

# Newbery

## MEDAL ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

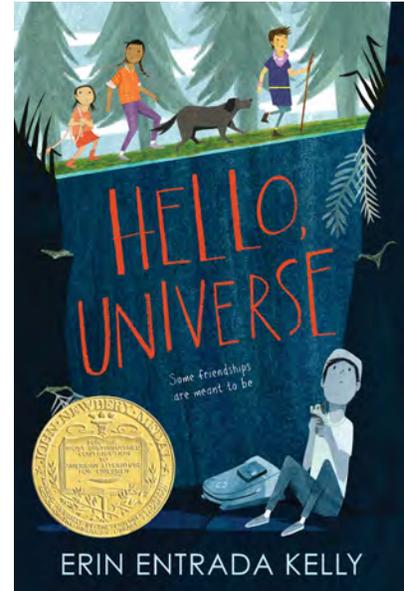


**Erin Entrada Kelly** received the 2018 (John) Newbery Medal for *Hello, Universe* (Greenwillow/HarperCollins). She delivered her acceptance remarks at ALSC's awards banquet on Sunday, June 24, 2018, during the American Library Association Annual Conference.

I'd like to thank the ALA and ALSC. I'd also like to congratulate Derrick Barnes, Jason Reynolds, Renée Watson, Matthew Cordell, Jacqueline Woodson, and all the honorees. It's incredible to be in such esteemed company. I'm convinced that I've entered an alternate universe and that in some parallel reality I'm on my couch eating Cheez Whiz in my pajamas. But since I'm here, and you're here, I'll just say: hello, alternate universe!

I'd also like to recognize my family and friends who are here tonight. I'm eternally grateful to my agent, Sara Crowe, with Pippin Properties. I'm indebted to the team at HarperCollins, especially the people at Greenwillow. In particular, artist Isabel Roxas, who drew the art for *Hello, Universe*, *The Land of Forgotten Girls*, and *You Go First*, and Sylvie Le Floc'h, who designed all my books. And I would not be standing here if not for my editor, Virginia Duncan. I should be able to find the right words to express my gratitude. But there are none. So...thank you for challenging me. Thank you for believing in my work. And thank you for using a pencil instead of Track Changes.

I'd like us to travel through time together, if you'll indulge me for the next few minutes. I'm in a room full of big imaginations, so I suspect you



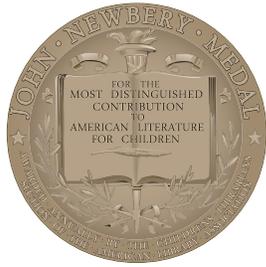
won't mind. We aren't going back too far—just a few decades, to 1970, where there's a beautiful Filipino woman with long dark hair working in a restaurant in her home country. She is from a poor family. As a girl, she washed her clothes in the river and slept in a nipa hut with her ten siblings. One night, while she's working, she meets an incredibly shy American sailor.

He asks her to marry him after one date. He doesn't even know her last name. Maybe she doesn't know his, either. But she accepts on one condition—he has to meet her priest first. With the priest's blessing, he sails back to America, where he promises

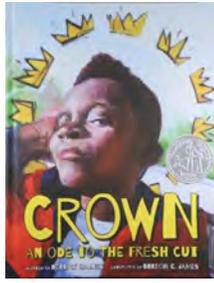
For more information about the Newbery Medal, visit <http://bit.ly/newbery-award>.



Erin Entrada Kelly grew up in Louisiana, and currently lives in the Philadelphia area. She holds a bachelor's degree in women's studies and liberal arts from McNeese State University and an MFA in creative writing from Rosemont College. Her other novels include *Blackbird Fly* (2015), *The Land of Forgotten Girls* (2016), winner of the Asian/Pacific American Librarians Association (APALA) Award for Children's Literature, and *You Go First* (2018). Entrada Kelly also writes short fiction, which has been nominated for the Philippines Free Press Literary Award and the Pushcart Prize.



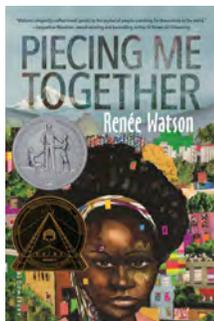
## 2018 NEWBERY HONOR BOOKS



***Crown: An Ode to the Fresh Cut***  
Derrick Barnes  
Illus. by Gordon C. James  
Bolden/Agate



***Long Way Down***  
Jason Reynolds  
Atheneum/Simon & Schuster



***Piecing Me Together***  
Renée Watson  
Bloomsbury

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to write, and he does. He sends her awkward selfies with his Polaroid so she won't forget what he looks like. Despite the awkwardness of the selfies, she packs her few bags, leaves everything behind, and moves from a tropical island to a small, snowy town in Kansas to marry a man she barely knows.

They have a daughter. She is bright, sunny, and cheerful. People stop them in the grocery store to remark on how beautiful she is. When she gets a little older, she'll learn to love books, especially Judy Blume. *Superfudge* becomes a favorite. She's a delightful child, full of smiles and laughter.

Three years after this daughter is born, they have me.

I entered the world afraid and full of questions.

I was afraid of the dark. I didn't like to climb trees because I was convinced I would fall. I didn't scale fences or ride skateboards. There was nothing particularly extraordinary about me. I wasn't the prettiest girl at school, or the smartest. I wasn't the quietest or the loudest. I was just a little Filipino girl, born in Kansas and growing up in south Louisiana, trying to find her place in the world.

There were two things that set me apart, however.

The first was this: I didn't look like the other kids at my school. My hair was black and coarse, my eyes were slanted, and over and over the other kids asked: "What are you? What are you?" It was a question I didn't have an answer to. There were no Asians in my neighborhood. There were no Filipinos at my school. The kids asked, "Does your family eat dog?"

