



Caldecott Medal Acceptance Speech

An Old Man, an Elephant, and a Lack of Confidence

Erin E. Stead



Photo Credit: Nicole Haley Photography

Erin E. Stead is the winner of the 2011 Caldecott Medal for *A Sick Day for Amos McGee*, written by Philip C. Stead and published by Neal Porter Books/Roaring Brook Press, an imprint of Macmillan Children's Publishing Group. Her acceptance speech was delivered at the ALA Annual Conference in New Orleans on June 26, 2011.

I'm not very good with words. I am not a very good storyteller and I tend to think in metaphors that make sense only to me. In normal conversation, I have trouble responding in a timely fashion. Words will pass through multiple filters before my brain approves them and then, as they reach my mouth, the conversation has moved on. So it is strange for me now to be in charge of a conversation with all of you. I will try my best, and hopefully by the end I will have made some sense. To this audience of word-loving librarians, writers, and editors, I wish us all luck.

The last few months have left me searching for the right words. I have been hoping to come up with the exact turn of phrase for feelings I have yet to fully accept. The trouble with being an illustrator who is not a writer is that I am afraid I will fall short.

Mr. Bryan Collier and Mr. David Ezra Stein, I can't think of a better phrase than "deeply humbled." I am deeply humbled, in a sense that I have never experienced before, to share shelf space with you both. Mr. Collier, I saw an original of yours once and stood in front of it for ten minutes trying to decode it so that I could imitate it. I could not. With *Dave the Potter*, you've given me another book to study. Mr. Stein, you have so quickly become one of my favorites. Ever since *Leaves* was published, I think to myself, "Are you okay?" as the leaves fall from the trees in autumn. If this speech gets too long-winded, I hope a little red chicken pops out and says, "Don't talk to strangers! So Erin didn't. THE END!"

To Ms. Judy Zuckerman and members of the 2011 Caldecott committee, I can really only say this: Thank you.

It is difficult to say more than that to you because nothing else truly expresses my gratitude. I've tried to distill an indescribable amount of appreciation into words. I've written some terrible sentences attempting to explain all of the excitement, terror, and honor that orbit around this huge planet of gratefulness. But those words seem small compared to these immense feelings. The only words that come close are thank you. I will work very hard to live up to this award.

The news of winning was overwhelming. I'm not sure if it was a faulty speakerphone or my own shocked ears that added static to your voices. After we hung up, I called my editor and made him repeat everything. Slowly. It's good that the award cannot be taken away from an illustrator for lack of grace when being presented with this news. I don't think my desperate need to sit down translated very well over the phone. What a sneaky, wonderful morning you must have had, committee members. It was wonderful for me, too. You'll have to believe me now since I was unable to express it then.

It is a beautiful twist of fate that I am standing here because of a little book that is about having good and loyal friends. If I did not have my own friends who continue to arrive at just the right time, I would not be here. I should not be standing here alone. There is a whole cast of characters that should be at my side, and perhaps you can envision them as a rhinoceros, an elephant, a tortoise, or an owl. You should know, however, that I am probably the penguin.

Before Philip introduced me to Amos McGee and his friends, I had completely lost the courage to make my own drawings. I suffered from a severe and self-inflicted loss of confidence. I made the decision to stop drawing completely, and stuck to that decision, for better or for worse, for three years.

At the end of the third year, I was unable to ignore the fact that without drawing, a part of me was missing. With a lot of patience and encouragement from Philip, I began to draw a picture that had been knocking around in my head for years. I did it at the kitchen table so as to not overwhelm myself, a little bit at a time. It was a very tiny drawing.

It was a drawing of an old man and an elephant.

It is a tremendous gift to have people in your life that know better than you.

While I was drawing at the kitchen table in 2007, Philip and Neal Porter were already working on a book together. In passing, our friend George O'Connor, also published by Neal, told Neal that I



Erin Stead (right) receives her Caldecott Medal from 2011 Caldecott Committee Chair Judy Zuckerman at the Newbery/Caldecott/Wilder Banquet. Photo Credit: Alexandra and Michael Buxbaum.

was an artist as well, but that there was no way I would show him my drawings. I was much too shy. Neal very quickly sent an e-mail to Phil asking him if there was any way he could see one of those drawings. Philip sent him my not-yet-finished elephant in secret. I guess Neal must have thought it was okay because he asked Phil if we could meet.

