

Newbery Medal Acceptance Speech

The Bathtub Storyteller

Susan Patron



Susan Patron is the winner of the 2007 Newbery Medal for *The Higher Power of Lucky*, published by Richard Jackson Books/Atheneum Books for Young Readers. Her acceptance speech was delivered at the Annual Conference of the American Library Association in Washington, D.C., on June 24, 2007.

When my sister Georgia assured me that I really didn't need to recount my entire life history in this speech, I was relieved, as I'm sure you are, too. But I should touch on some highlights that led me to write the book I am so honored you are honoring.

My older sister Patricia hacked a path through the dense, impenetrable underbrush of childhood, so my own way was greatly eased as long as I stayed close behind her on the trail. My skirmishes off to the sides brought trouble. Patricia had a quality of empathy and generosity in childhood and adolescence that has become legendary in adulthood. She taught me how to read, for instance, when she was six and I was a four-year-old yearning to know the words that explained the pictures in the *Los Angeles Times* comics page.

On the first day of instruction, she made me find the word "a" each time it appeared in every strip. I already knew "A" was a letter, the first letter, but I hadn't figured out it was also a word.

On day two, I was told to find every "the." So far, reading was easy, and I knew two different important words on sight. This went on for a while, and I remembered thinking I would be old, like around six, before I learned each word in the English language, one by one. But somehow eventually I was just reading, as Patricia had told me I would.

As we grew up, she continued to give me important life skills: she taught me, for example, the all-but-impossible skill of not caring if you were cool in junior high, and she taught me to play chess.

I was, and am, a crazed collector of objects most people throw away. I'm drawn to the idea of amassing a huge quantity of some unlikely thing, as prison inmates of the 1920s and 1930s did, making beautiful, functional lamps out of Popsicle sticks and fashioning picture frames and purses out of intricately folded, gluelessly connected cigarette packages.

Sometimes my collecting is seriously misguided, as in the 1990s, when I hoarded fabric-covered, foam-stuffed

shoulder pads with the intention of sewing them into a quilt. The fact that by its nature a shoulder pad will not lie flat and is defined by rounded borders did not deter me.

Writers present may recognize here the sick and insidious signs of writer's block. Patricia saved me from wasting hours of time on this project. "The foam inside will deteriorate," she said in a way that made me pay attention. "It'll be an awful quilt and you will hate it." This was how she told me to get back to writing. I am still grateful.

I began making up stories in third grade to entertain my then-four-year-old sister Georgia. My job was to give her a bath. The rule was that she couldn't get out of the tub until she was clean, which I determined by the degree of wrinkledness of her fingertips. Patient waiting on both our parts was required, so I sat on the lid of the toilet, inventing stories to pass the time. She sat unmoving in the tepid water, sucking a corner of the washcloth, forgetting, perhaps deliberately, to keep her hands in the water so they'd wrinkle. I loved to watch her eyes turn inward as she immersed herself in the story. Mesmerizing this little-sister listener, then and now a first audience for a new story, became a powerful stimulant and reward for me. (Georgia reported this experience to Richard Jackson at an ALA Conference; he urged me to write about it, and then published the result at Orchard as a chapter book called *Maybe Yes, Maybe No, Maybe Maybe*.)

During the ten years it took me to write *The Higher Power of Lucky*, Georgia often told me she needed a new story from me, even offering to get in the bathtub (metaphorically, of course) if I needed her to.

Another lifeline during the long period of doomed attempts and writer's block was the faith of my editor, Richard Jackson. Dick doesn't measure time in the usual way. His form of encouragement is to make it known that he will wait as long as it takes. He is kind. He is ferociously protective of his authors. Compliments are rare from Dick Jackson because the shining force of his faith in the work, the great gift of that faith, constitutes

the true compliment and requires no further embellishment.

Wanting to become a writer from the time of the bathtub stories, I constructed elaborate romantic fantasies of my adult writer persona. In junior high and high school, I studied French for the sole purpose of assuming a French identity when I finished school and would be living in the maid's room on the top floor of an apartment in Paris. There I would write novels anonymously, so as not to get in trouble with my parents, that probed and clarified all aspects of the human soul. I would live on wine, coffee, and baguettes, wear white lipstick, and suffer willingly for my art. Three years of Mr. Gottlieb for French at Hollywood High School reinforced this notion: he played Edith Piaf records to give us an authentic flavor of the language. I would be tragic, like Piaf, only taller.

