

# Caldecott Medal Acceptance

*Kevin Henkes*

The picture book texts I love most are those that are so succinct that not one word can be extracted and not one word need be added. Those that get right to the point and are not overly long. And so I thought it would be fitting if tonight I simply stood before you and borrowed from a character of mine by remarking, “Wow! That’s just about all I can say,” and then sat down.

However, more than one person has informed me that a speech is, in fact, not a picture book. And so I will elaborate.

“It was Kitten’s first full moon. When she saw it, she thought, There’s a little bowl of milk in the sky. And she wanted it.”

In the life of a young child there are many firsts, one right after the next, in a row that seems to stretch to eternity. I recently read through the scrapbooks my wife and I have kept for our children, starting from their births. The word *first* appears on nearly every page in the earlier books, sometimes more than once.

These are some of the “firsts” we noted: First bath. First feeding. First visitors. First car trip. First night away from home. First smile. First time sleeping through the night (not to happen again for about five-and-a-half years). First cold. First flight. First rainbow. First blown kiss. First haircut. First snowfall.

As a child gets bigger, so, too, do the firsts. Here are a few more: First word. First steps. First sentence. First day of school. First time zipping up a jacket with no help.

The list goes on and on. The magnitude of each first, each act, is

staggering when you consider it. Think of them, these firsts, and think of the child experiencing them.

A child—someone who is egocentric, but powerless. Someone whose knowledge is limited, but whose imagination is vivid. Someone whose experience is limited, but who has curiosity to spare. These combinations are complex and difficult by their nature. They provide the perfect setup for a child to misinterpret with great certainty. Northrop Frye wrote, “Nearly all of us have felt, at least in childhood, that if we imagine that a thing is so, it therefore either is so or can be made to become so.” A blanket on a chair at night *can* be a bear. An illustration in a book *can* be as physically real as the book itself. The moon *can* be a bowl of milk.

Back to firsts. The sociologist Erving Goffman made the following observation: “To walk, to cross a road, to utter a complete sentence, to wear long pants, to tie one’s shoes, to add a column of figures—all these routines that allow the individual unthinking competent performances were attained through an acquisition process whose early stages were negotiated in a cold sweat.”



*Kevin Henkes is the winner of the 2005 Caldecott Medal for Kitten’s First Full Moon, published by Greenwillow Books. His acceptance speech was delivered at the ALA Annual Conference in Chicago on June 26, 2005.*

photo courtesy of Milt Leidner

These negotiators are who I write and illustrate picture books *for*. They are also who I write *about*. And Kitten of course, is a child. She is myopic. She is curious. She is persistent. She wants and wants and wants. She makes mistakes. She misunderstands. She gets hurt. She is confused. She is scared. She is also a symbol, a symbol that says: childhood is anything but easy.

Another first. This time, mine. My first trip to New York City. I was Kitten, and Greenwillow Books was the moon.

It was twenty-five years ago next month that I, at age nineteen, flew from Wisconsin to New York in search of a publisher. I was armed with a map of Manhattan (photocopied from a book at my local library), three portfolios filled with what I thought was my best artwork, a dummy for what would become my first picture book, and a list of my ten favorite publishers. Greenwillow Books was my first choice, my number one.

Just to make sure that I wouldn't be late, I arrived at 105 Madison Avenue, Greenwillow's then-home, about an hour before my morning appointment with Susan Hirschman.

I don't really remember Susan looking at my work, although I know she did. Mostly I remember talking about favorite books, many of which we agreed on. And I remember Susan asking, "How old are you? Where are you staying? Why did your mother let you come?" (I think she thought I was twelve.)

Then Susan asked where I was going for my next appointment, and when I told her, she said, "We'll just have to take you before they do. Let's call your mother and tell her we're going to publish your book."

The moon, a bowl of milk—call it what you will, I'd found it. And so I was taken

in by the Greenwillow family—my only publisher in twenty-five years. I walked about a foot above the ground for the rest of my stay in New York.

I suppose you could say that, like Kitten, I was naive. Remember, I was nineteen. I truly thought I would go to New York and come home with a contract for a book. That I did so is a miracle. And I will be grateful to Susan forever for that. Would I have the same confidence now, at age forty-four? I doubt it.



During my early Greenwillow years, I'd travel to New York once or twice a year, usually for a week. Susan would often find an empty office in which I'd write. Some of my early books were composed and polished in New York. If I happened to be in town when my art director, Ava Weiss, was going to press nearby, she'd take me with her. Ada Shearon was managing editor, and Libby Shub was senior editor. I learned so much from these four women about all aspects of American trade publishing for children. I was hungry and they were willing to share what they knew.

The Greenwillow staff changed very little over the years—one of the many things

I love about Greenwillow. It truly has a family feel to it. Phyllis Larkin joined Greenwillow during what I call my "middle Greenwillow years." And now, of course, Susan, Ava, and Phyllis have retired, and Virginia Duncan is the publisher and also my editor.

I think of *Kitten's First Full Moon* as a bridge book, a link from Greenwillow before to Greenwillow now. *Kitten* began with Susan and Ava, but by the time I finished it, I was working with Virginia and my new art director, Paul Zakris.

The influence of all four of them is surely present. The book wouldn't exist without Susan and Ava, and it wouldn't be the book it is without Virginia and Paul.

