Hello, hello, hello!

Members of the 2019 Caldecott committee, my agents, my family, fellow authors and illustrators, publishers, librarians, beacons of the community—

As the 2019 Caldecott committee gathered around a phone, early on a cold January morning in Seattle, I was having dinner in sultry Myanmar, trying not to picture them. But I couldn't help it. I liked the look of them all, in my mind, about to deliver news to change a life. And then, like some kind of dream, my phone buzzed.

My phone. This was not supposed to happen.

From seven thousand miles away I heard the crackling committee and the word medal, and the first thing out of my mouth was . . .

Oh no.

No.

No.

Followed by, Are you sure about this?

I hate to tell you, but I tried to give the thing back.

As the news of this second Caldecott sank in, I kept thinking, No one deserves this much good fortune. And then I remembered how I felt when my second child, Eggy, was born. I didn't, for a minute, offer to give my son back. His arrival was every bit as miraculous and joyful and distinct as it had been with my first child, Olive. (Later, when Eggy was three, and I was trying to sound professional on the phone with my first editor, Victoria Rock, and Eggy was under my desk in a cardboard-box bumper car, gleefully ramming my shins, then, for a split second, I considered giving him back. But only for a second.)

I also realized with a thud how rude it was to question the judgment of the committee. Mary Fellows and

Sophie Blackall received the 2019 (Randolph) Caldecott Medal for Hello Lighthouse (Little, Brown/Hachette). She delivered her acceptance remarks at the Newbery-Caldecott-Legacy Banquet on Sunday, June 23, 2019, during the American Library Association Annual Conference.

Sophie Blackall is an Australian-born illustrator based in New York. She has illustrated over 45 books for children, including Finding Winnie: The True Story of the World’s Most Famous Bear, the 2016 Caldecott Medal winner, the bestselling Ivy and Bean series, and Ruby’s Wish, which won the Ezra Jack Keats Award. Her first book for adults, Missed Connections: Love, Lost & Found, was named one of the Best Art and Design Books of 2011 on brainpickings.org. Blackall lives in Brooklyn with her family.
the fourteen other committee members spent an entire year poring over picture books. And what a year for picture books! And they chose Hello Lighthouse for the medal. For which I am, after my initial shock, profoundly grateful.

It’s especially wonderful to be in Washington, DC, tonight, to cheer on Meg Medina, to celebrate the legacy of Walter Dean Myers, and to be honored alongside Brian Lies, Grace Lin, Juana Martinez-Neal, and Oge Mora.

And yet, when someone says, “Hey! I hear you won the Caldecott!” I wince in response, as though they’ve said, “Hey! I hear you accidentally killed a horse!”

Australians, as a rule, don’t like showoffs. When I told my mother that I had won the 2016 Caldecott for Finding Winnie, she chastised me for bragging.

Australians are trained to be self-deprecating. We save others the trouble of discovering our flaws by presenting them with a list when we meet. Especially if we are women.

In 2013, when Susan Rich wrote to me with the manuscript of Finding Winnie, before accepting I asked whether she should perhaps consider Brian Floca? Because Brian is really good at drawing trains.

This year, the Caldecott attention made me uncomfortable. I was acutely aware of the many illustrators who made beautiful, award-deserving books in 2018, and I felt their disappointment. Also, I had it on good authority from Chris Raschka that nobody likes a two-time medalist. Although he seems pretty likable. And maybe I was imagining it, but when people said, “Your cup runneth over,” it sounded the tiniest bit like a reprimand. As though I had chosen an inappropriately sized cup, and now I was making a mess on the floor.

So I decided to look to my forebears to see how previous medalists managed their good fortune.

I went right back to the beginning, to 1938 when the first Caldecott Medal was awarded, and proceeded to read all eighty-one speeches. (Well, I couldn’t read Stephen Gammell’s, the infamous speech that was never written down, so eighty.)

Many winners wished they could skip the speech, or draw it instead, but besides that most were surprised, pleased, and grateful.

A few clearly thought it was long overdue . . .

And then there were the women.

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Hello, Dorothy P. Lathrop. Virginia Lee Burton. Elizabeth Orton Jones.

