



Caldecott Medal Acceptance Speech

On "Pow" Moments and Getting "The Call"

Beth Krommes



Photo by Dave Rowell.

Illustrator **Beth Krommes** is the winner of the 2009 Caldecott Medal for *The House in the Night*, published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. Her acceptance speech was delivered at the ALA Annual Conference in Chicago on July 12, 2009.

Good evening. I'd like to begin by offering my heartfelt thanks to Nell Colburn and the members of the Caldecott committee. I am so grateful and amazed to receive this award. Thank you to the Association for Library Service to Children, the American Library Association, and librarians, teachers, and reviewers everywhere for bringing *The House in the Night* to the attention of so many people. I am most honored.

I would also like to congratulate the other honorees. You are my heroes, my role models, and my inspiration.

When asked what I was doing when I received The Call, I can honestly reply I was sitting at my drawing table preparing to work. Monday, January 26, 2009, was a teacher workshop day, and my girls were home from school. I was terribly aware it was Caldecott Day. I had heard that *The House in the Night* was being discussed as Caldecott-worthy, but I had convinced myself not to hope for it. I went to the gym early, came home, took a bath, ate breakfast, and sat down to work. And then, at 9:20 a.m., the phone rang.

It was a woman named Nell Colburn, who I assumed was a potential illustration client. I wrote down her name, and I started writing down "Association for Library Service to . . .," and then thought, "Oh goodness." I could hear excited voices in the room with Nell, and though I was sitting down, my knees started shaking. As Nell told me the news, I kept repeating, "I can't believe it." My office is a little balcony overlooking the living room, so both my daughters, Olivia and Marguerite, heard my delighted reaction to the call.

Soon I was off the phone and we were all jumping around screaming. I immediately called my husband, Dave, at work, my dad, and the author, Susan Marie Swanson, who burst into tears when she heard the news.

The next few hours were chaotic. The phone started ringing, and every time I put it down, it rang again. *The New York Times* sent over a photographer. I learned, with an hour and a half's notice,

that we needed to fly to New York so I could be on the *Today* show the next morning. I didn't have anything to wear. The girls and I drove downtown, found an outfit, stopped at the bank, and dashed back home. Dave walked home, and we all packed our suitcases and left for the airport. For days afterward, I kept asking my family, "Is this really happening?" I kept pinching myself.

One thing I know for sure is that I wouldn't be here tonight if it weren't for my children. So thank you to my wonderful husband, Dave, and to our beautiful daughters, Olivia and Marguerite. Having kids made me aware of the spectacular art in children's books and made me want to try my hand at it. But more importantly, the hours spent reading picture books to my girls were not only cozy but instructional. I saw the kinds of books my daughters enjoyed and which details in a picture captured their attention. Every day that I worked on *The House in the Night*, I thought about how it would feel to be lying next to a child and reading the book at bedtime. I tried to imagine what a parent and child would notice and talk about in my illustrations.

What all our favorite picture books had in common was that they were poetically written and artistically inventive. A parent would not get sick of reading them over and over. They included *Madeline*; *Millions of Cats*; *Bedtime for Frances*; *Little Fur Family*; *Lyle, Lyle, Crocodile*; *Miss Rumphius*; *Owl Moon*; *The Cat in the Hat*; and everything by James Marshall, especially *George and Martha* and *The Stupids*. My favorites of all were the books about Frog by the Dutch author and illustrator Max Velthuis, especially *Frog and the Stranger*, *Frog in Winter*, and *Frog in Love*. The goodnight books I loved most were *And If the Moon Could Talk* by Kate Banks, with pictures by Georg Hallensleben, and, of course, *Goodnight Moon*. All these books have an enormous amount of heart.

When the manuscript for *The House in the Night* was offered to me, I saw that this was also a story with heart. Ann

Rider, my longtime editor at Houghton, knew I had always wanted to do a book in black and white, and Susan Marie Swanson's beautiful manuscript was right for me on so many levels. Not only was the text perfect for black-and-white art, as it was all about light and dark, but it was also lyrical, inspiring, and so open-ended that the story would be told primarily through the pictures. This is every illustrator's dream.

It took awhile to figure out what the story within the pictures would be. I knew the

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main character would be a little girl. Authors are told to write what you know, and the rule remains the same for illustrators. Draw what you know. And I know girls. I have four sisters and no brothers, two daughters and no sons. I decided the girl would have to be me, as I couldn't choose one daughter over the other.

But what exactly would this child do that would take her from the key to the house, to the light, to the bed, to the book, to the bird, to the song, to the dark, to the moon, to the sun, and back again in reverse order? Somehow, she had to get out of the house, into the sky, return, and end up asleep in bed. The only way she could reach the sky would be on the back of the bird. I felt that this wasn't original, but hoped I could make it fresh.

I spent a year on the book. That year included six months on the design phase before starting the final art. Designing a book is my favorite part. It is like fitting

together the pieces of a large puzzle. Because the text moves forward and then backward, I chose to echo the scenes from the first half of the book in the second half. I aimed for what I call “*pow* moments”—when one turns the page and is dazzled. I taped the pencil roughs in order on my studio wall so I could study the visual flow from page to page.

