



**Matt de la Peña** received the 2016 (John) Newbery Medal for *Last Stop on Market Street* (G. P. Putnam's Sons/Penguin). His acceptance remarks were delivered at the Newbery-Caldecott-Wilder Banquet on Sunday, June 26, 2016, during the American Library Association Annual Conference.

For more information about the Newbery Medal, visit <http://bit.ly/newbery-award>.



# Newbery

## MEDAL ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

*"I had never known, never even imagined for a heartbeat, that there might be a place for people like us."*

This is the last line of Denis Johnson's short story collection *Jesus' Son*, and it describes perfectly the way I felt way back in 2003 when I was informed that my first novel, *Ball Don't Lie*, was going to be published by Random House. It describes the way I feel tonight, too, over a decade later, as I stand here among you all.

All dressed up and a fresh haircut.

A seat at the table.

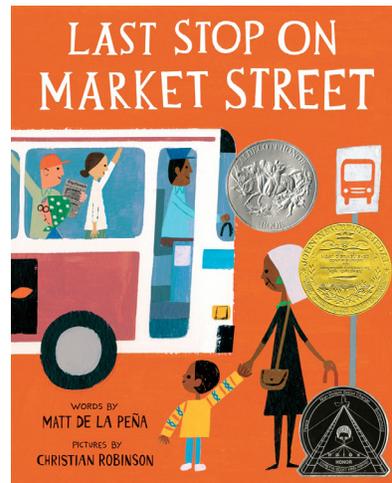
Growing up, I never could've imagined anything like this. Me and books? Reading? Nah, man, I was a working-class kid. A half-Mexican hoop head. I spent all my afterschool hours playing ball down at the local pick-up spot off Birmingham. I dreamed of pretty girls and finger rolls over outstretched hands.

But age has a way of giving a guy perspective.

Turns out I was wrong.

Turns out I've been a reader all along.

Maybe I didn't have my nose in a novel, but I read my old man's long silences when the two of us sat in freeway traffic in his beat-up old VW



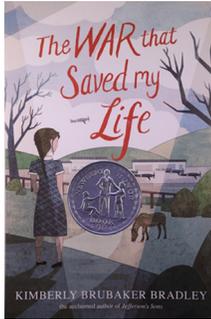
bug. I read the way he pulled himself out of bed at 3:30 every morning to get ready for work. How he never took a sick day. I read my mom's endless worry about the bills. About the empty fridge. But I also read the way she looked at me and my two sisters. Like we were special. Like we could make something of our lives. I read the pick-up politics at Muni Gym in Balboa Park. How the best players assumed a CEO-like power the second they laced up their kicks and called out to the crowd, "Check ball." And I read how these same men were stripped of this power as soon as the games died down and they set foot outside the gym, out of their domain and back into yours.

Matt de la Peña received an MFA in creative writing from San Diego State University and a BA from the University of the Pacific in Stockton, California. He is the *New York Times* bestselling author of six critically-acclaimed young adult novels, including *Mexican WhiteBoy* and *The Living*. De la Peña also wrote the award-winning picture book, *A Nation's Hope: The Story of Boxing Legend Joe Louis*, illustrated by Kadir Nelson. He currently lives in Brooklyn, New York, with his family.

**FUN FACT:** Matt de la Peña attended the University of the Pacific on a full athletic scholarship for basketball.



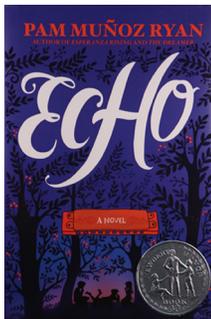
## 2016 NEWBERY HONOR BOOKS



*The War that Saved My Life*  
Bradley, Kimberly Brubaker  
Dial/Penguin



*Roller Girl*  
Jamieson, Victoria  
Dial/Penguin



*Echo*  
Muñoz Ryan, Pam  
Scholastic Press/Scholastic Inc.