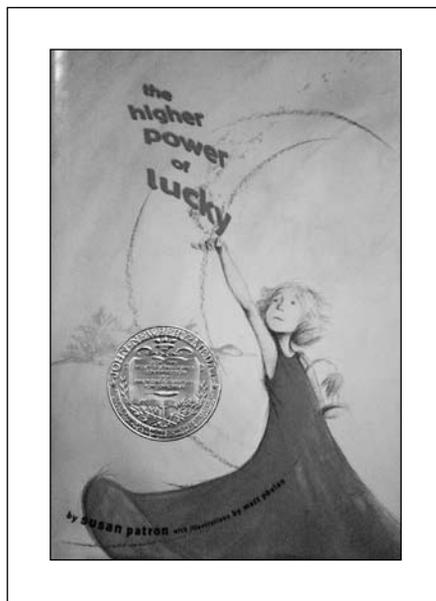
Coincidentally, at about this time, when I was sixteen, a young Frenchman came to Los Angeles for an extended visit, staying with my sister Patricia and her then-husband. One evening they were to attend a Ravi Shankar concert with some other friends, and Pat had asked me to babysit her two-year-old. When I arrived, there was a fire in the fireplace, lighting the rich wood paneling and Oriental rugs; Erik Satie's *Trois Gymnopédies* was playing on the turntable. The shy foreign guest, whose name was René Patron, wore a three-piece suit, looked like an actor in a François Truffaut movie, and smelled interesting and very French.

I was horrified and embarrassed not to be grown up yet, which didn't seem fair because I'd been working at it all my life. It was unbearable to be the babysitter, outside of the sophisticated, intellectual group who were all in their twenties, or at least nineteen. As everyone was leaving, my sister and René had a murmured conversation in French, which I tried mightily (but failed) to overhear and understand. Patricia shrugged and turned to me. "René's not going to the concert," she said. "He'd rather stay home with the babysitter."

Finding ourselves alone (with my niece tucked away in bed), neither of us able to converse in the other's language, we

sipped wine by the fire, and I studied the Erik Satie album jacket intently, as though there would be an exam on it later. It felt as if we were suspended in time. So we did the one thing we could do to connect in a nonverbal but thrilling way. I am sure you have guessed what that was because you remember that Patricia had long before taught me all the life skills. We played chess. He won, but only because I wasn't feeling competitive.

Some time after this, René rented a room from my mom's best friend, Helen Trimble, who lived across the street. He had brought only a small suitcase, not much bigger than a laptop. Helen Trimble became his surrogate American mother.



Her son, Jimmy, took René on his motorcycle to Pink's, Barney's Beanery, and the best jazz dives in L.A.

Several years later, after René and I were married, I'd become a children's librarian at the Los Angeles Public Library [LAPL], and he had established his rare book restoration business. Jimmy Trimble began imploring us to visit his cabin in a hard-scrabble town in the high desert of the Eastern Sierras. René was for it; I, not. For one thing, Jimmy was a larger-than-life kind of guy, a handsome, romantic outlaw, third-generation Irish; and who knew what kind of wild adventure he would launch us into? For another, the tiny town he described sounded

strange, excessively remote, depressed, and depressing. The idea of going there frightened me.

Then it was discovered that I had a serious illness, and mortality got up into my face, clamped my head in its vise, and blew its cold breath into my mouth. This changed me. When it was over, I was twenty-seven years old and had not died, which filled me with gratitude, recklessness, and the urge to experience everything. On our next vacation we crammed the trunk of the car with what I imagined were desert-survival necessities and went to visit Jimmy Trimble at a place similar to the fictional Hard Pan.

We were entranced by the landscapes and the exotic inhabitants—human, animal, and plant. Eventually the region became the first "character" in *The Higher Power of Lucky*. Jimmy Trimble played hard and died in his forties, and I gave his name, and his mother Helen's, to Lucky.

Lucky and I have had a pretty exciting ride, beginning with my prepublication realization that illustrations had not been discussed, yet to me they were important for a nine- or ten-year-old's understanding of some of the book's particular details, such as cholla burrs and parsley grinders.

An illustrator hadn't been budgeted and it was late, but Dick Jackson is an editor who listens to cries from the heart. He pulled out all the stops, asking me if I had someone in mind, and I leapt at the chance to suggest an artist whose only work I'd seen was a jacket reproduced in a Simon & Schuster catalog. It was a line drawing of a boy, sweet and vulnerable, surrounded by white space. That tiny picture was filled with emotion. The artist was Matt Phelan, who agreed to illustrate *Lucky*. To Matt, I give profound thanks for expanding access to the story through his thoughtful, tender, and delicate pictures.

