness.

I came across a quote from *Moby-Dick*. “It is not down in any map; true places

never are.” That’s when the wheels began turning. What is a true place? What would a true place be for someone who had never lived anywhere for more than a few weeks or months at a time? What if it was a young girl during the Depression? A young girl named Abilene Tucker.

I’m always amazed at the writing process. We writers have great plans for the story we think we’re telling only to find out that our characters have another idea. *Moon Over Manifest* is about home and community, but in many ways it became a story about storytelling and the transformative power of story in our lives. Yes, the people of *Manifest* are ordinary people living in the plains of Kansas. But through their story, in the very telling of it, these ordinary people show themselves to be beautiful and extraordinary. And I take no credit for that. I’m surrounded by people like that. As Abilene would say, “People who are tired and hurt and lonely and kind.” And I would add, people who are funny and humble and generous.

Story evolves from story. Take Sister Redempta. I’ve known some Sister Redemptas or variations of her. She comes from grade school stories of my own or ones I’ve heard of Sisters back in the day. My mom tells of a girl in her school who was a little plump, a little plain, a little raggedy. This girl had been acting up in school and was sent to the principal’s office—Sister Mary Somebody. Sister said, “Now why would you want to act this way? Not nice behavior coming from such a pretty little girl.” The girl went away feeling not chastised but *pretty*. That’s a Sister Redempta.

I know some Shadys, too. And Eudora Larkins and Ivan DeVores and Velma T.’s. But don’t we all? If we really pay attention and really recall, don’t we all have stories that could create characters like these?

The things that unite us, in fact bind us together as people, are simple. Laughter—no one has to teach us to laugh. There's nothing better than babies' laughter that bubbles up from their core. Tears—no one teaches us to cry. When moved, the tears just come.

And story—the way we give voice to our laughter and tears. From the time children can speak: “Mama, guess what!” Or the boy in school who is asked what is six times four. He raises his hand and says, “Um . . . one time . . .” He doesn't want to give the answer to six times four. He wants to tell a story. Abilene would call this a universal—this need for story.

“Allow me to introduce myself. I am a mom. I am a writer. And I am from Kansas. Growing up, we toured the country for three weeks every summer in a trailer, and I realized that what is to me strange, exotic, extraordinary is just someone else's ordinary.”

Abilene, who has never experienced *some* of the things that bind us to one another—community, friendship, belonging—she knows the power of story. That's one of the things we first learn about Abilene: her daddy does his best talking in stories. And she clings to them. Tucks them in deep like the compass tucked away in her satchel. And saves them for when she needs them.

And of all the places for her to end up in her drifting: Manifest, Kansas, the stopping point for immigrants and refugees from around the world. Displaced people just like her. People

with stories of their own but whose stories become hers. Isn't that how we all come to know one another—through our own stories?

Through the people of Manifest, Abilene experiences the power in a story. It can change us in the telling and in the listening. As writers, readers, librarians, storytellers—we are all diviners. We reveal things, make them known, especially to ourselves. Through stories we recognize each other and ourselves. We recognize what is common to all of us. The ordinary—but in the telling it becomes beautiful and extraordinary.

The Newbery

So back to the Newbery. When *Moon Over Manifest* was published last October I was living large. My family and friends all came out for the big book launch and we celebrated a dream come true. Then January 10 rolled around and something happened that I had not dreamed. Something extraordinary. I received word that my book will forever be listed among the likes of *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, *A Wrinkle in Time*, *Number the Stars*, and *A Year Down Yonder*. Books that I loved and I swear loved me back.

What does it mean? How do I put it in context? It's not something I set out to accomplish. It's not something I earned. So quite simply, it is a gift. And that is context enough. A gift, like a story, has a giver and a receiver. That implies a relationship. The kind of relationship we witness in Manifest, Kansas, when Shady and Jinx and the people of Manifest are mixing up their elixir. Shady is asked to offer a prayer, which sounds more like a toast, and the townspeople respond:

“Amen,” they said in unison, these citizens of the world, and they held their breath as the many and varied ingredients that had been simmered and stewed, distilled and chilled, were combined to make something new. Something greater than the sum of its parts.

That is the best part of a story—that relationship between teller and listener, between writer and reader. We each bring our own ingredients of memory and experience, loss and longing, to add to the story pot, to simmer and stew.

I'm honored, humbled, and grateful beyond words. Thank you for the way in which you have received and honored my book—my story. If in giving me this award you are saying that my story touched you, then we share in this honor. Because your story touches mine and mine mingles with yours, and as writer and reader we throw in our own ingredients to the story pot to simmer and stew, to make something new, something greater than the sum of its parts. ☺

A Trivia Oops

Two eagle-eyed readers found an error in the Spring 2011 issue of CAL. In our Dog-Eared Page feature on p. 2, the question was posed, “Which author/illustrator holds a Caldecott ‘threepeat,’ winning the coveted award three times?” The answer was David Wiesner, which is correct. However, as the readers pointed out, Marcia Brown also holds that honor. She won in 1955 for *Cinderella, or the Little Glass Slipper*, 1962 for *Once a Mouse*, and in 1983 for *Shadow*.