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I didn't read past page twenty-seven of *The Catcher in the Rye*, but I read *Basketball Digest* cover to cover. Every single month. I'd show up at my junior high library an hour before school, find an empty table in back, and tuck the latest issue inside the covers of the most high-brow book I could find—usually some Russian novel with a grip of names I couldn't pronounce. Mrs. Frank, the warm-smiling librarian, would occasionally stroll past my table and say, "*War and Peace*, huh? How are you liking that one so far?"

"Oh, it's great, miss," I'd tell her. "I really like all the wars and stuff. And how it eventually turns peaceful." She'd grin and nod and move on to the next table. I'd grin, too, marveling at my own slick ways. But then a few days later she'd confuse me by sliding the newest *Basketball Digest* across the table to me with a wink.

Back then I never would've described myself as a reader, but Mrs. Frank knew better. And the truth is, I wasn't reading those magazines for stats or standings, I was reading to find out what certain players had to overcome to get where they were. I was in it for the narrative. And what I found in some of the better articles wasn't that inferior to what I would later discover when I read *War and Peace* for real.

Over the past ten years I've visited hundreds of schools and met tens of thousands of young people. And so many of them are just like that old version of me. Self-defined non-readers who spend all day reading the world. My mission as an author is to help a few of them translate those skills to the written word. It didn't happen for me until college, when I was introduced to books like *The Color Purple*, *Their Eyes Were Watching*

*God, One Hundred Years of Solitude*, *Drown* by Junot Díaz. When I finally fell for literature, I fell hard.

But what if I can nudge a few of these kids toward the magic of books at a younger age? What if I can write a story that offers that tough, hoodied kid in the back of the auditorium a secret place to feel?

"I had never known, never even imagined for a heartbeat, that there might be a place for people like us."

Unfortunately, we don't always get that far. Sometimes we have to back up and address something much more basic and urgent. "Hey, mister," I've heard time and time again, always from kids at the poorer schools, "why would you come *here*?"

The subtext is obvious.

This school is not worthy of your time.

*We* are not worthy of your time.

When I sat down to write the text of *Last Stop on Market Street*, this troubling mindset was rattling around in my brain. Nana, the wise grandma in the book, is urging CJ to see the beauty of his surroundings, yes, but she's also steering him toward something much more fundamental. She's teaching CJ to see *himself* as beautiful. To see himself as worthy. "Sometimes when you're surrounded by dirt, CJ, you're a better witness for what's beautiful."

And sometimes when you grow up outside the reach of the American Dream, you're in a better position to record the truth. That we don't all operate under the same set of rules. That our stories aren't all assigned the same value in the eyes of decision makers.



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There was something else on my mind when I wrote *Last Stop*. Up to that point, I'd published a handful of literary urban novels that tackled race and class head-on. I was proud to see the books carve out a real presence in schools with diverse populations. But when I visited the more affluent schools, the private schools, my books were harder to find. Either they were set aside on the "Diverse Books" shelf, or they weren't there at all. This frustrated me. And why was it so common for me to see a class full of Mexican kids reading *The Great Gatsby* when I almost never saw a class of white kids reading *Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass*?

Sometimes I was part of the problem, too.

Once a librarian invited me to visit her school, saying, "I'm so excited, Matt. You're going to be my Mexican author."

I cringed and told her, "Actually, ma'am, most of my books are about not feeling Mexican *enough*."

She ignored me, saying, "We just received a very generous grant from the district. We're prepared to offer you double your current honorarium."

"Like I was just telling you, ma'am," I fired back. "I'm your Mexican author."

A few years later I had a much more troubling exchange. At one of the big national conferences, a librarian approached me outside an event space and excitedly introduced herself. "I want you to know," she told me, "that I really like your books. I mean, we don't have those kinds of kids at our school, so we don't stock many of them, but I want you to know how much I appreciate your work."

"No, I totally get it, ma'am," I said. "Out of curiosity, though, how many wizards do you have at your school?" (Shout out to Tim Federle!)

With *Last Stop* I set out to try something new. I tried to write a book featuring diverse characters in a storyline that wasn't focused (at least overtly) on diversity. When I finished the seventieth draft of the text, I was proud of CJ's journey, both inside and out. And I was proud of the music of the language. But it wasn't until I saw the words transposed over Christian Robinson's soulful and whimsical art that I first wondered—secretly, of course—if we might've made something special.