My scratchboard pictures begin totally black, and I draw by scratching white lines through the black ink surface. The more one scratches, the brighter a

picture becomes. It was Ann's idea from the beginning to add the golden highlights. She had admired this effect in a book called *Goodnight, Goodnight* by Eve Rice, published in 1980, and she shared her copy with me. I thought maybe we should add another color or two in addition to the gold highlights, but Ann's brilliant instincts were right. She is always right, to tell the truth.

I knew immediately that the house in our story should look simple and timeless. This is the kind of house I would like to live in eventually, when the kids grow up and we can downsize. I knew that the household objects should be simple and humble, too: an umbrella, a coat rack, a rocking chair, a wooden dresser, a toy car, a basket, a cloth doll. I included many of my favorite things: the shell mobile we made after a vacation to the Jersey shore, Vincent van Gogh's *Starry Night*, my sister's teddy bear, and Marguerite's violin. The dog is my child-

hood dog, Scamp. I knew that the landscape would be the rolling farmland of my native Pennsylvania. I have also paid homage to Wanda Gág by including her house, Tumble Timbers, within the landscape on the second-to-last spread; and to Dr. Seuss's *The Cat in the Hat*, as we see just a glimpse of Mother's foot coming through the door.

I feel lucky to be an illustrator of children's books, and I have certainly been blessed in my life. I grew up in a wonderful family and had parents who supported my interest in art. They sent me to weekly art classes and encouraged me to attend art school. At Syracuse University, I majored in painting with a good dose of printmaking and spent my junior year abroad in London. I graduated with \$60 in my bank account, worked as a secretary, and went on to graduate school for a master's degree in art education.

It was a long road for me to the world of children's books. I worked as a teacher, the managing director of a small arts center, the manager of a fine handcraft shop, and as an art director for a computer magazine, all before becoming an illustrator. For ten years, I illustrated mostly for magazines and cookbooks. Initially, my medium was wood engraving, but I soon switched to scratchboard, which has the same look but takes less time.

My college friend, the artist Salley Mavor, encouraged me to try illustrating for children. I joined the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators and started attending conferences. A cover I did for the January 1998 issue of *Cricket* magazine caught Ann Rider's attention. Five of the six children's books I've illustrated to date have been in collaboration with Ann. Connecting with her was the greatest good fortune of my professional life.

When people ask me what *The House in the Night* is about, I say art, music, books, imagination, family, home, and love. It is a comforting goodnight story that I hope will especially help children who fear the dark.

Our community was tested this past December when a severe ice storm hit much of New Hampshire and we were without power in our home for nine days. Some people on the outskirts of

the neighborhood. The houses were all dark except for solitary rooms with flickering candles. I remember being stopped in my tracks as I glanced at the glorious night sky. It was the sky from *The House*

my mother, grandparents, and other family members and friends who cheer me on from above.

Lastly, I thank my little town of Peterborough, New Hampshire. Here the residents know that community matters, that the arts matter, and that books matter. In particular, thank you to my librarian friends at the Peterborough Town Library; the staff of the Toadstool Bookshop; and the Sharon Arts Center, where, years ago, I was first introduced to wood engraving. I have been overwhelmed by the excitement and good wishes of all. Friends tell me that all they heard for a week afterward was, "Did you hear about Beth Krommes?" The most amusing line relayed to me was when our friend Ray said, "Isn't it great! Beth Krommes has scratched her way to the top!"

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town had no electricity for as long as three weeks. I thought about light and dark often during those cold days as we hurried to get everything done during the daylight hours. I agreed with a few of the local elementary school children who quoted Dickens in their essays a month later, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." It was the best of times when we were all together in the same room every night: watching the fire, reading books, playing cards, or reading aloud. People were helping people at every turn. It was the worst of times when we never felt really warm, we were sleep-deprived from having to refuel the stove every two hours day and night, and we were running out of wood. I could feel my spirits slipping each night as the sun went down.

One night, I took the walk out to the garage to get a few more buckets of wood. The air was freezing and the icy ground treacherous underfoot. I looked around

in the Night! That light in the dark lifted my spirits more than I can say, and I suddenly felt a deep connection with the stars, the ice, and the night.

I have so many people to thank this evening. Thank you to Susan Marie Swanson for your lovely manuscript; to Ann Rider for your encouragement and guidance every step of the way, on this book and all the books we've done together; to Carol Rosenberg for your design expertise; to Donna McCarthy for your production genius; and to Sheila Smallwood, Lisa DiSarro, Karen Walsh, and the rest of the staff at Houghton Mifflin Harcourt for your help. I am so grateful to you all.

Thank you to my family and friends for your support: my husband, my daughters, my father and stepmother, my sisters and their families, my aunts, uncles, cousins. Thanks also to those departed:

As I sat on the flight home from New York City after the *Today* show interview, I had a chance to reflect on all that had happened during the last day and a half. I felt like that little girl on the back of the bird in our story as we flew over the woodland and farmland of Connecticut, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire. The winter landscape was stunning. The sky turned rosy, then dark, and lights started to sparkle in the houses and buildings below. Soon I would be home and back to daily life, but for the moment I was filled only with wonder, gratitude, and great hope for the future. Thank you. ☺