



Kelly Barnhill received the 2017 (John) Newbery Medal for *The Girl Who Drank the Moon* (G. P. Putnam's Sons/Penguin). She delivered her acceptance remarks at the Newbery-Caldecott-Wilder Banquet on Sunday, June 25, 2017, during the American Library Association Annual Conference.

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

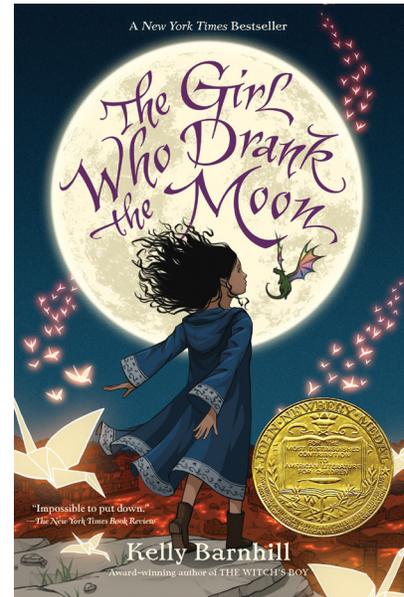


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Nobody writes a book alone. This may come as a shock to you, those of you who aren't writers. Because from your point of view, writers sure seem like they're alone, in our tea-stained yoga pants and ratty sweatshirts and the sun-starved pallor of our faces when it's clear that we haven't left our offices for days. But it's true. We can't do any of this by ourselves. Which means that before I get to talking about...all this business, I need to say thank you to some people.

Firstly, I wouldn't be here at all if it weren't for Lindsay Davis, who not only was the first person to say yes but was the person who championed my very first book. That first yes made all the difference in the world to me. It still does. Also, Steven Malk, my amazing agent, who hoisted my career on his back and has carried it tirelessly across deserts and mountains, and maybe even into outer space. I'm not entirely sure about that last bit, but I wouldn't put it past him. My writing is better because of Steve—mostly because I'm constantly trying to impress him. I sure as heck wouldn't be here without Elise Howard, who (if you don't know this already) is a wacky supergenius and absolutely right about everything—including, and especially, the time when she ordered me to write this very book. Let this be a lesson to you. Always listen to Elise. And helping Elise is the entire team at



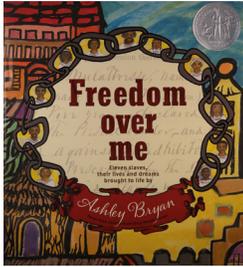
Algonquin Young Readers, buoyed up by the boundless support from Workman. Each one of you is an absolute jewel. I often tell people that I, like the rest of the writers at Algonquin, am the luckiest writer in America, *and I mean it*. I wouldn't be here without my writing group, The Black Sheep (Steve Brezenoff, Kurtis Scaletta, Karlyn Coleman, Jodi Chromey, Bryan Bliss, and Christopher Lincoln), who refused to allow me to give up on this book, or any of my books, and insisted that I continue, even though it seemed impossible.

I especially have to extend my profound gratitude to the members of the Newbery committee: I thank

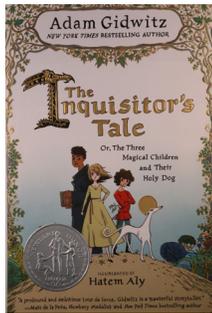
Kelly Barnhill writes novels for children and short stories for adults. She has been awarded writing fellowships from the Jerome Foundation, Minnesota State Arts Board, and McKnight Foundation. Barnhill's work also has received the World Fantasy Award, Parents Choice Gold Award, Texas Library Association Bluebonnet Award, and a Charlotte Huck Honor. She is a teaching artist with COMPAS, a community arts program. Barnhill lives in Minnesota with her husband and three children.



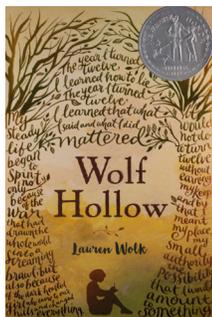
2017 NEWBERY HONOR BOOKS



***Freedom Over Me:
Eleven Slaves, Their Lives and Dreams
Brought to Life* by Ashley Bryan**
Bryan, Ashley
Illus. by the author
Atheneum/Simon & Schuster



***The Inquisitor's Tale: Or, The Three
Magical Children and Their Holy Dog***
Gidwitz, Adam
Illus. by Hatem Aly
Dutton/Penguin Random



Wolf Hollow
Wolk, Lauren
Dutton/Penguin Random

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you not only for this award—which, granted, is lovely—but for the work you do for children’s literature. I thank you for your intelligence and care and honor for this art form, how you demonstrated through your tireless efforts the fact that this *matters*. Each book that you pored over matters. And each reader matters. I know how much this work meant to you—I see it, and I appreciate it. I’m proud to be laboring in the same field as all of you.

