



Newbery Medal Acceptance Speech

“You, My Friend, Have Potential”

Katherine Applegate



*Katherine Applegate is the winner of the 2013 Newbery Medal for *The One and Only Ivan*, published by Harper, an imprint of HarperCollins Children's Books. Her acceptance speech was delivered at the American Library Association Annual Conference in Chicago on June 30, 2013.*

There is a romantic moment, of sorts, in *The One and Only Ivan*, when Ivan, a gorilla who has been without the company of others of his own kind for almost three decades, finds himself sharing a quiet interlude with a female gorilla named Kinyani. “Is there anything sweeter than the touch of another,” he asks, “as she pulls a dead bug from your fur?”

Long before I wrote that bit of primate romance, I wrote another kind. As a matter of fact, I believe I can stand before you tonight and say, with some confidence, that I am the first Newbery medalist in history to have coauthored not one but two Harlequin Temptation romances. (The Temptation imprint—not to be confused with any of the so-called “sweet” imprints—was distinguished by a considerable amount of what Ivan would have called “face licking.”)

There are some amazingly talented writers in the romance genre.

I was not one of them.

In the interest of full disclosure, you should know that your 2013 Newbery medalist, in collaboration with her husband, planted redwoods like this in the literary forest:

Laura laced her fingers through his. “Time for night school.” Wordlessly she stationed him next to the water bed. “Lesson number one. A woman’s body is like a piano.”

Alex smiled roguishly, scalding her with his gaze. “Then you’re definitely a Steinway, baby.”

And so on.

I should probably note here that it’s way too late for you to reconsider your choice of medal winner.

Recently I saw a blog post that described me as a late-blooming, sprightly fifty-six-year-old. (You have no idea, by the way, how much comedic mileage your spouse can get out of a word like *sprightly*.) “Late-blooming” is perhaps not quite the right description, though.

I’ve been a working writer for quite a while, as it happens.

I was in college when I started to enjoy writing and to think I might even be able to string words together for a living. After graduating, among the words I effectively strung together were: Hello, my name is Katherine, and I’ll be your server tonight.

I didn’t like being a waiter, and I was, alas, an indifferent and incompetent one, but the alternative—writing—seemed like a terribly public way to fail. One night, however, after dropping a tray of strawberry margaritas on a man wearing a completely white suit, I decided to reconsider my options. I’d like to tell you that I was motivated solely by my love of language and passion for story, but the truth is, I was really tired of Top Ramen and one-ply toilet paper.

With my talented husband, Michael Grant, I began to write. People even paid us sometimes. And I did fail, but I learned, too. I learned that writing is excruciating. I also learned that writing is exhilarating.

Michael and I wrote together, we wrote individually, and we wrote a lot. After the romances, I was a ghostwriter for years. I ghosted so much I was positively ectoplasmic for a while. I wrote Sweet Valley Twins books, Little Mermaid and Aladdin and Mickey Mouse books, books about girls who loved horses and horses who loved girls. Eventually, Jean Feiwel at Scholastic took a chance on a concept we’d created called Animorphs, and it became a long-running, best-selling, middle-grade series. There were so many books in that series that eventually we, the former ghostwriters, found ourselves hiring ghostwriters.

So, “late-blooming?” I’m not sure. It’s quite fair to say that it took me awhile to locate my literary sea legs. After so many series books, I wanted to write a book with a beginning, a middle, and an end. I wanted to take risks with writing, to challenge myself. I wanted to find a unique voice (and eventually I did, even if it did belong to a gorilla).

Perhaps that’s why, on this evening of celebration, the epigraph in *The One*

and *Only Ivan*, long attributed to George Eliot, seems so apt: “It is never too late to be what you might have been.” It’s a sentiment, I think, that appeals to anyone who has ever dreamed a foolish, daring, it’s-never-too-late kind of dream. Which is to say: most of us.

And it’s why it’s especially gratifying to be here with you tonight, celebrating remarkable books like *Three Times Lucky*, *Splendors and Glooms*, and *Bomb*, and glorious illustrated books like *One*

husband.” At which point Steven asked me if there were any other life events I wanted to add. I assured him I was quite through.

With the Newbery come many delights, including champagne enough to float the *Queen Mary* and the joy of knowing your little book won’t be heading straight to that great remainders table in the sky anytime soon. But it wasn’t until I attended the wonderful children’s literature conference at Western Washington

little guilty about the 47 percent, but hey, I’d won the Newbery, people.

It’s a heady and joyous time, those weeks after the Newbery is announced, but eventually, reality sets in. You realize that someone still has to clean the litter box.

And that someone is you.

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If I had a dollar for every person who has come up to me this year and said, “You know, I really loved *The One and Only Ivan*, but I’ve always despised talking animal books,” I could buy—well, maybe a used Prius, anyway.