But I never imagined anything like the morning of January 11th.

I was in Minneapolis that week, teaching at Hamline University—with Printz winner Laura Ruby, coincidentally. I had stayed up until 2:30 a.m., finishing up my next YA novel. It felt amazing to send the manuscript off to my editor. I could finally rest. Before I went to sleep, I set my phone next to my bed and turned on my ringer. There was a little buzz that *Last Stop* might have a shot at some kind of Caldecott recognition. I knew the committee wouldn't call me, but Christian and I have the same agent, Steve Malk, and I thought he might call if there was any exciting news.

An hour later the phone rang.

But it wasn't Steve.

The man on the line said, "Hi, Matt? My name is Ernie Cox, and I'm calling on behalf of the Newbery committee. We have some news." I remember thinking, This guy must've been out all night drinking. He said the wrong

committee name. I remember sitting up and pressing the phone closer to my ear. "Your book *Last Stop on Market Street*," he went on, "has been awarded the 2016 John Newbery Medal." A chorus of committee members cheered behind him.

At first I was just really, really confused.

And then I was overwhelmed.

Before that morning, I hadn't cried since I was thirteen years old. Sadly, that's not an exaggeration. But in the middle of that short conversation with Ernie Cox and the rest of the committee, the streak was broken. Warm tears rolled down my cheeks. Not because I felt happy—though I definitely felt happy—but because I felt like I'd been forgiven for all my shortcomings as a writer. This job can be a lonely, lonely ride. And there are moments when it's nearly impossible to maintain a belief in yourself. Ninety-nine percent of the time the words don't seem quite good enough. Or the characters don't seem quite real enough. Or worst of all, you don't feel quite talented enough. At the end of every single work day, I find myself muttering the same two sentences, over and over. "I should have accomplished more today. I should have been better." But on the morning of January 11th, these people on the phone were telling me I had done something good. Something worthy.

I couldn't speak for a long stretch of time. I was too busy trying to understand.

"Matt?" Ernie said. "Are you still there?"

As soon as we hung up, I called my wife. "Caroline," I said, in an even voice, "I have something I need to tell



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you.” I paused for a long time, trying to keep myself in check. Like I have all my life.

“What?” she said. “Is everything okay?”

“I think *Last Stop* just won the Newbery.”

She paused. “Wait, are you sure?”

“No,” I answered.

She fired up her iPad and went onto the ALA website and looked up the 2016 award committees and asked me, “Okay, was it a man or woman on the phone?”

“A man.”

“Holy shit,” she said. “The chair of the Caldecott is a woman.”

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There are so many people I want to acknowledge.

First and foremost, I want to thank Christian Robinson. *Last Stop on Market Street* is a picture book, and I’ve always believed that your brilliant illustrations are what make this book what it is. You are a special person, Christian. And your Nana is a special woman. I’m honored to have made this story with you.

Steven Malk. I stand by what I said way back in January. You are the Steve Nash of children’s books. Not only are you the one who paired Christian and me together, you’re the one who suggested I try my hand at picture books in the first place. I was a brand-new novelist, and you saw something that might work in a picture book text. My first thought was, This guy’s out of his mind. But it turns out you weren’t. I’m so proud to be on your squad.

Jennifer Besser. Thank you for tak-

ing a chance on publishing this book and for fighting behind the scenes to keep CJ’s dialogue authentic. You understood from the beginning that CJ would switch codes if he was at school. But he wasn’t at school. He was with his Nana on the bus.

Cecilia Yung and Lauren Donovan. Thank you for being the very first champions of CJ’s story. Cecilia, I’ll never forget the two-hour conversation we had about *Last Stop* in L.A., back when the book was nothing more than a single-spaced, spoken word poem. Your art direction is brilliant. Lauren, you are a publicity magician (and I kind of know about that stuff). I think you’re both amazingly talented and generous, and I want to do all my picture books with you.

To the entire Penguin school and library department—especially Carmela Iaria, Venessa Carson, and Alexis Watts. I can’t begin to explain how much your support has meant to Christian and me over the past year. Thank you for all your hard work behind the scenes. Also, I just like hanging out with you guys.

