

# The 2001 Caldecott Medal Acceptance Speech

David Small

I want to thank Connie Rockman and all fifteen members of the Caldecott Committee for giving me this terrific award and for making possible all the honor and prestige it has brought me in the last five months. I also thank them, deeply and sincerely, for the opportunities the Caldecott brings in its wake. Public appearances in person, on TV, on radio, and on tape give us the gift of seeing ourselves, as well as seeing ourselves as others see us, which is really a great gift to have, so I thank you.

My congratulations to the other winners, and apologies for the banquet program. As the saying goes, "Do a caricature, lose a friend." Some of you are my friends and I don't want to lose you. Others I'd like to know better. I hope that my drawings haven't screwed up our relationship.

Thanks to Judith St. George for writing the smart, funny text that inspired my pictures for *So You Want to Be President?* As it happens, Judy and I met for the first time only a few months ago, long after the book was on the market, and I was happy to find she is as smart, as well-spoken, and often just as cheeky as her text is. I think I can speak for Judy, too, in expressing thanks to Patricia Gauch, vice president and publisher of Philomel Books. Patti is a savvy and—to use her own favorite word—sassy lady. She is sensitive, energetic, and a caring editor who helped in many important ways to guide and shape this book, and it was her

idea to bring Judy's text and my illustrations together in the first place. I want to give very special thanks to my art director Cecilia Yung. Generally when you're working with an art director for the first time and you announce that you're planning to work in a new style, there is this long, dead pause on the other end of the line during which the art director is calculating how much money to offer you to kill the job. Cecilia didn't seem at all fazed that I wanted to take a fresh, looser approach to my art for this book and went along zestfully with everything I proposed. (Well, almost everything. And, okay, not always zestfully.)

There are several members of my family here tonight, among them my three stepchildren, Ginny, Mark, and David, who have been a wonderful support and encouragement to their evil stepfather these past five months, and who for twenty-five years, whether they know it or not, have been a source of great pride and satisfaction to me and their mother. Gin, Marko, L. D., I thank you and I love you.

I want to send thanks to George W. Bush and Al Gore for prolonging the election so that our book could stay on the *New York Times* bestsellers list for a few extra weeks. Nice work, fellas!

Thanks must naturally go to the great, hard-working team of marketing and publicity staffers at Penguin Putnam, and especially to Angus Killick, who was one of the first people to predict that this book would be a huge winner. Looking back over my career, I would like to give long-distance thanks to Alan Benjamin, whom I haven't seen for many years but who gave me my start in publishing in 1980. Alan persuaded Macmillan to take my first book and, during the short term he was senior editor at Crown, convinced them to acquire *Imogene's Antlers*. His

inventive and twisted mind obviously recognized in me a younger brother.

Stephen Roxburgh, now the publisher of Front Street Books, was the other warped genius who gave me my second big boost up. Stephen brought both me and Sarah Stewart into the Farrar, Straus and Giroux corral and molded and guided a few of our early books. Stephen tended to flick off the table anything that did not meet his high standards and because of this I continue to learn a lot from him.

I'm proud to say that all those books Sarah and I have done with FSG are still in print. This is mostly due to the completely archaic and totally fiscally irresponsible publishing practices at Farrar, where good money that might be spent on things like swank offices and editorial assistants' salaries is lavished on the books they choose to publish. To all our friends at FSG, our deepest thanks.

Mary Rife of the Kalamazoo Public Library Children's Room was a fortuneteller back in 1982. When my first book, *Eulalie and the Hopping Head*, was published, she predicted that I would one day win the Caldecott. I merely laughed at her. Mary has been a friend and faithful supporter all these years. She is retiring from service soon, but she came out here from Michigan to be with us tonight.

Many blessings upon my wonderful agent Holly McGhee for being direct, tactful, for being such a mensch, and for always being on my side.

The last person I have to thank is really, ever and always, the first one on my list, Sarah Stewart, who is often my collaborator, my best and most honest critic, my friend, my darling, my soul, and also my wife. Without Sarah, I tell you this in all honesty, I would have been dead—spiritually if not literally—twenty-five years ago.

David Small is the winner of the 2001 Caldecott Medal for *So You Want to Be President?*, published by Philomel Books. His acceptance speech was delivered at the annual conference of the American Library Association in San Francisco on June 17, 2001.