I loved animal books as a child, and if the animals talked to each other, or to humans, so much the better. One of the first books I remember my dad reading to me was *The Story of Doctor Dolittle*. When my second-grade teacher read *Charlotte’s Web* to my class, I was enchanted and heartbroken, in equal measure. That so many people were allergic to animal fantasies was news to me.

Interestingly, those people were always, without exception, adults. Children were willing to give me the benefit of the doubt. Where adults see problems, children see potential. First-person gorilla? Sure, why not?

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Cool Friend, *Sleep like a Tiger*, *Creepy Carrots!*, *Extra Yarn*, *Green*, and *This Is Not My Hat*—and, of course, celebrating the amazing Katherine Paterson herself. E. B. White wrote in *Charlotte’s Web* that “it is deeply satisfying to win a prize in front of a lot of people,” but it’s even more satisfying when you get to share the stage with the creators of such brilliant and lovely books.

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I was in a hotel room in Richmond, Virginia, where I’d been celebrating my sister Martha’s fiftieth birthday, when I got *The Call*. We were supposed to fly home to California that morning, but my daughter, Julia, had a temperature, and I was Googling urgent-care clinics when the phone rang. I remember hearing Steven Engelfried say, “Newbery Medal,” and I think I blurted, “Are you sure?”

I did manage to remember Neil Gaiman’s tweet-heard-round-the-world and, with some difficulty, rein in my desire to echo his phrasing. I told the committee, “This is the most amazing thing that’s happened to me since the birth of my son and adopting my daughter.” Belatedly I added: “Oh, yeah, and marrying my

University, a few weeks after winning, that I realized the real, the ultimate, perk conferred by a Newbery Medal.

It was the middle of the day and there was a long line at the women’s restroom. (Clearly—just as an aside—the world needs more female architects.) When I got there, the line parted like the Red Sea and everyone said: Go ahead,

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you won the Newbery. To which I of course responded: I can’t do that. I’m a Democrat.

A couple of hours later, a similar scene unfolded. I was the next scheduled speaker, and time was short, and, well, let’s just say I exploited my power. I felt a

“You have to write the book that wants to be written,” said Madeleine L’Engle. “And if the book will be too difficult for grown-ups, then you write it for children.”

It’s easy for children to embrace animal characters, I think, because they’re kindred spirits: wild-hearted and possessed

of powers others don't fully appreciate—be they the hidden talons of the domesticated cat or the hidden imagination of the domesticated child. Both live in a world controlled by tall, erratically behaving humans who subscribe to arcane and random rules.

At its heart, of course, an animal fantasy is as much about humans as it is about animals—about the things we most fear and the things we most love, about pain and sadness, but also about redemption and hope. Stories about animals don't have to be sad, but many are, perhaps because they are so often about powerlessness. And certainly *The One and Only Ivan* has tragic moments. It was, after all, inspired by a dark and true story.

The real Ivan was shipped as a baby to a shopping mall in Tacoma, Washington, where he served as prop and punch line for twenty-seven years. I've talked to countless people who visited Ivan as children, and, to a person, they all remembered the pain they felt, watching this lonely, magnificent animal in his desolate cage, seemingly beyond help.

After *The One and Only Ivan* was published, a bookstore contacted me about a pending elementary school visit. One of the parents was worried about using Ivan. She hadn't read it (they never have, as librarians know better than anybody), but she gathered that it was sad, and might make some of the children cry.

The bookstore, to its credit, reassured her thusly: absolutely it will make them cry.

And, oh—by the way—that's a good thing.

We live in a world where children are bullied into despair, and even suicide; where armed guards in a school hallway are considered desirable; where libraries are padlocked because of budget cuts; where breakfasts and backpacks, for too many children, are unaffordable luxuries.

Children know all about sadness. We can't hide it from them. We can only teach them how to cope with its inevitability, and to harness their imaginations in the search for joy and wonder.

Nothing, nothing in the world, can do that better than a book.

In Ivan's story—both real and fictional—there is hope. During his years in the mall, the world changed, as it has a way of doing, and our understanding of the needs of animals in captivity grew. Eventually, Ivan was released to Zoo Atlanta, where he lived out his days. It wasn't the perfect answer—it was still, after all, a world with walls—but Ivan was surrounded by people who loved him, and grass and trees, and, most of all, other gorillas.

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So, no: not a perfect ending. But things aren't black and white in the world, and they shouldn't be in a children's novel, either. What makes children, at the end of the day, better people than the rest of us is that, despite everything, they're buoyant, unrepentant optimists.