"Do you know the price of tea in China?"

I felt very alone in the world. Sometimes I would wake up in the middle of the night, when everything was quiet and dark, and sit in a corner. There was a clock in my house. I listened to it tick. I felt like the only person on the face of the Earth, and that scared me.

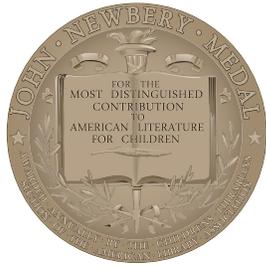
The Scholastic Book Fair was one of the few things I loved about school. My family didn't have much money, so my choices were limited. I'd circle items with a pen, scratch one out, circle something else. I'd smell the flyer the same way I smelled pages of books. It smelled like home.

The other thing I loved about school was, of course, the library. Thankfully, T. H. Watkins Elementary had one. It was a special treat when *Sideways Stories from Wayside School* was there, because it was usually checked out. I would imagine what it was like to go to Wayside School. I pretended I was on the thirtieth floor, in Mrs. Gorf's classroom, watching her turn people into apples. I pressed the worn, dog-eared pages of the book and wondered about the other kids who were checking it out. Who were their favorite characters? What did they like most about it?

I learned to escape through books.

When I read *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret.*, I was no longer a scared little girl in Lake Charles, Louisiana. Instead, I was whisked off to the magical land of north Jersey. When I read *Blubber*—one of my favorites—I was taken to the utopia of Radnor, Pennsylvania.

One day—very early on—I realized something: books were noth-



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ing more than pen and paper. And I had both of those things. So I started writing my own stories, where things could be just as I wanted them to be. It was then 1985, and I was eight years old.

Most emerging writers polish their craft by emulating some of their favorite books and authors. Not me. Writing came so organically. I filled notebooks. I started a book series about identical twin girls who live in California and go to a school called... Golden Valley High. One of the twins is smart and bookish; the other is a popular cheerleader. I have an exclusive excerpt to share with you tonight. This is from chapter four of book one, *Almost Lucky*.

Sindy and Ricky walked in a restaurant called "La Merci." It was expensive because Rickie's parents were rich. They had over one thousand dollars. Sindy ordered oysters and a Shirley Temple. Rickie ordered red wine, snails, and French fries. Sindy thought snails were gross. In thirty minutes, the food came. The wine was called Damiano Astino. When they were done, Rickie asked, "Do you want to dance?" Sindy said, "Sure." They danced to the song, "Gone with the Wind."

My first hardcover was bound in cardboard. It was a book about two orphans who are best friends. I didn't have the incredible Lois Adams as my copyeditor then, so the published title is *The Two Orphans*. These two "orphans" live in an "orphanage," where they "wore tattered clothing." (I was particularly proud of that line.) The copyright is 1987.

When I got to high school, I listened to girls talk about their dream weddings. Who would be in the wedding party, what kind of dresses they would wear. We played games to guess who we would marry and filled in the blanks of our sign-in books. But I dreamed about the day a publisher would call. Because that's the second thing that set me apart: My Big Dream.

When I wanted to disappear, when I felt small and insignificant in the world, when I had so many things to cry over that I could never pick just one, I reached for that dream like a security blanket. I wrapped it around my shoulders and used it for warmth.

That's what dreams do for people.

And what does it feel like when dreams come true? It feels like a phone call from Cecilia McGowan when you're driving down I-95, thirty minutes before the Youth Media Awards press conference. It sounds like cheers from a committee of people you have never met, but who have changed your life. It sounds like Cecilia saying, "We've been calling and calling you! And we finally got a good number." Apparently they had the wrong one at first. I'm still not convinced they called the right digits, but they can't take it back now.

I'm often asked to describe my ideal reader. And the truth is, I write books for my characters. For Virgil Salinas, who is shy and lonely and always picked last for basketball. Or Valencia, who wants to be the next Jane Goodall, but doesn't have a friend in the world. In *You Go First*, the main characters, Charlotte and Ben, sit

alone at lunch. I write for them, too. Because I was—and am—all of them.

My greatest wish as a writer is that the person reading my book—or any book, for that matter—feels less alone. Because I know what that feels like. I suspect you do, too. When I was a kid, I didn't always understand why I was so sad. I would lie awake at night, stare at the popcorn paint on the ceiling, and think about all the people in the world that I would never meet. I'd wonder: what if someone out there feels the way I do, and we could be friends, but I'll never meet them because they live in another state, or another country? It was a tragic thought, and I would overwhelm myself with it until I cried.

But that's why we have books, isn't it? So we can meet those people. Walk in their shoes. See our reflections. So we can discover that we never struggle alone.

Books are an incredible gift. But without you—the book people of the universe—they would never find their way. To know that my books sit on your shelves and pass through your hands is an honor indeed.

Which brings us back to the present. To the universe we find ourselves in tonight. That little girl who wouldn't climb trees or scale fences, that little girl who prayed for blue eyes? She still exists. She's still wrapped in that blanket. But she's not alone anymore. She's in a room full of beautiful readers. She's at a podium in a new dress. She's surrounded by people who make dreams come true every day by putting books in the hands of kids and introducing them to a big-



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ger world. A place where all things are possible.

You have given me a tremendous honor tonight. And it's my hope that you will remember, each day, how you honor the dreams of underdogs everywhere. When budgets are low and tension is high, when office politics overshadow your greater purpose, when you're paying student loans, when you're wondering why you had to

get into this business instead of something less stressful and more fruitful, I hope you will remember this story. It's a story that's easily summarized: "Once upon a time, there was a little girl. And all her dreams came true." But it isn't just my story. It's the story of you and me.

Thank you.



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