Patti Gauch reminds me that my sketches for *So You Want to Be President?* began to flood across her desk before the contracts were even signed. This shows how eager I was to do the project. The thing that excited me the most about this book was that it offered me the chance to combine the work I'd been doing for years as an editorial artist for publications such as the *New Yorker*, the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post* with the work I'd been doing—also for years—in children's books. At last, I thought, the child and the adult in me could meet and shake hands.

One of the ways I have managed to duct tape together a living as an artist is this combination of careers—editorial and children's book art—each competing to see which could be the less lucrative. For a long time my life has consisted, on the one hand, of drawing (as it were) chickies, bunnies, and duckies, and having that work interrupted by magazines and newspapers calling upon me to draw caricatures of people like Tonya Harding, James Carville, and Linda Tripp. In 1987, for example, I was working on the finished art for a book about kangaroos and koala bears by Beatrice Schenk de Regniers when *Playboy* called me to join the interview team on the Jessica Hahn story. I dropped everything and flew to New York. For two full days, in a suite at the Plaza where Jessica Hahn was sequestered under a false name for her protection, I attended those disturbing interviews. At night I returned to my own hotel room and drew Hahn's memories of being sexually coerced by the Reverend Jim Bakker in a Florida motel. It's a wonder then, when I returned home and resumed work on my children's book project, that the kangaroos and koalas for the Schenk de Regniers story didn't end up looking like hucksters and degenerates. (Or maybe they did. That book was as well received as hoof-and-mouth disease on a boot heel, and has long since gone out of print.) This kind of mental and professional disconnect has been the hallmark of my working life for more than twenty-five years.

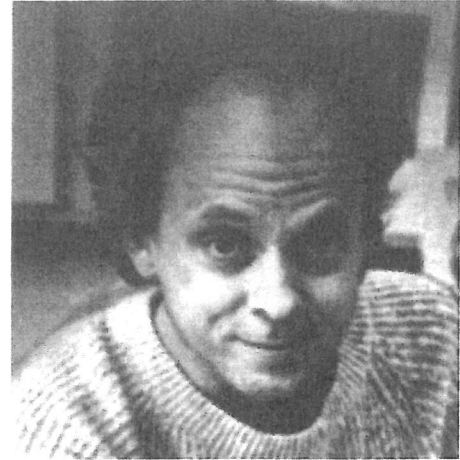
So, with the opportunity to illustrate Judy St. George's book about the presi-

dents, my inner child and my inner adult finally did meet and sat down together to share the same box of crayons. Philomel Books became, then, the daycare center for this not-always-peaceful playtime. My inner adult, as it turned out, would not share, play fair, or cooperate. He wanted to hog all the art supplies and tended to express himself more forcefully than anyone else in the room.

One of the great problems for Patti Gauch and Cecilia Yung was reminding the editorial caricaturist—that is, the adult David Small—that he was working on a children's book and that, despite the many rich opportunities for sophisticated political satire offered by the subject matter, children would inevitably make up a great part of the reading audience. "It would probably be best, David, if you didn't have President Gerald Ford diving into that empty swimming pool." At the beginning of this project I often felt that my most potent ammunition was being taken away from me and that I was marching into battle armed with nothing but a slingshot and a bag of marshmallows.

It was the clash of two professions, a mix-up of *métiers*, an opposition of occupations, and for a while there it got pretty dicey. However, thanks to Patti and Cecilia, to their good sense and patience, I found a way to make the book funny without being vulgar, irreverent without being too offensive, and sharp without being savage. Hopefully, too, we found a way to help readers young and old take another look at the leaders of our country and see them neither as divinities nor villains, and certainly not as representatives of some impossible dream, but as men with both great abilities and great faults. In other words, to help people see these men as what every president has proven himself to be—a fallible human being.

As I told you at the beginning, it has been an amazing five months, and the Caldecott Award has caused me to examine myself in a way and with an intensity I've never had before in my life. It has turned a big spotlight on me, and shown me the switch for turning on another big spotlight inside myself. One of the things

