



## Printz Honor Speech

### Margo Lanagan

*Tender Morsels* took about 18 months to write, in total, but there had been a 10-year gap since my last full-length novel was published, and there were many, many times during that 10 years when I wondered if I'd ever manage a novel again. It was really only the fact that my agent Jill Grinberg, acting for Allen & Unwin, kind of leaked to US publishers that Allen & Unwin had contracted a novel from me and thus created a small bidding war, that made my terror of not completing a novel overcome my work avoidance tactics for long enough for me to get the job done.

By this stage (around October 2005) I'd written a novel-like thing, quite unrelated to *Tender Morsels*, that had tottered along for a while and then fallen over dead. When the US offers came in, I realised this thing was not going to work as a follow-up to *Black Juice* and *Red Spikes*, my short-story collections. It was not only pitched at slightly too young an audience, but was also quite incoherent. After I'd submitted the third draft to Allen & Unwin, my editors—and there were a gang of three of them—called me down from Sydney to Melbourne, took me into a private room, offered me coffee and cake, and gently asked me a number of questions about the book, the main one of which was: 'Margo, can you tell us what this book is actually *about*?'

And I couldn't tell them. At around the same time, *Black Juice* won both the Victorian Premier's Literary Award, and not one but *two* World Fantasy Awards. Which sounds like a wonderful thing, and of course *is* a wonderful thing, but all of a sudden my situation changed from just being me working away on my own with no-one much taking any notice of me, to me standing in the spotlight with this corpse-of-a-novel in my arms and an Audience Out There whispering, 'And what is she going to do next? When will there be a *proper* book?'

And then *Black Juice* won the Printz Honor. and then it was nominated for the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize, for a Nebula, and a Hugo, an International Horror Guild Award, a Theodore Sturgeon, a Tiptree, and two more premier's awards. Things went kind of nuts. I came home from New Orleans with my Printz plaque and my Mardi Gras beads, to a full-time technical writing contract and an obligation to complete—by no particular date, everyone was very careful to say,



but I could hear the distant sound of their toes tapping—some kind of novel that would meet with the approval of not only my mates at Allen & Unwin but new publishers in both the US and the UK, who had laid down more money for it than I think I'd made out of my whole writing career thus far.

So, no pressure.

I didn't know what to write a novel about. I didn't believe that I could do this thing; I didn't know where to start, and I had no sense of how to continue and finish it. So what did I do? I went Internet surfing.

Now, the Internet can be a terrible thing, wasting time that would be better spent writing, or communicating with your children, or sleeping, or sorting your sock drawer, but in this case it was my friend. It delivered up to me, from the keyboard of my actual friend Justine Larbalestier, via her blog, the following sage advice:

If you have no particular story to tell, then borrow one from someone else. This has worked pretty well for Shakespeare and pretty much every other great writer. The bible is good for plots, as are myths, fairy tales, legends, ballads, pop songs, and crappy movies that didn't quite work (rewrite them so they do).

If you're worried about your plot being a bit too recognisable, set it somewhere completely different, and change the sex, age, race, ethnicity and religion of all the characters. You can further cunningly disguise it by mashing two or three plots together. It's about time someone wrote *Romeo & Juliet* plus *The Hustler* plus *The Ramayana*.

I'm not going to tell you what your novel should be about except to say that it must not be about a first-time novelist working in a coffee shop. Also stay away from unicorns, dragons, butterflies and washed-up alcoholic salesman (though possibly combining all four might work).

I thought, this is something I could do. I went to the Brothers Grimm and kicked around a few stories, and read a few that I hadn't read before, including 'Snow White and Rose Red'. There were bears in this story, that had once been princes; there was an exceptionally unpleasant dwarf; there were a couple of irritating nice-as-pie girls, there was a saintly mother; there was treasure. It had lots of good things in it that I could use, but it didn't particularly jump out and announce itself among the others as 'your next novel, Margo'. For one thing, it didn't make



any sense. There wasn't any reason why the prince should have been cursed by the dwarf, for instance, and turned into a bear. But it did raise my feminist hackles, at least; raised hackles are always a good starting point for a story.

Then technology intervened again—this time, television programming. I happened upon a documentary about a town called Plats-de-Mollo in the Pyrenees, where, every spring, a ritual is performed that is pretty much as described in *Tender Morsels*, where the young men are dressed up in bearskins and smeared with oil and soot, and they rampage around the town trying to kiss and mess up the girls and women. And the idea of combining *this* men-who-are-bears tale with the Grimms' bear and dwarves etc. was the thing that flipped the switch for me. I couldn't quite see how I would do it, but I wanted to see it done, and it looked as if it might be quite a complex, novel-sized task.

To reduce my terror at the prospect at taking on that task, I made a few rules for myself. To begin with, I told myself, you must not admit you're writing a novel. You don't believe you can write a novel, but you know you can write short stories; therefore, pretend that these are short stories. Each of these short stories must at some point, any point, doesn't matter where, veer towards the Grimms' story and touch some part of it, but it can immediately veer away again and become something in its own right if it wants to.