The next part of the story of *Lucky* involved my waiting for some stranger's fingertips to wrinkle and eyes to turn inward, thrilled from being immersed in the book. Advance reader copies were sent to reviewers and given away at the ALA Conference a year ago. I waited eagerly for reviews. Being in collection

development, I knew where to check—databases, Web sites, blogs, print media. Fuse #8 published the first review on her blog. With publication in November, I figured there would be more response. In fact, there was very little, except a beautiful star in *Kirkus*, a light in the darkness. By December, a few lukewarm reviews. Best-of-the-year lists came out; *Lucky* appeared only on NYPLs. Mock Newbery award contests were held, but *The Higher Power of Lucky* wasn't selected as a contender for children to read.

By the third week in January, people close to me knew I was seriously and

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uncharacteristically depressed. On the Sunday before the day of the Newbery announcement, I thought hard about the children's literature community's reception of this book that, in Katherine Paterson's phrase, I'd given myself to. Then I played computer solitaire for three or maybe four hours straight. René checked on me periodically, pretending to adjust the Venetian blinds. "André Gide only sold twelve copies of his first book," he mentioned, almost casually.

Eleven years earlier, *Maybe Yes, Maybe No, Maybe Maybe* had received starred reviews, was selected as an ALA Notable Book, and appeared on several best-of-the-year lists. I thought I had grown since then as a writer, and that *Lucky* was a deeper, richer book. I'd learned a lot and worked hard on getting better at the craft. It seemed I'd instead become a whole lot worse as a writer. "I'm going to give back the advance for *Lincoln's Knot*," I told René, referring to the companion book that I'd almost completed and that was, with Dick Jackson's retirement, to be in the hands of the brilliant Ginee Seo at Atheneum.

To paraphrase Donald Westlake, I'd decided to take myself out of the game and warm the bench of despair.

Having given up my writing career on Sunday night, I woke up Monday not as an author but as a librarian. My writer persona had thrown in the towel, but my LAPL juvenile materials collection development manager side was filled with excitement and anticipation and looked forward to going to work to hear the podcast of the award announcements live from Seattle.

When the phone rang at 6:30 A.M., I assumed it was a colleague; something to do with work. The person calling said she was Jeri Kladder, chair of the Newbery committee. OK, I thought, but why call

me? Maybe they needed some last-minute bibliographic information and had heard what a hotshot I was in those matters. She said I'd won the Newbery Award. This struck me as very weird and probably a mistake.

"Are you sure?" I asked. "Maybe you mean a Newbery Honor?" I heard a bunch of people in the background laughing—I was on speakerphone.

"Did we wake you?" asked Jeri Kladder. Synapses in my brain were sparking and snapping but not connecting. "No, I got up early to watch the podcast," I explained conversationally; just a little chat between colleagues.

I had made a chicken sandwich to take to work, and Gandalf, our 130-pound Rhodesian Ridgeback, was waiting impatiently for his rightful piece of chicken skin. He was agitating for it. Dogs are the most ritualistic species on earth, and if you gave yours a piece of chicken skin in 2002 when you made yourself a sandwich from last night's roast, that dog will expect, and lobby heavily and relentlessly for, his piece of chicken skin forever afterward.

The people in the background on the phone were cheering as Gandalf and I

danced around the kitchen. Jeri told me not to tell anyone until after the podcast at 8 A.M. That made me remember when the Caldecott and the Laura Ingalls Wilder committees I'd been on years before called our award recipients. You love your winner and you have worked very hard, and very honorably, to arrive at your decision.

So I cried and said, like someone on *The Sopranos*, because I was now in a completely surreal world, "I love you guys," something I would probably not say to a group of fifteen strangers in real life, and hung up. Then I gave Gandalf his piece of skin and went upstairs to tell René that I was going to be a writer again.

Jeri Kladder and the 2007 Newbery committee, I thank you deeply.

Then the story of the book gets a little bizarre. When some school librarians discovered that the first page contains the word "scrotum," an enormous national discussion ensued. Blogs and Web sites asked, "Shall we buy this book? What if parents object?"