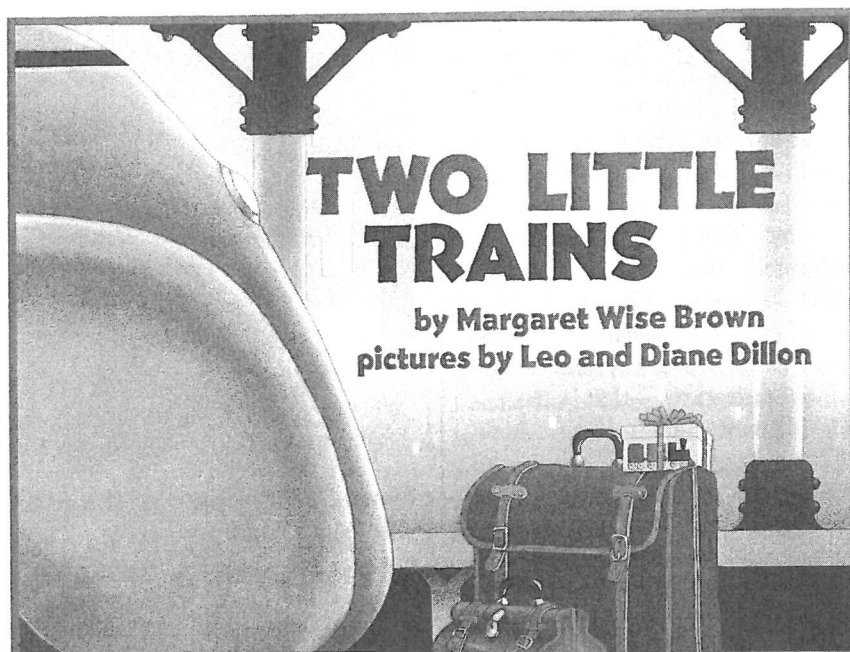


David Small, winner of the 2001 Caldecott Medal

that made this speech so problematic to write was my having to be careful to make a distinction between revelations that were enormous for me personally and ideas that would be appropriate to share.

Although I've had a lot of illumination shed on certain threshold experiences in my life, it would not necessarily be useful to drag these out in public. There is one point, though, that to feel good about myself I must make, and if it involves a certain measure of personal openness, so be it. Forgive me; it's not whining, it's the only way I know of to make this point effectively.

In all our travels this spring, to schools and libraries in cities from one coast to another, Sarah and I have been disturbed more than ever before by the nearly total eradication of the arts from the schools in America. Children who need the expressive outlet of art, music, dance, and playacting have none of it. At the best they listen to a visiting author or artist for forty-five minutes, and those people might as well be visiting from the moon, so remote are most children from the real, human, and very necessary activities of writing, of drawing, of playing an instrument. These things are deemed by school administrators as luxuries when they are in fact necessities. As someone so rightly pointed out, few people get chills from doing a math problem. Art and music are the things which speak to the



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human soul. These necessary tools of human expression have become the exclusive property of a small elite group when they should be readily available to all American schoolchildren.

Ask any teacher and he or she will tell you that the biggest troublemakers in school are often the best artists, that the most troubled boys (and let’s face it, the

kids who in recent years have unleashed the most serious damage have been boys) are also often the ones who draw obsessively in their spare time.

In the fall of 1967, when I was a substitute teacher in the Detroit Public Schools, I was sent for a few days to sub—that is, to babysit—for a class at the city jail for high-school-age criminals.

Most of the boys I encountered there had been imprisoned for crimes like breaking-and-entering, but one among them was a murderer. Before I walked into the room I was told by a guard I would meet this young man who, for the sum of two hundred dollars, had shot and killed his friend’s father. Nervously I prepared to come face to face with a monster.

When I finally saw him (a couple of the other students pointed him out to me), for a few moments I was taken aback by a complete reversal of expectations. Instead of the hulking, drooling demon I had anticipated, I met a boy who reminded me physically and spiritually of myself when I was in school. Thin and starved-looking, he didn’t speak. Avoiding eye contact, he hung out around the edge of the crowded room, as far away as he could get on the periphery of things. Looking at this kid, I was suddenly thrown back into fifth and sixth grade at MacDowell Elementary, where hurtful words were hurled at me every day by students who took my underweight, underdeveloped body and my reticence to participate as a reason to cull me from their herd. Those names were leveled at me so often, I came at last to identify with them, believing that they branded my future. Furthermore, no one at home did anything to help or to alter that image of myself.

Now, in this young murderer I saw me and I asked myself, Could I have gone that route? There were big differences between him and me, of course, in class and in the opportunities afforded us. No doubt, by virtue of my circumstances at birth, I had more to look forward to than he ever had. I also had talent and ability in drawing that had been nurtured since a very young age. In my socio-economic class, back in the fifties, it was acceptable that a child make art—lots of art, if he wanted to. At least I had that option, while I am pretty sure that that young man did not.