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I've always thought that the best part of being a writer is getting fan letters, although I tend to feel a little guilty when I receive them. The letters are so sweet and effusive, so humbling, and the truth is, we writers are a sketchy bunch—we are, after all, navel-gazing, whiny,

full-grown adults who sit around in our sweatpants all day, talking to imaginary friends.

I particularly treasure this fan letter, which I shall read to you in its entirety:

Dear KA Applegate. It's me again the huge fan. I wanted to know if you can send me some of your books and the dvd seasons of animorphs if it's not too much to ask because I don't wanna be a bother to ya. If anything you're my best friend in the whole wide world and I've never had any with your quality and imagination I mean I have a big imagination, too, just not that huge to imagine people turning into animals and alien slugs trying to rule earth.

You, my friend, have potential.

From your biggest fan

“You, my friend, have potential.” I've been lucky enough to hear that many times in my own life, when I've needed most to hear it. How do you say thank you for something like that? “Humans have so many words, more than they truly need,” as Ivan says, and yet there don't seem to be enough.

Still, I will try. Thank you—

- To my dad, for his quiet courage and sly wit, and for tolerating a chaotic menagerie of pets, including an unremitting stream of baby gerbils.
- To my mom, for showing me that it really isn't ever too late to be what you might have been, when she went to art school after her four children were grown—and permanently rechristened the “ironing room” her “art room.”
- To my sisters, Martha and Lisa, my brother, Stu, and my dear friends Lisa and Suzanne, for their love, their patience, and their laughter.
- To John Schumacher and Colby Sharp and the Nerdy Book Club and all the many librarians and teachers who've enriched my life and the lives of their students.

- To my agent, Elena Mechlin, and my lawyer, Steve Sheppard, for making even contracts in triplicate entertaining.
- To Jean Feiwel, Liz Szabla, Dinah Stevenson, Jennifer Greene, and Elise Howard, for letting a middle-aged dog try some new tricks.
- To the HarperCollins crew for their skill and support, especially: Susan Katz, Kate Jackson, and Katherine Tegen; to Amy Ryan, Sarah Hoy, Renée Vera Cafiero, and Lucille Schneider for their amazing attention to every last detail; and to Laurel Symonds, Jenny Sheridan, Kathy Faber, Suzanne Daghlian, Lauren Flower, and Patty Rosati and her whole wonderful team for all the TLC.
- To *Ivan's* brilliant illustrator, Patricia Castelao, for bringing *Ivan* and his friends to life with such humor and grace.
- To my dear friend and editor, Anne Hoppe: Thank you for making *Ivan* the book it was meant to be. Anne loves words passionately. Anne loves books purely. *Ivan* would not be *Ivan* without her. There are so many wonderful writers in the world. I wish they could all have the chance to work with Anne Hoppe. She'd be very tired, granted. But they'd be better writers—and better people—because of it.
- To my amazing children: Thank you for reminding me what really matters and for keeping me humble. Julia, who has always ready with a comforting hug and the world's best sandwich, said, when I announced I was finally done with *Ivan*: "Oh, so you mean we exist again?" Jake, who has a passion for justice and an ear for truth, recently texted his sister, when she asked me a question about her English homework: "Sorry, Julia. Mom's only written poetic stuff. That's useless in the real world."
- To my husband, Michael Grant: Thank you for . . . everything. Thirty-four years ago, Michael knocked on my door to borrow a can opener, even though he already had one. He told me back then that we could approach our lives as comedy or tragedy. I'm glad we chose comedy. I've learned so much about writing from Michael, and even more about life. We've shared a long and crazy and wonderful history, and now we share this award . . . although, apparently, we still don't share litter box duty.
- To Steven Engelfried and the 2013 Newbery Committee, thank you for your dedication this past year, for heroically tolerating the bookshelves, the closets—and no doubt, the bathtubs—full of books to be read, the long meetings, the reading till the wee hours. That you love books wholeheartedly is quite evident. What may not be quite so evident is that most of you could probably use some new bookshelves.
- And finally, to all of you who've come here tonight to celebrate children's books: Every time you find the right, the necessary, book for a child—a book about sadness overcome, unfairness battled, hearts mended—you perform the best kind of magic.

It doesn't matter if it's about a gorilla or a nuclear physicist, a puppeteer, a motherless girl, or a clueless fish. If it's the right book, you've allowed a child to make a leap out of her own life, with all its limitations and fears—and, yes, sometimes sadness—into another, to imagine new possibilities for herself and for her world.

Every time you book-talk a new title, every time you wander the stacks trying to find that elusive, well-thumbed series paperback, every time you give just the right book to just the right child, you're saying, "You, my friend, have potential."

That is a gift. That is a miracle. And that is what you do, each of you, every single day.

For a thank you that momentous, there truly are no words. 🐼