



Matthew Cordell received the 2018 (Randolph) Caldecott Medal for *Wolf in the Snow* (Feiwel and Friends/Macmillan).

His acceptance remarks were delivered at ALSC's awards banquet on Sunday, June 24, 2018, during the American Library Association Annual Conference.

For more information about the Caldecott Medal, visit <http://bit.ly/caldecott-medal>.



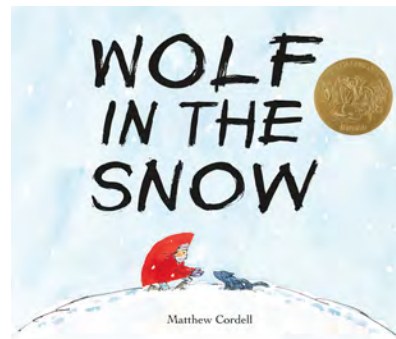
Caldecott

MEDAL ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

When I was five years old, I wanted to be a stuntman when I grew up. When I was ten years old, I wanted to be a ninja. When I was fifteen years old, I wanted to be a professional skateboarder. When I was twenty years old, I wanted to be a graphic designer. It wasn't until I was a whopping twenty-five years old that I had any indication that I wanted to make books for children.

By that time, I had met a brilliant and beautiful young woman. One who would change my life in so many ways for the better. Julie was, and is, a writer and a school librarian. I was, and am, an artist. We'd been dating seriously for some months, and she eventually had the bright idea that we could collaborate on a thing that she'd write and I'd draw, and we could try and get a children's book published. To which I thought, "Well, that's a terrible idea." I was an artist making art for grown-ups since I myself had turned into a pseudo-grownup, and I couldn't fathom at all how making a children's book could be cool or respectable in any way. To be fair, and also apologetic right now, I hadn't looked at any picture books since I myself had been a child. I hadn't thought about them, and when (and if) I did, it was in this warm and wholesome, didactic, and uncool sort of way. Boy, was I wrong.

Surprisingly, Julie wasn't offended by



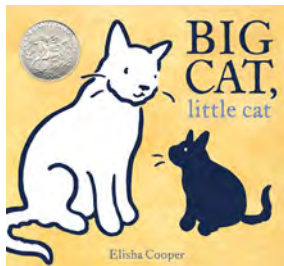
my indifference, and she went ahead and wrote a picture-book manuscript. "Toby and the Snowflakes," it was called. It was about a boy whose best friend moves away. When a snowstorm starts, this sad boy imagines the falling snowflakes to be the voices of some new friends, and it changes his dreary day into a hopeful one. I read it. I put it down. I went and did something else. Surprisingly, Julie *still* wasn't offended by my indifference, and she started showing me picture books that she loved as a child and bringing home contemporary ones from her school's library. This changed everything.

I'm a visual person, so when I started looking at the fantastic and wobbly drawings by the likes of William Steig, Quentin Blake, and Jules Feiffer, I was immediately intrigued. It just so happens that, at that time, I was also becoming uninterested in *adults*. As I slowly sank into proper adulthood

Born in Greenville, South Carolina, Matthew Cordell took an early interest in drawing, and his interests expanded to other art forms, such as painting, printmaking, and sculpture. He is also the author and illustrator of *Trouble Gum*, *Another Brother*, *Hello! Hello!*, and *Wish*. Cordell's illustrations also are featured in the work of prominent authors, including Philip Stead (*Special Delivery*), Rachel Vail (the Justin Case series), and Gail Carson Levine (*Forgive Me, I Meant to Do It*). He lives near Chicago with his wife, novelist Julie Halpern, and their children.



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HONOR BOOKS



Big Cat, Little Cat
Elisha Cooper
Illus. by the author
Roaring Brook/Holtzbrinck



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

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with an adult job, with adult friends, doing adult things, I became very unsatisfied with it all. Adults were judgey and annoying. Adults were pretentious. Adults were jaded.

On the other end of this human spectrum, children rather terrified me. With their keen, sometimes brutal insightfulness, their unpredictability, and their unrelenting energy. I hadn't lived around or in a child's world for quite some time, so these little enigmas were foreign territory to me. They were far better than me, and much more evolved. But I knew enough to know that children, unlike many adults, are profoundly accepting of so many people and things. And they are odd and funny in the most imaginative of ways. And because of it all, they were far more approachable than I'd once figured them to be. The more I thought about children and about the art of children's books, the more tremendously inspired I became.

I drew some pictures for "Toby and the Snowflakes," and Julie and I put together a proposal and submitted queries to twenty publishers. We received nineteen answers in the form of rejection letters. The twentieth answer was a "maybe." After about six months of tinkering with the manuscript, "Toby and the Snowflakes" was accepted for publication by Houghton Mifflin.