To everyone else at Penguin who touched this book in any way. I know it takes an army to give a book a life. I am incredibly grateful to each and every one of you.

To the librarians out there who work tirelessly to put good books into the hands of young people. Thank you for your gift. I’m fully aware that it is because of your profound support that I have a career.

To my family. The de la Peñas. Mom, you’re the reason I try hard at life. Thank you for allowing me to run every single draft of this book past you. Turns out your feedback was Newbery-worthy. Dad, thank you for

teaching me the world. I’ve told the story of your late turn toward literature a number of times. I bet twenty percent of the people here tonight know your story. What they don’t know is that I drew on your quiet wisdom when I wrote Nana’s dialogue.

Caroline. My wife. My best friend. I want you to know that I *see* you. I’ve been on the road a lot the past couple years. And when I’m home I’ve been on deadline. You’ve been amazing through it all. Not to mention the fact that you have a full-time job of your own. I see you. And I love you. And there’s nothing I’m more proud of than the life we’re making together.

To my two-year-old daughter Luna, who’s back in our hotel room right now, sleeping. At least in theory. Thank you for giving me such incredible joy. You make my heart beat with such purpose. I love you, little girl.

And finally, to the 2016 John Newbery committee. I am humbled beyond belief by this mind-blowing honor. What makes me especially proud is the thought of all the diverse readers out there who desperately need to see themselves in books. I want to tell you about two of them right now.

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The first is a girl I met at a really rough high school in Newark, New Jersey. An organization called My Very Own Library donated one hundred of my books to students, and at the end of the presentation, the kids got in line to have them signed. One African American girl—frizzy braids, dirty jeans, messed-up teeth like mine—took her signed copy and looked at it and then looked at me and said: “Ain’t you gonna ask for MY autograph, mister?”

Her girls laughed and laughed and



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one of them said: “Now why’s he gonna want your autograph, dum-dum? You ain’t famous!”

Normally I would have laughed right along with them.

But I saw her face.

Instead I handed this girl my Sharpie and held out the inside of my forearm and told her: “Hell yeah, I want your autograph. I don’t have paper, but you can just sign your name right here, on my skin.”

Because maybe that’s the kind of audacity it takes to be someone when you come from nothing. And maybe that’s the kind of audacity we need to assume in the book world in order to finally give young people hero choices that reflect our current population.

And finally, I want to tell you about a kid I met in Virginia last year. I had just presented to his entire elementary school, in the auditorium. I read *Last Stop* and told them a few secrets

about the book, but before I said goodbye, I explained that I wanted to give away my own copy of the book. The whole time I was talking, I’d been watching them, and there was this one kid I needed to give the book to. I walked up into the crowd and handed it to a boy who was sitting sort of off on his own. He took the book and everyone clapped and I said goodbye.

As I was leaving the school about fifteen minutes later, a few kids came and gathered around me. They wanted to talk. And suddenly the boy I’d given the book to appeared. He was still clutching it in his hands. “Mister,” he said in a quiet voice, “why’d you give it to *me*?” I shrugged and told him, “I’m not really sure, to be honest. I just...I think there might be something really special about you.”

And then something powerful happened. He began to cry. And the other kids began rubbing his shoulders and patting him on the back and someone told me, “He just moved here.

He’s new.”

As I walked out into the parking lot, to my rental car, I kept thinking about that boy. And his tears. And how tightly he was holding onto the book. I didn’t know what any of it meant, but I knew it was significant.

Then in January you guys called and told me about the Newbery, and I *became* that boy. Why had you picked me? I kept wondering. I didn’t understand. And did I really deserve it? And then so many of my peers reached out after the news was announced to rub my shoulders and pat my back. After a few weeks I realized I would never truly understand what any of it means. It will forever remain a beautiful mystery. A significant one.

“I had never known, never even imagined for a heartbeat, that there might be a place for people like us.”

Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

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### 2016 JOHN NEWBERY MEDAL COMMITTEE

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Association for Library Service to Children

For more information about the Newbery Medal, visit <http://bit.ly/newbery-award>.