And lastly, I would not be here at all without my family. My parents who helped teach me how to understand stories, my husband who bears the singularly difficult position of being the long-suffering spouse to an only mostly-sane writer, and does so with grace and strength and dedication and kindness, and my three kids, who are in the process of writing their own lives, rewriting the whole world. I wouldn’t have become a writer without you. I certainly would not be *this* writer without you. You kids are my first thought and my last thought, for every single story. None of this would exist without you, my darlings. Thank you.

So—apparently, I won a Newbery. I am still astonished about it. I am still—after all of these months—in a state of non-belief: it is a story, you see, that stands in conflict with the narrative that I have created for myself, the narrative that helps me organize my life and what I believe about my life.

In the weeks that followed that phone call at five in the morning—when I was ripped out of the deepest of deep sleeps by the voices from a room full of marvelously cheerful librarians with their impossibly good news and me responding with garble-y, inco-

herent, sleepy nonsense, punctuated with the occasional, “H-h-how is this *possible?*”—I am still trying to accept the fact that it did, in fact, occur, and was not simply a thing that I made up. This is harder than you’d think—after all, I literally make things up for a living.

This is not due to any particular ambivalence about my book. In truth, I loved writing this book—I really did. I loved mucking about in its strangeness—its poetry and paper birds and monsters and odd magicks. I loved writing through its pain and confusion and grief and hard-fought joy. I loved weaving in those not-subtle-at-all superfeminist undertones. So, yeah. I had a pretty good time with this one. Still, I held a deep, fundamental belief that no one else on earth would like it. This is true. I think I even turned it in to my poor editor with a letter of apology. This assumption was part of the narrative that I lived in, part of the story that I insisted on telling myself, which meant that each time a reviewer *didn’t* hate it, or each time it inexplicably landed on some list—each was an astonishment. This award, this speech, me standing here in front of the biggest crowd of the best-dressed book nerds in America? Well. It’s not what I expected. I feel as though I’m living in a story that isn’t mine—a narrative that I did not invent, one that I hesitate to claim as my own.

I’ve been telling stories my whole life. Most of them outlandish. Most of them outrageous. Most of them strange and odd and misshapen. I can’t help it. I blame wiring. I blame anxiety. I blame the fact that I was an oldest child, and oldest children typically are sent out of doors with unruly younger children—to entertain them, I guess—and honestly what else are



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you supposed to do? I told stories. I took a small space and a small world and a small life and enlarged it, enbiggered it, enmagicked everything. I enlarged the world, because I could. Because I wished it to be larger. I made everything contain multitudes because I, myself, wished to contain multitudes. I used stories to tell the truth about the world and about myself, and I used stories to tell lies—about the world, and about myself.

Once upon a time, when I was a mousy-haired, accident-prone, socially anxious, and unbearably lonely twelve-year-old, with an epic Oz/fairy tales/*Anne of Green Gables* obsession, I journeyed with my three elvish companions on a magical path, into a deep, dark wood.

Actually, it wasn't a deep, dark wood at all—it was the scrubby leftovers of my city's once-great trolley line, abandoned sometime in the fifties, and which had gradually succumbed to the will of weeds and buckthorn scrub and cottonwood trees. To me, it was a wild and endless forest. And my elvish companions—the blond children down the block I babysat every Tuesday and Thursday—believed me when I told them it was special, and believed me when I told them it was magic, and believed me that it went on for miles and miles and miles, and that we had to hold hands very tightly, or else we might be lost forever in the thick canopy of trees.

(They believed me, of course, because I wanted to believe, myself. We *believe* a thing, and it *is*. That is the power of stories.)

The sinkhole, I told the children, was the entrance to the lair of an evil king, and we had to hold our breath when we walked by, to keep him

from snatching the air right out of our lungs, grasping it tight, and holding us in his underground dungeons forever. Breath is magic after all. Ask anyone you like.

I told them if they stared at tree bark for long enough, they'd eventually see a map—one that would give them perfect directions in a certain country that does not exist on earth. I told them that pink quartz is the buried remains of a dead gnome's heart and that you can distract ghosts by blowing ashes in their faces and that a sudden cool breeze was the collected spirits of dead warriors, trying to remind you to be brave and bold and kind and righteous.