Once I got my hands and head and heart all the way into it—working with Julie's wonderful text; collaborating on the art with the talented, sharp, warm folks at the publisher; seeing a book through to publication; and sharing it with this refreshing new audience of children and families and educators—I fell completely in love with making books for chil-

dren. And I knew right then that this was the thing I needed to be doing for the rest of my life.

We have to open our ears and eyes and hearts to the people and things we don't know or understand. If we stop listening and seeing and learning, we will surely miss opportunities to bridge our differences. We will surely miss opportunities to achieve greatness.

Writing did not come easy for me. But I really wanted to write and illustrate my own books. Back in the day, I wrote many fantastically terrible picture-book manuscripts that were politely rejected by the editors and art directors who liked me for my illustrations. My skin thickened, and I persisted, and eventually I cracked the code for what worked for me. I discovered that the best way into a story was to root it in something that was true to my own life. My first written and illustrated picture book, *Trouble Gum*, was roughly based on the good-natured pranks my brother and I liked to play on unsuspecting family members as children. My next book, *Another Brother*, was about a funny moment I remembered when an obsessed toddler cousin of mine subconsciously copied everything his older brother did. So I made a book about twelve toddler sheep that copied their older brother. When I had children of my own, the blinders really came off for story inspiration and ideas. Unbeknownst to them, I subtly rip off the unbridled brilliance of my children daily. So, I had found what worked, and I never wanted to return to the days of making a story out of something completely unfamiliar to me. But then came a day when I did just that.



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A Different Pond
Bao Phi
Illus. by Thi Bui
Capstone



Grand Canyon
Jason Chin
Illus. by the author
Neal Porter/Roaring Brook/Holtzbrinck

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Now. This is the part of my story where things will start to get embarrassing. It was the year 2013. The ALA Youth Media Awards were soon to be announced. My book *Hello! Hello!* had a bit of buzz swirling around it, so for the very first time in my career, I actually had a book in the Caldecott conversation. And, oh, I wanted it. I wanted it so bad. Late that night before the awards were to be announced, after the rest of my family had gone to bed, I closed the door to my bedroom studio. I dimmed the lights. I took a book off of my shelves, and made a pencil rubbing of the Caldecott Honor sticker from the cover of *Interrupting Chicken*. I cut out this gray—wannabe silver—circle and I taped it to a copy of *Hello! Hello!* Then I looked at my book with its faux sticker, and I did some hardcore visualization. I chanted and I meditated on it. I may have prayed, even, that I would get one of those dreamed-about early-morning phone calls. I turned my cellphone ringer all the way up and got under the covers. I closed my eyes. One sleepless night and unbearably long morning later, that call did not come. And I was crushed. But, the embarrassment doesn't end there.

The next day, wallowing in self-pity and angst, I drew a picture of a wolf howling sadly at the moon. And in the face of the moon was a very subtle rendering of the Caldecott Medal. I posted the drawing on Facebook. I don't think anyone picked up on the Caldecott moon. It's possible they did, but it was just too awkward of a thing to mention. At any rate, the drawing, it helped. Turns out, when you're feeling blue, it's cathartic to make pathetic, passive-aggressive art. Furthermore, I found myself quite drawn to the wolf itself. I hadn't ever thought

much about wolves before. They were kind of creepy and dark and vicious. Or so I thought. So I drew some more wolves. And I liked doing it. So I drew some *more* wolves.

Then, I drew a wolf and a girl. This drawing was very minimal, but very dramatic. The girl and wolf were standing in a white, snow-covered field, facing each other, close in proximity. The wolf was solid black and mysterious. The girl was in a bright-red, triangle-shaped coat, also mysterious. I liked the graphic quality of the red, the white, and the black. What was it? I didn't know. But I was surely going to post this drawing on Facebook. To my surprise, I received many inquiring and encouraging comments such as "Is this a story?" and, "You should write a story about this!" To which I thought, "Don't tell me what to write!"

The truth was I'd actually been thinking some of the same thing. Was there something more to these characters? I did want to draw them again. I did want to find their story. But it had been proven that pulling a story out of thin air was not my thing. So I didn't want to do that. Not yet. Instead, I stepped away from drawing and read about wolves. I learned about wolves. And what I learned was that much of what I thought about wolves was wrong. Contrary to what I believed, contrary to misinformed stereotypes, contrary to what we'd read in those old big-bad-wolf tales like "The Three Little Pigs" and "Little Red Riding Hood," wolves are not creepy. Or dark. Or vicious. Wolves do not hunt people. In fact, they want nothing to do with us.

I learned that, because of age-old stereotypes, wolves have been unfairly demonized and maligned by



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humans. Wolves have been hunted down—in some cases, entire populations wiped out—because of these sorts of widely believed prejudices. The truth is, wolves want much of the same basic things that humans want. Family. Companionship. Safety. Survival. But because of misinformed ideas, people distrust wolves. And we hurt them for it. Wolves distrust people. And they fear us for it. All of it is wrong. But on it goes.