Which is how Davit Ramstrong's story happened, and poor Bullock Oxman's, and Collaby Dought's—and for a while Teasel Wurledge had his own story, too, and a very nasty story it was, until I decided to tell his parts from Branza and Liga's points of view. There was a whole section where a god-man performed an exorcism in the twitten there, behind the Eelsisters' convent; quite a lot of these little stories either fell away from the final version or were smoothed into it—although the odd reviewer has complained that she can still see them. 'Why are we following all these secondary characters' story arcs?' she whinges. We're following them because *I* like them and it's *my* book.

The degree of double and triple-thinking that went into the writing of this book! Although I knew that I *must* end up with a publishable novel—there was no choice about that—I had to pretend to myself that there was no pressure on, that the whole thing was a kind of wonderful, fun exploration, that anything went, and that anything, once written, was open for deletion, renegotiation, rewriting for tone or changing the point of view. For any plot issue that presented itself, I



had to choose the solution that seemed at the time the most pleasurable to pursue, the one that would multiply my choices rather than rein them in, the one that would allow the story to progress in the weirdest, wildest and most interesting way.

By these methods, at the rate of about 10 pages a week for 12 weeks, I grew what would end up gluing itself into about the first third of the novel, up to the point where Urdda finds her way back to the real world. Then I asked my novel-writing workshop, wRiters on the Rise: ‘Guys, is this thing a novel?’ and they said, ‘Not yet, not quite, but *for God’s sake what happens next?*’ So I figured I was onto something.

And in 2007, thanks to the generosity of both my 3 publishers and a fellowship from the Literature Board of the Australia Council for the Arts, I was able to buy the time to keep up with the work and fun and self-delusion that was necessary to push this herd of stories right to the end, and rewrite it twice thereafter so that it became the novel I am delighted to be celebrating with you today.

To win a second Printz Honor is stunning; I can’t quite believe I’ve done it. To be in the running for a second Printz Honor, however, is a nerve-wracking experience. The first one, you see, came out of the blue; I barely knew what the Printz Honor *was* when the phone call came, back in 2006. This one—well, let me tell you. Steven and I were away from home; I’d just spent the week tutoring at the Clarion South workshop and then he’d flown up to Brisbane to join me and we were staying with our friends Lynne and John. We’d left our 2 sons behind; I’d warned the younger one, Harry, who was on school holidays, that he might possibly receive an overseas phone call on the Monday morning, but I didn’t make a big point of it—I didn’t tell our older boy Jack, because he wasn’t home at the time and I wasn’t sure he would be home that morning. And I didn’t want to look silly if the call didn’t come.

Anyway, the night before, we went to another awards night, the Aurealis Awards, which are one of the two major Australian speculative fiction awards, the others being the Ditmars. I was up for 2 prizes, and I was so confident of getting at least one of them that I invited Lynne and John along to share the glory. This ensured that neither came my way—how embarrassing. And I thought, very sensibly, ‘You must *not* get your hopes up about the Printz, Margo. Don’t even tell Lynne and



John that you're up for it. This could end up being an entirely prize-free weekend. You've got to be prepared for that.'

So I waited. I pretended I wasn't waiting, and I waited. I had my phone on; it didn't ring. I had my computer on; nobody was blogging those announcements live, that I could find. I did not get my hopes up; it was easier not to get my hopes up after the Aurealis night. But this being a writer, I decided, was just an ongoing exercise in humiliation. Next time I was up for a prize I should head out bush, out of phone and Internet range, out of range of caring about this sort of thing.

Finally I rang home. 'Hey, Mum,' said Jack. 'Oh, I thought Harry would answer,' I said. 'Harry's asleep,' he said. 'And I'm trying to sleep in, but I've been bothered by Americans all morning. First this woman rang, from *Denver Colorado*. She wants you to call her back—let me find the note I wrote. And then Nancy—is it Nancy, your publisher?—she rang.' 'Did they say what it was about?' 'No, here's the number.' And he proceeded to give me a number, but he wasn't quite sure if that was a 4 or a 9 that he'd written down.

So Steven fetched me the code for Denver Colorado. I rang the 4 number, which didn't exist. So I rang the 9 number, which put me on to voicemail, and I left a message. Then I rang Nancy, and she was able to put me out of my misery. There was a lot of pingponging of phone messages between me and Mary Arnold after that—we never actually managed to talk to each other until this weekend! But I did get the message, one way and another.

So, it is basically with great relief that I stand before you today, having finished a novel when I was very uncertain that I could, and having seen it recognised in this wonderful way. I'm doubly thrilled that my countrywoman Melina has taken out the award itself, and it makes me glow with awe and pride to be, as the Olympic Games commentators say, 'podiuming' with Melina as well as with Tobin Anderson, Emily Lockhart and Terry Pratchett. I'm just delighted that the Printz Committee has included my weird, distorted fable among the best of 2008, and I thank them for this honour from the bottom of my heart.