I never knew if their mother was bothered by the endless stream of drivel that I poured into those tender ears. Although, to be fair, she did stop calling me eventually, so maybe.

Stories enlarge, they expand, they amplify. They turn sows' ears into silk purses and pig keepers into kings. A story can make a lonely, anxious kid feel more than herself for just a moment, and make an ugly, forgotten gap in a city feel like a broad, wild, and infinite space.

We tell stories because we yearn for larger truths, larger experiences, larger worlds, and larger selves. We tell stories because we wish to contain multitudes—and *we do*. We see the world through a wider and more complicated lens, and we can, for a little while, feel as another feels, think as another thinks, and breathe someone else's precious and magical breath.

But.

There is another power of stories, one that well-meaning, bookish people don't always like to talk about. Sto-

ries can reveal, analyze, and dissect, yes, *but they can also* conceal, obfuscate, and distract. Stories break down barriers and reveal the nobility in ordinary people and things, but they can also turn nice old ladies into fearsome witches and neighbors into fiends. Stories can create empathy, kindness, connection *and* antipathy, hatred, and division. Stories are bridges *and* walls.

When I was writing this speech, I got asked a lot about politics. "Are you going to talk about politics in your Newbery speech, Kelly Barnhill?" This is what people asked me—after they were able to once again convince me that, yes, I really did win a damn Newbery and didn't make it up. It's hard not to talk about politics. We are living, I don't know if you've noticed, *in interesting times*. And of course all art is political. And politics, in its essence, is just storytelling. All social movements, all social change, all arcs of justice—they are all storytelling. We take the narrative that we're given, and we retell the story in a way that better reflects the world we want to see. Human beings build meaning through narrative—we can't help it. We're wired that way. So whose stories are told, and whose stories are silenced, and why those stories are told in the first place, and what we as a culture do with those stories, *this matters*. This work matters. It always has. But now more than ever. And we have to pay attention. And as people who traffic in books and stories for a living, we need to show kids how to pay attention, too.

I wrote this book intending to wrestle with the notion of false narratives. The stories that turn neighbors into scapegoats. The stories that perpetuate intolerance. The stories that encourage us to notice the splinter



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in our neighbor's eye while ignoring the two-by-four in our own. While we have all seen how minds can be opened through stories, we also have read our history, and we know the other side of that coin. We know that tyranny and intolerance are also built on stories. We know that systemic oppression is rationalized through stories. We know that atrocities are justified through stories. And that's what we see on a macro scale; on the micro scale, we see the same thing. Self-hatred is narrative. Self-doubt is narrative. Heck, even anxiety is just a story we tell and tell ourselves, again and again, and can't turn off.

Stories *are* powerful. For good or ill. They can literally rewrite a person's sense of themselves, and they can rewrite the world around us.

This is what I was trying to do in *The Girl Who Drank the Moon*. To show how a story, when it is cynically told, can twist the truth. I wanted to show how a cynical story can become a wall, a prison, a weapon. And it is only by subverting the narrative, by

re-inventing and re-imagining and re-telling, that we can replace that which is harmful with stories that enlarge, ennoble, and expand.

I believe this is possible. I've seen it happen, and I know that you have seen it, too. We live in interesting times. And we have kids who, right now, are deeply in need of books that will give them the tools they need to think critically. To ask questions. To break down assumed narratives—both about ourselves, and about the world. We need stories that are mirrors so that *any* kid can see themselves clearly. We need stories that are bright lamps, shining hope and light in a troubled world. We need stories that are bridges and roads, connecting that which we know to that which we do not; stories that are safe harbors and welcoming sanctuaries; stories that are armor and shield, friend and companion; stories that free prisoners, heal the harmed, teach the ignorant, and feed our aching souls.

Once upon a time, I was a lonely kid, an anxious kid, burdened with a false narrative—the story about myself that

I told myself. It took me a long time to learn how to subvert that narrative. As book people, we are all experts in subversion. We know that books teach us to transgress, to stand up, to listen, to connect, to analyze, and to understand. With books, we are more than ourselves. With books, we contain multitudes. I have often said that reading is an act of radical empathy, and I do believe it, but a shortened version of that is also true. Reading is *radical*, full stop. Which is why every kid deserves a library stacked to the rafters with radical reads—books that enlarge us, ennoble us, books that remind us to be brave and bold and kind and righteous. Books that challenge us to face the narratives in our culture that twist, that divide, that tell us lies about ourselves—and to break them down, look inside, analyze their working parts, and ultimately write something new. Tell a new story. Rewrite the world.

Books are magic, after all. Ask anyone you like.

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