Publishers Weekly interviewed me and ran a piece on the controversy, followed by a front-page article in *The New York Times*, in which I said that the word "scrotum" is delicious. I meant: the sound of it! To *Lucky*! This didn't help things. Then there were interviews on *Talk of the Nation* and other FM stations; Barbara Walters defended the book; and Roger Sutton of the *Horn Book* pointed out the insidious dangers of a subtle form of censorship that involves simply not buying a book that has won a major award.

I was trying to keep a copy of everything being said, published, blogged, and podcast about the controversy. In a librarian-esque way, I set up a folder: SCROTUM. Soon that folder was inadequate. I needed subheadings such as popular culture for online scrotum-inspired products: T-shirts, mouse pads, coffee cups, tote bags, and thongs. Subheading wikipedia, where *The Higher Power of Lucky* has the dubious distinction of being referenced in the entry under "scrotum." Subheading nasty e-mails. Subheading endorsements from organizations and colleagues. This included

online support from PEN, SCBWI, ALSC, the National Coalition against Censorship, and a beautiful affirmative statement posted on the Web sites of my distinguished co-honorees Jennifer Holm, Kirby Larson, and Cynthia Lord.

All this was, by turns, disturbing, ominous, reassuring, and exciting in its own strange way, but I began to long for someone, a child, to read past the first page. For weeks, the discussion went on and adults talked passionately about it. In France, our Patron relatives Googled their American aunt and found more discussions on French-language *blogues*. Finally, a teacher from Oakland wrote that her fourth-grade class, to whom she had read the book, could not guess what the controversy was about, though they thought it might be because I'd introduced the idea of cremation. When she told them it was over the word, they went to the dictionary and looked it up. They concluded that if the book were banned because of that word, then the dictionary should be banned, too.

And then a letter came from a young reader, which I'll share with you:

Dear Susan. My name is Leah. I am eight years old—I live in Creston Iowa. I read your Book Higher Power of Lucky. I really enjoyed it. Here are some things that I enjoyed. Lucky was brave to get that bug out of her ear. It was great that she found her higher power. I liked how Brigget spoke French. Oh, La vache! [smiley face drawing] I liked when Brigget adopted Lucky, just like when my mom adopted me. Also I liked how the numbers are on the side of the pages. Love, Leah.

PS tell me when you write another book.

That's a promise, Leah.

The question every reporter asked was, "If you were to write the book again, would you use a different word?" Would another word, or another body part, have done? Did I throw that scrotum in gratuitously for shock value?

My answer is that I chose the word very carefully and deliberately. But neither intellectual freedom and related issues nor shock value was in my mind at the time of writing. What I wanted was to tell a story that would be compelling to kids. I was interested in relating to readers on a deeply emotional level, in a way that

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could help them figure out a little about how the world works.

I needed a sensitive word and subject, something a little bit taboo, in order for one of the final scenes to have impact and power. In that scene, enough trust has been engendered between Lucky and her guardian, Brigitte, that now, at last, Lucky can ask her question straightforwardly. It's very significant that Lucky finally has enough trust that she can go to Brigitte with her questions, because she is trying hard, throughout the book, to prepare herself for growing up. Lucky is teetering on the brink of womanhood, and she swipes Brigitte's red silk dress as a metaphor of this.

Brigitte's answer, explaining the meaning of scrotum, is equally important. It shows Lucky, and the reader, that Brigitte deeply loves her ward. If the question had

been less intimate, the scene wouldn't have had the same impact.

Many thanks to my agent Susan Cohen of Writers House, and to everyone at Simon & Schuster/Atheneum for supporting *The Higher Power of Lucky*, especially Emma Dryden, Rubin Pfeffer, Rick Richter, Ann Bobco, Ginee Seo, Paul Crichton, Michelle Fadlalla, Lila Haber, Carol Chou, Mary McAveney, Mara Anastas, Jodie Cohen, Kim Lauber, and Richard Jackson.

Thanks to all my LAPL buds, Eva Cox in particular.

With the firestorm and controversy out of which *The Higher Power of Lucky* has emerged unscathed, I am more than ever confirmed in my belief that librarianship is a noble profession, essential to free speech and free access for children. It is crucial to children's ability to make sense of this fragile, battered world—the world we're handing over to them. I'm grateful to have spent thirty-five years promoting children's books. It's work you can look back on and know you made a difference in people's lives, and as clichéd as that sounds, I believe it profoundly.

To teachers and librarians who take risks using books that may occasion objections or challenges, bravo. To publishers and editors who stand behind authors as they work to make a story true to its characters, and as they try to write in a way that respects the intelligence of readers, bravo. Bravo and thank you. 🍷