I can stand here today encouraging anyone who will listen to never, under any circumstance, doubt Philip C. Stead or Neal Porter (I think the two of them will find this funny, as they probably feel—and rightly so—that I doubt them all the time. But that is my flaw, not theirs).

I met Neal shortly after the secret elephant exchange. He took Phil and me out to dinner and spoke to me about books (a fast and true way to my heart). He spoke of nurturing new talent and finding the right book for the right artist, which didn't necessarily happen without failure. He was extremely careful and sensitive with me. I loved him instantly. Then, toward the end of the meal, he leaned over the table and said quietly, "You know, this is all really just an excuse tonight to try to convince you to make a picture book.

I realize this story is extraordinary and I am extraordinarily lucky to be a part of it. At the time, I was aware of that as well. I was unable to say no to this opportunity.

But I was terrified.

I never grew out of picture books. I believe in them. A picture book allows

a child ownership of art—even if it's just for the two weeks they check it out of the library. That book is theirs. I'm not sure any other art form replicates that feeling.

Philip always knew I should make books. I did not. I thought I was too serious, my pictures too tiny and quiet to hold their own on a bookshelf. This was a career I deeply admired and respected but felt I did not deserve. And maybe couldn't handle. It is hard to make books. It *should* be hard to make good ones. It all has to hang together so tightly—the words and pictures and everything in that universe held together by book boards. It is so easy to lose a child with just one wrong note.

Even when my artist feet were on a shaky ground, I always circled back to children's books. Before stubbornly deciding to quit drawing, I was either working in one children's bookstore or another, or going to my library's picture book section in my spare time. I studied books and children's publishing even though I was in school for very serious painting. After reading Leonard S. Marcus's *Dear Genius*, Ursula Nordstrom became my hero. The weekend I moved to New York, Phil and I walked down 18th Street and into Books of Wonder. In an uncharacteristically aggressive move, I begged for a job from a staff who would later become my friends. All of these friends still work in children's books, and many of them are published by Roaring Brook Press—including George, who first told Neal I was an artist whether or not I thought I was. Nick Bruel, Jason Chin,

Julie Fogliano, George O'Connor, and others are all diverse, inspiring, funny, and caring friends. They sat me down with a stack of picture books and they taught me how to sell them. Discussing and reading with these colleagues was some of the best education I have ever had. They have encouraged Philip and me and helped us out along the way, and I wish they could all be here with me.

The friends I have met at the bookstore and in publishing have taught me to see children's books through an arc of time. The first night I met Neal Porter and he was speaking to me about books, it was as though he was speaking about that same arc. I believe the best books translate through time because they tug at something true within us. If I truly believe that, then the only way I can make a book is to try to be completely honest in the pictures.

It's a scary proposition for me and probably will continue to be for a long time. When I draw honestly, I feel like I leave myself exposed a little on the page. I try to draw who I am. Drawing is an act that makes me feel vulnerable, but also one that completes me.

And so, without Philip and Neal, I wouldn't have believed I could make this little book and do it well. For the year it took me to complete the art for *Amos*, I hid behind both of them and relied on them to believe in me when I couldn't.

Neal proved his belief by being gently unobtrusive. He told me I could "contact him as little or as much as I saw fit." That's a lot of trust for a first-time illustrator. Neal has always been respectful of Phil and me and our ideas, whether or not we deserve it. I may not always be confident, but I am incredibly stubborn. I have very strong opinions about my books. Neal accepts that somehow, while asking polite questions that may prove my opinions wrong. He continues to be outrageously patient with my process, allowing me to disappear for long stretches. When I surface, he's there and extremely generous with his time.

This awareness of my personality allows me to grow a little as a person. And if I am a better person, I am a better artist. I am overwhelmingly thankful this editor

found me and continues to work with me. The artist/editor relationship can feel one-sided. It's always me who needs something (a phone call, a deadline extension, a therapist). So I am grateful to Neal that he allows me to call him my friend, and a dear one at that.