I looked at this story that had played out between wolves and people, and I saw a similar story being played out today between people and...other people. People who are angry or afraid or distrustful of others because of what they believe to be true. People who judge or hurt others because of differences in race, religion, sexual orientation. Suddenly, the story I was searching for between the girl and the wolf presented itself. A story of fear and misperception, yes. But one that ultimately leads to kindness and redemption. These are unfortunate, ugly times we are living in. But it needn't be that way. It can be better. We can all do better.

We have to open our ears and eyes and hearts to the people and things we don't know or understand. If we stop listening and seeing and learning, we will surely miss opportunities to bridge our differences. We will surely miss opportunities to achieve greatness.

I'd like to congratulate my newly minted Caldecott siblings, Thi Bui, Jason Chin, Elisha Cooper, and Gordon C. James, on their esteemed accomplishments and beautiful books. Congratulations to Erin Entrada Kelly, Derrick Barnes, Jason Reynolds, and Renée Watson. Congratulations

to Jacqueline Woodson. It's an honor to share this very fortunate, amazing, bright moment in my life with you.

I'd like to thank this wonderful, wonderful Caldecott committee. I don't think you'll ever fully comprehend how I feel about you all and what you did. I am enormously grateful to each and every one of you now and forever.

Thank you to every editor, art director, publisher who has taken a chance on me and lifted me up and made me a better book maker. But of course, specifically, thank you to everyone at Feiwel and Friends/Macmillan who has helped my books, my career, and my craft over the years. Thank you so much to my editor, Liz Szabla, to my publisher, Jean Feiwel, and to my art director, Rich Deas. Thank you for having faith in this book and for helping me to make it so much better. Thank you for your respect and friendship and collaboration.

Thank you to Rosemary Stimola for always believing in me and in this book, and in all of my books. Thank you for having my back and Julie's, too. You have seen me and my family through high highs and low lows, and we love you like one of our own.

Thank you to my community of bookmaking friends who agreed to look at my sketches and came to my rescue many times as I was working on *Wolf in the Snow*. Most notably my Chicagoland illustrator group, The Crusty Nibs: Stacy Curtis, Larry Day, Tom Lichtenheld, Eric Rohmann, and Chris Sheban. Thank you also to talented friends Miriam Busch, Candace Fleming, Edward Hemingway, Mike Petrik, Ed Spicer, Erin Stead, Philip Stead, and Mark Winter.

Special thanks to Kira Cassidy of the Yellowstone Wolf Project for taking

the time to answer in depth my questions about wolves and wolf behavior.

Thank you to the many teachers, librarians, and educators who have supported my books over the years. Thank you for your positive voices and for welcoming me into your schools and libraries. Thank you to the countless children who have enjoyed, appreciated, or bluntly rejected my books over the years. Children are the better versions of the rest of us, and I feel so lucky to spend my days with them and to have them as my audience and friends.

Thank you to all of the art teachers who pointed me in the right direction and encouraged and inspired me to try harder. Teaching is an exhausting and selfless and all-too-thankless pursuit. More than ever, our children need heroes. They need look no further than in our schools and libraries.

Thank you to Janice Halpern for your kindness and generosity. You are an invaluable part of the support system for me and my family, and I'm so grateful and blessed to have you in my life.

Thank you to my mom for your love and encouragement and support. Growing up, times weren't always so easy, and I know you took the lion's share of bringing up Eric and me. Your tenacity, work ethic, and self-motivation inspire me to this day. Thank you for making my childhood safe and special.

As for my own fierce and fearless wolf pack—at the end of the day, everything I do is for you. Everything I do would be nothing without you. So, thank you most of all to my wonderful wife, Julie (our alpha wolf), and our children Romy and Dean. Thank you for your endless patience, love,



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and inspiration. Thank you so much, Julie, for reintroducing me to children's books, thank you for believing in me and supporting me. Thank you for putting up with my silent, brooding spells. The day I met you was the luckiest day of my life. Thank you for leading our wolf pack into greatness.

The last person I want to thank could not be here tonight. You see, my dad, my Pop, he was slowly dying of pancreatic cancer while I was finishing the artwork for *Wolf in the Snow*. I didn't always understand my Pop. He didn't always understand me. But he was so, so proud of me. And

he loved me so much. I know because he told me so often. The one and only bad thing in all of this is that my Pop didn't live long enough to see this most wonderful thing happen for me and my family. I don't get to feel his proud hug. I don't get to see his knowing, subtle smile. Wherever you are, Pop, I think of you every day. And I love you. And I miss you. And I'm grateful for all that you did to make me a better person and to make my life a better life.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you, one and all.



Association for Library Service to Children

For more information about the Caldecott Medal, visit <http://bit.ly/caldecott-medal>.

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