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Eighteen solo women have won the Caldecott Medal in eighty-two years. I was very interested in the women; and especially the working mothers; and particularly the working, single mothers; and most-particularly the working, single mother who won two Caldecotts, my hero, Barbara Cooney. But it was Marcia Brown, who writes so eloquently in each of her three acceptance speeches about the challenge and responsibility, peril and heartache, of artistic process, who stopped me in my tracks. She writes about the artist in the third person, using the pronoun “he.”
The Caldecott women had a way of distancing themselves from their achievements, which I found heart-breaking—and familiar.

Most lighthouse keepers were men. But some of them were women. Women in lighthouses did all the same work as the men. They tended the light, rescued sailors in storms, and scraped ice off the lantern-room windows. They also cleaned and cooked and bore children.

Most Caldecott winners are men. But some of them are women. Women who make books do all the same work as the men. They delve deep into research, they paint through the night, and they wrestle with revisions. They also clean and cook and bear children.

And remember birthdays and booster shots, and to change the oil in the car.

** Hello, Margot Zemach. Trina Schart Hyman. Mary Azarian. **

In a Q&A at a recent school visit, a student raised her hand and said, “I have something to say and a question: I didn’t know girls could be authors; and also, how does it feel to hold a medal in each of your own hands?” I thought of Marcia Brown and I looked this child in the eye without wincing and said, “Girls Can Do Anything. And I’ll let you know in June.”

I’m crushed when I meet girls who are unaware of their potential or when I’m told I’m the first female picture-book author or illustrator to visit a school. We are in a golden age for picture books, and many of them are being made by women.

** Hello, Yuyi Morales. Melissa Sweet. Cece Bell. **

In the past twenty years, only three women have won Caldecott Medals. And men have won nearly two-thirds of the Honors. This year the Caldecott numbers are different. Also, this year there are 131 women serving in Congress. This past year, even though Wikipedia hadn’t previously thought her noteworthy enough for an entry, a woman, Donna Strickland, won the Nobel Prize in Physics. There is change in the air. It is time for women to allow themselves pride in their achievements, to talk about their work in the first person—and use whichever pronoun is right for them.


Hello Lighthouse is dedicated to Susan Rich—editor, friend, beacon of light. Before I had drawn a single line of Finding Winnie, I was already talking to Susan about Hello Lighthouse. I thought, There is something special about this woman. She is brilliant and wise and wickedly funny—she illuminates everything in her path. She makes me a better writer, a better illustrator, and a better person. I hope we get to work together until our hands and minds and hearts give out.

While it seemed at times as though we were in our own world, discussing small things (like fog bell mechanisms and lighthouse tender schedules) and big things (like love and
loss and hope and change), no two people are an island. In our case we had the extraordinary design and production team at Little, Brown behind us, supporting our uncommon trim size, gatefold, case cover; finding the perfect combination of paper and ink to achieve stormy-dark skies and barely there fog; and working tirelessly in pursuit of the finest stamping of gold foil. I thank everyone at Little, Brown, including Dave Caplan, Nicole Brown, Erika Schwartz, and Ruiko Tokunaga; also Nikki Garcia, Kristina Pisciotta, Andrea Spooner, Megan Tingley, and Victoria Stapleton, who loves me in spite of everything.

** Hello, Ekua Holmes. Carson Ellis. Michaela Goade. **

Hello, Barbara McClintock. Marla Frazee. LeUyen Pham.

** If it gets to 1:00 p.m. in the studio I share in Brooklyn and nobody has yet mentioned food, Rowboat Watkins will send us all a text in caps, WHY DOES EVERYONE HATE LUNCH? You might, at this point in the speech, be thinking, WHY DOES BLACKALL HATE MEN? **

Oh, I really don't. I have shared my waking, working hours of the past eight years with some of the very best of them. Our studio lineup has changed; the way I feel about them has not: Brian Floca, Johnny Marciano, Sergio Ruzzier, John Rocco, Eddie Hemingway, Rowboat Watkins, Doug Salati. Old and new, I love them dearly. They are kind and funny and insanely talented. They weighed in on every page of Hello Lighthouse, offering wisecracks and pithy witticisms; thoughtful, generous, constructive criticism; loyal camaraderie; whiskey and cake.