Philip says he wrote the story of Amos McGee specifically for me. When I was shown the very first draft on a legal pad, there was no doubt. I was very pleased to meet these characters. They immediately felt like friends I had known for a long time. But each character also felt like extensions of me. No one knows me better than Phil. So when he writes a story specifically for me, I am able to draw in a natural way. I am very lucky.

Phil met me when I was just barely sixteen and he was about to graduate from high school. We often thank our lucky schedules that we were in the same art

room at the same time. Within the first few meetings, Phil told me he wanted to be a children's book illustrator and I remember being stunned. I was stunned because he had the guts to say out loud at seventeen what I had been secretly thinking for years, and say it with a determination I had rarely seen in adults. You just cannot doubt Phil Stead.

"Books are my home. When I walk into a bookstore, or a library, or crack the spine of a new book, I am home. These are personal experiences to me because there are people behind all of them."

From that moment on, we have been together.

Today, we work at two different desks in one room. Phil is my best critic and nothing leaves the studio without his approval. Once a story for me is set, he allows me into the writing process and will change a text based on what I'm drawing. I love

working on books together. But I also love watching him work. It is inspiring to share a studio with someone whose art I truly admire. For an incalculable number of reasons, many of them too personal to share, I am fortunate Phil kept talking to the top of my head because I was too shy to look at him in high school. I am fortunate, too, because eventually I spoke back. He is my greatest friend.

I am a little less fragile now and settling into my instincts with bookmaking. I am very young. I still have doubts. But they are outweighed by true friends (and maybe a heavy medal).

Books are my home. When I walk into a bookstore, or a library, or crack the spine of a new book, I am home. These are personal experiences to me because there are people behind all of them. And so, I try to make personal experiences. I will continue to try to

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"Wabby, more stuffed bunny than real rabbit, is an endearing, if slightly goofy hero...the book's message, 'to everything there is a season,' is a good one!"
- Booklist



"...everything children's music should be: funny, warm, a little bit silly and very comforting."
- Parents Magazine



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We've pulled a collection that is normally scattered about in chapter books and put it in the favorite series section. Choosing "sports stories" makes it easier for shelvers to identify what books belong in the collection. Don't stress too much about labels, the kids will find what they are looking for and you and your staff will adjust too.



During school breaks, and especially in the summer, the favorite series shelf is so popular that many of its inhabitants are checked out. In that case, we use shelf talkers to guide readers to new authors or series.



A picture is worth a thousand words and this sign sits above the favorite series shelf and shows the cover and title for each series. We don't re-catalog the books, so this acts as a ready reference for both kids and shelvers. We try to keep our shelves as current as possible; re-evaluating every six to nine months.

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make honest pictures. I make art with my hands. It has flaws, but so do I.

I am aware that e-books are changing our world of books and bookmaking. They offer convenience, but by their nature, I'm not sure they can be timeless. Their selling point is that there is limitless information beyond that backlit page. But I believe there is an infinite beauty in the limitations of paper books. I don't think it can be mimicked or replaced by pixels on a screen. To me, e-books are not books. The more flash and whiz-bang we add, the more we limit the possibilities of our own imagination. Books are simple. They must be felt. The copies of my very favorite books are not pristine. They are worn and dog-eared and a little bit dirty because they are loved.

My art teacher in high school was Mr. Mike Foye. He taught me well and still

does today. His AP art history final exam was an essay question in which he asked seventeen-year-olds to answer questions regarding the following passage.

"What is REAL?" asked the Rabbit one day . . ." Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?"

"Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real."

"Does it hurt?" asked the Rabbit.

"Sometimes," said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. "When you are Real, you don't mind being hurt. . . . It doesn't happen all at once. . . .

You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't often happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."

This slightly abridged quote from Margery Williams's *Velveteen Rabbit* makes the ground slip beneath me. One of the many reasons I am thankful for this honor is that I believe this medal gives my little, quiet book a chance at maybe being loved enough to become Real for someone other than me.

I am extremely grateful to you all. 🐰