So, while it was difficult to see him ending up like me, I could easily see myself having ended up like him had I not had the option of the arts. Crime and violence know no class boundaries. But the arts in education do know class



boundaries. We have seen flourishing arts programs in a few schools. There the hallways and classrooms are richly covered with paintings and filled with music, making these environments quite simply delightful to be in, as well as a delight to learn in. But these are for the most part in private schools in wealthy communities. But even wealth is not an indicator of a full education for the children. In March, while on book-tour, Sarah and I were in emerging affluent neighborhoods with new elementary schools where there were no arts programs and the libraries had been lost to computer centers. In all too many schools across America, the halls are silent and the walls are empty but for a list of rules to follow in case of a fire drill. (When I see a wall full of colored-in xeroxed turkeys I also see emptiness. I am also underwhelmed when I listen to anyone extolling the virtues of the computer over things created by hand, as if drawing, painting, and sculpture are activities related to the Pliocene epoch.)

My school did not have the greatest arts program going, but at least it had one. If there had been no art room, no music, no school plays, an outsider like me would simply have been driven further and further underground. As it happened, because I was allowed to develop my art skills, by the end of seventh grade I wasn't being called those nasty names any more. Instead, the kids who used to call me a punk because I was bad at sports were calling me "David Small, the Greatest Artist of Them All!" Of course I

was only the greatest artist at MacDowell Elementary School, but this made me feel different about myself and was a beginning step in a new direction. Our new world is full of terror and is shrinking in frightening ways. To dismiss art from the school curriculum—not only to do it but to allow it—is typical of a society trying to anesthetize itself from pain. But the inability to sense pain is a mortal danger in itself. Convicted murderer Gary Gilmore said, "Inside every killer is a little punk looking for revenge." Take "killer" out of that sentence and substitute "artist" or "outsider" and it still holds up. The fact is, self-expression erupts like a boil, whether it is in the Brooklyn Museum of Art or the halls of Columbine High. Self-expression is dangerous if repressed. Both the artist and the criminal can be punks looking for revenge for the wrongs done to them, so we must ask ourselves, What kind of revenge do we want to permit them? Would we rather have kids expressing their animus through Columbine or through a painting? It is up to us to choose which we would rather spend our money on, more prisons or more art programs in our schools. I choose art.

Over the past several months I have been asked repeatedly what it's like to win the Caldecott Medal. I think the answer to this question could possibly lie in a dream I had the other night:

In my dream I was inside my house, in the living room, waiting for my barber to show up. (To accommodate my schedule the barber was making a house call.)

While I waited I noticed that there was a large tiger in the room with me. The tiger was prowling around, weaving in and out of the furniture.

Just then, the doorbell rang. It was the barber!

I reached into a desk drawer and pulled out a stun gun. With this instrument I knocked out the tiger. Then, grunting and sweating, I hoisted the heavy limp animal into the open case of the grand piano.

Just as I was closing the lid, the barber entered the room. However, as the lid came down I could see the tiger opening its eyes. Apparently I had not stunned it sufficiently.

Too late! The barber was already taking off his coat. He and I exchanged pleasantries and, getting straight down to business, he began to lay out his accoutrements. Meanwhile, the piano started to tremble, to rock from side to side, and to move a little on its wheels.

I said, "Excuse me," to the barber and left the room quickly. Then, through the door I heard, first the musical crash of the piano as it fell over on the floor, followed by the furious snarls of the tiger as it struggled free of the piano, and lastly, of course, the pitiable wails and screams of the barber as the beast fell upon him and ate him up.

This dream explains what it is like to win the Caldecott Award: a huge, fierce and very handsome beast is let loose in your house; a few innocent people step in its path; and the only thing you can do is get out of the way and let it happen. ●

## ARNOLD

## YALSA PRESIDENT'S REPORT

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We will continue to concentrate on what needs to be done, including refinement of the strategic plan, development of new continuing education opportunities, and the use of technology to build bridges within the library and youth development communities and among ourselves.

None of this would be remotely possible without the most stellar staff in the history of any organization—Julie, Linda, Esther, and Judy, thank you!

And thanks to my fellow board members and the hardworking committees whose input and output have been amazing. I'd like to express my heartfelt appreciation to each of you for giving me

the chance to harness my own energy and ideas and hitch them to the shooting star that is YALSA.

Remember, "the future never just happens, it is created." (Will and Ariel Durant, *The Lessons of History* (Fine Communications, 1997).

Onward. ●