Books have many beginnings; sometimes they're difficult to pinpoint. But I know this: I've always been drawn to picture books for the youngest child. I love their simplicity and their poetic nature. When I became a parent, this attraction intensified, and so I tried my hand at creating board books. I also became interested in simple concept books and tried without success to write one. One failed attempt was all about circles—a ball, a bowl, a button, a plate, a marble.

One of the lines read: "The cat thought the moon was a bowl of milk." The book idea didn't work, but I liked this line and it stuck with me. Over time—several years—the line expanded and finally became the words for *Kitten's First Full Moon*.

As I was rereading my son's and daughter's scrapbooks to prepare this speech, I stumbled upon what I think might be another link to how *Kitten* began. The entry that made me pause was in my son's scrapbook, describing his first rainbow. This is what I wrote: "There was a huge rainstorm today . . . You watched from the window. Soon, the sun broke through the clouds and we all went out to look at a magnificent rainbow—your

first! It was a double rainbow—one arc curving over the other. I wonder what you must think of it—colors in the sky that aren't usually there."

Obviously, a rainbow is not the same as light reflected off the moon, but a few key elements are similar to those in the book: a very young child, a natural phenomenon, the sky. But most important and interesting is my comment at the end of the entry: "I wonder what you must think of it—colors in the sky that aren't usually there." It's this kind of musing that allows a writer to see things differently, to see things the way a child might—to see, perhaps, the moon as a bowl of milk.

From the start I pictured this book with black-and-white illustrations, bold sans serif type, a square trim size, and soft, creamy paper. I love to use color—even bright color—in most of my picture books, but for this book color seemed unnecessary. I thought that by keeping everything as simple and spare as possible, a better, tighter, more complete book would result. I liked the idea of having a white moon, a white cat, and a white bowl of milk surrounded by the black night.

When I draw, I usually use a crow-quill pen, which makes a rather thin line. This time I wanted a much thicker line, and I wanted the line to vary in thickness, so I drew with a brush—a technique I'd never used in any of my other books. This allowed me a freedom I'd not previously experienced while doing finished art. I'd been used to scratching away for hours making small marks. With a brush I could make broad strokes and long continuous lines. I could define shapes with a single motion.

The art was prepared using black gouache for the line and black and gray colored pencils. But the book was printed in four colors on a full-color press. This gave the illustrations a richness and depth they wouldn't have had if the book had been printed with black ink only.

Although the finished art is very dissimilar to hers, I thought of *Kitten's First Full Moon* as a sort of tribute to Clare Turlay Newberry all the while I worked on it.

The black-and-white illustrations of cats in her books, including *Mittens*, *Pandora*, and *Marshmallow*, are masterful. I've always admired them. And although she isn't given a name other than Kitten, I secretly think of my heroine as Clare.

I also admire the work of Jean Charlot. His illustrations for Margaret Wise Brown's *A Child's Good Night Book* and *Two Little Trains* are some of my favorites in any children's books. His line work is simple, direct, and, in my mind, perfect. I am struck by his ability to capture

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the essence of something beautifully, without one bit of excess. That's what I strove for in *Kitten*.

And, of course, I was thinking of the great Wanda Gág.

Here's another first. 1985. My first ALA. Coincidentally, the first ALA Annual Conference I attended was in Chicago, twenty years ago. My in-laws lived in the Chicago area, so Susan asked if my wife, Laura, and I would like to go to the Newbery-Caldecott Banquet. Laura and I sat at a table with librarians, most of whom were from Kansas, if I recall correctly. None were children's librarians. They were adult card catalogers (perhaps there's a new term now). I had published only four books at the time, each of which had sold about a hundred copies (half to my mother), and no one at the table had heard of me or my books. After the speeches were over and people were rising to leave, one of the women pulled a catalog card out of her purse and asked me to sign it. She had an open face and a kind smile. I did as she requested. And as we parted, she said, "Who knows, maybe one day you'll be up there winning a medal."

For making exactly that happen, my deepest heartfelt thanks to Betsy Hearne and the 2005 Caldecott committee. I

cannot adequately express how much this honor means to me.

Thanks, also, to my parents and siblings, who were there for my "firsts"; to my other family, the Dronzeks; to all my friends at HarperCollins; to everyone from my Greenwillow past; to everyone at Greenwillow present, especially Virginia; to Will and Clara; and to Laura, my first, last, and everything in between.

Thanks to the librarians and members of the American Library Association—all

of you who have understood and supported me and my books all these years. Ginny Moore Kruse and the late Gertrude Herman were there for me from the start. I had intended to name more names, but if I did, we'd be here until tomorrow. I thank you all from the bottom of my heart.

And, last and most, to Susan—you gave me my work life and so much more.

From "firsts" to last—one last story.

A young man who works in the art department at Greenwillow gave a copy of *Kitten's First Full Moon* to his two-year-old niece when the book was first published. I'm told that the little girl loves the book so much that, over time, she's licked a hole in the page that shows a triumphant Kitten lapping up milk after her journey.

I've rarely been paid so high a compliment. Except for tonight—another first for me, to have a book of mine honored with the Caldecott Medal. I feel as if I've come home to a bowl of milk as big as the moon.

And there really is only one thing more to say: "What a night!" 🐾