A lighthouse is built on the same dangerous rocks it is designed to warn against. Half of the building is done under water. A sudden storm can wash all efforts to sea. Making a picture book is not dissimilar. It's hard, hard work to create a world from a blank page. It is much harder to build something than it is to tear it down. But with Hello Lighthouse, once I realized that the lighthouse was constant and steadfast and must remain in place on the spread while weather and seasons and time passed it by, and when I realized that the lives lived within the round rooms of a tower were lives like any others, filled with love and friendship, birth and death, grief and joy in expanding circles, then I entered a kind of painting trance, transported to a remote island in the middle of an imaginary sea. Outside, in 2017, post-election, a storm was raging, and I was more grateful than ever for beacons.

** Hello, Michelle Obama. Carla Hayden. Jacqueline Woodson. **

Most Caldecott medalists either set out to make books for children, like Virginia Lee Burton, or they make books and other people say they're for children, like Maurice Sendak. I make books for children. I draw a sad fish dinner to make them gag, a wild wind to make them shudder, and a room so cozy they can imagine pulling up the quilt and falling asleep to the sound of crashing waves. I think about the children who might read this book, but also the children who probably won't. The twelve thousand eager children who get bused in to the Virginia Children's Book Festival in a county where one in five adults can't read. The children I met in Congo who are hoping the measles virus doesn't pass through their village before the vaccine reaches them, and the young people I hope to work with in Nepal who, with astounding courage and creativity, are protesting being forced into marriage, some of them at the age of five.

With any book, the very first children I think of are my own, because I couldn't make books without them. There were many years when Olive and Eggy and I were on our own. Like Barbara Cooney, I worked on books at the kitchen table while my children did their homework, and I carried on late into the night after they slept. They were understanding and supportive, thoughtful and encouraging, wise beyond their years and entertaining beyond belief. Also like Barbara Cooney, I have known the joy of falling in love a second time and expanding my family. Olive and Eggy and Jack and Bea have grown up together, into the finest young people I know. I have spent long nights in the studio and long days on the road, but I am never happier than when we are sitting around the kitchen table together.

As for my partner, Ed, he tends the light and winds the clockwork and is everywhere all at once. He cooks and cleans and picks up my laundry. He, who first told me I could write, is the best writer I know. All the words in the world are not enough to describe how wonderful he is and how lucky I am. Luckily, he knows all the words.

I am grateful to Little, Brown for making it possible for my family to be here tonight.
It took reading the speeches of my forebears—artists, immigrants, soldiers, parents, teachers, men, and women—to figure out what the Caldecott really means to me. Our work as bookmakers, and our work as women, is built upon the foundation of those who came before. It was built on sharp rocks, partly underwater; but without it, we cannot reach the height we need to beam a light into the dark. Until we look back, we can't see forward.

With this second award, I can look forward. I can lend my ears and voice and hands to help advocate for children in Virginia and elsewhere who don't have books, for children in Congo and elsewhere who don't have access to vaccines, for children the world over who are robbed of their childhood.

As always, I will look to beacons to guide me.

* * *

A parent told me she and her child were talking about the ending of Hello Lighthouse. Did you notice all the circles? the parent asked. It's like everything goes around, seasons and time, and now they're looking back at the lighthouse and that part of their life is over, and they'll always remember it, but it's sad, don't you think? And the child said, Not really, because after they finish saying hello to the lighthouse, which is also goodbye, they're going to close the door and climb the stairs and also, behind their house is the rest of the world.

Kids are smart.

Girls can do anything.

We can all be beacons.

In her final Caldecott acceptance speech in 1983, Marcia Brown said, I have attended several of these occasions—some up here, some down there. Wherever one is, one cannot help but feel on this night a sense of celebration and pride that we are all somehow one in work very much worth doing.

On the fanciest dais of the grandest room in the Marriott Marquis stands a woman, happy and grateful for the honor you have given her, proud to be one of you in work very much worth doing.

Thank you.

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