



**Kwame Alexander** received the 2015 (John) Newbery Medal for *The Crossover* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt). His acceptance remarks were delivered at the Newbery-Caldecott-Wilder Banquet on Sunday, June 28, 2015, during the American Library Association Annual Conference.

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



# Newbery

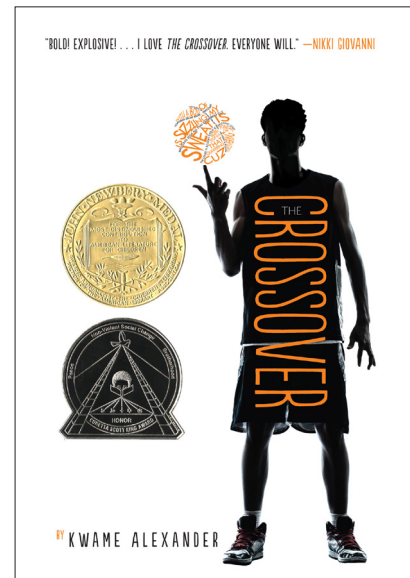
## MEDAL ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

"I believe there's a calling for all of us. I know that every human being has value and purpose. The real work of our lives is to become aware. And awakened. To answer the call." -Oprah Winfrey

Two hours after being awakened by the Call, I get another call, from a reporter. She asks, "How did you find poetry?" Let me go on record as stating that Newbery winners should not be required to answer questions, especially on record, during the two-week period after receiving the greatest and most miraculous news of their writerly lives. This haze, this Newbery trance, if you will, is not kind to clarity and conciseness. I tell her:

I think poetry found me. I think it circled above, for years, until I was ready, and then it swooped down, grabbed me by the arms, lifted me up, and I've been soaring ever since. Being honored in this manner, receiving the 2015 John Newbery Award for the most distinguished contribution to American literature for children, is other-worldly.

"What do you mean?" she continues. And, of course, I have no idea what I mean.



So I tell her to call me later, after I've gathered my thoughts. "When?" she asks. April, I offer, half-jokingly. My wife suggests that I meditate, seek serenity, calmly embrace this incredible moment, and then write about it. So, I do:

I get the call at 7:16 a.m., and I can't speak, which is ironic for a poet. I am wordbound. Mazy, even. Lost. And found. Am I ready? Of course. Am I prepared? No. Who is ever prepared for the big sea? It is one thing for a boy to tell you he has never read a book until yours. It is another different kind of thing

Kwame Alexander is a poet and author of 18 books, including *Acoustic Rooster* and *His Barnyard Band* and *He Said, She Said*. He is founder of Book-in-a-Day, a student-run publishing program that has created more than 3,000 student authors; and LEAP for Ghana, an international literacy project that builds libraries, trains teachers, and empowers children through literature. He visits schools and libraries, has owned several publishing companies, written for stage and television, and taught high school. In 2015, Alexander will serve as Bank Street College of Education's first writer-in-residence.

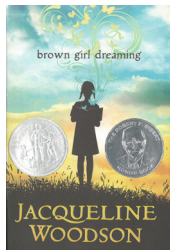
**FUN FACT:** In a January 30, 2014, YouTube video on why he thinks librarians will like *The Crossover*, Kwame said, "Over the years, librarians, I've checked out a lot of your books, so it seems only fair that you'll check out mine! Right?"



## 2015 NEWBERY HONOR BOOKS



***El Deafo.***  
Bell, Cece.  
Amulet Books/ABRAMS



***Brown Girl Dreaming.***  
Woodson, Jacqueline.  
Paulsen Books/Penguin

# Newbery

## MEDAL ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

for that book to be awarded a Newbery Medal and a Coretta Scott King Honor. On the same day. In the same beautiful world. This community of children's literature is a Harlem Renaissance for me. I say, Let the rent parties commence. We shall dream a new world, and toast the children we aim to inspire who are our reward. I leave you with the words of the six-year-old who woke up this morning inquiring about the commotion and dancing coming from her parents' room and, upon being told the grand news, said, "YAYYYY, Daddy. Can you go make my French toast now?"

I send this testimony to the reporter, who kindly thanks me but, alas, has already turned in her story. I decide to post it online for the world to see. Hundreds of librarians, friends, and fans offer their well-wishes in response:

Lynne White, School Librarian:  
This post brought a tear to my eye. The Newbery award is great... but readers you will change and inspire...this will be even greater.  
#hugs #highfives #majorfistpumps  
#ThisCommitteeGotItRight

Betty Bouton, School Librarian: I've never seen boys, reluctant readers, fight over a book...*The Crossover* is truly something special.

Teresa Saxton Bunner, Reading Specialist: I'm stopping by Krispy Kreme on the way home so we can toast you at our house tonight.

Lisa DiSarro, Director of School and Library Marketing, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: Kwame, I love this. I love how you are inviting your readers into this part of your

journey, but please don't write so much of this kind of thing that you have nothing good left to put in your actual speech.

And, my favorite:

Anonymous, Not a Librarian: Congratulations, Kwame, I guess I will have to read it now.

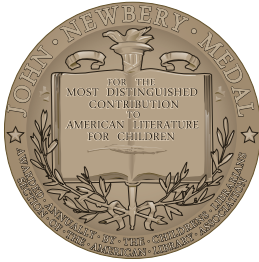
Actually, this is my favorite:

Katherine Paterson, Author:  
Kwame, welcome to the club.

A friend of mine calls, cackling with joy. "Powerful words, man. Your speech is going to rock!" he says, then adds, "I heard *they* send you to write the Speech at a destination of your choice. Anyplace you want." His laughter builds. It's contagious. "No way," I answer. "Are you serious?" Oh, the places I could go... Tuscany...Bali...Or maybe even a return to Bahia. "Perhaps," my wife says, "they only send you somewhere domestic." That's fine. Miami. Sedona. *Hawaii*. Over a celebratory dinner a week later, I recount these mind-boggling conversations to my editor...my editor, who, though she has quite the pulchritudinous grin, rarely laughs out loud. "Get this, Margaret," I say with excitement. "*They* send me to Any. Place. I. Want." She laughs. A lot. And then, still laughing, asks, "Kwame, who is *they*?" This, of course, tells me that *they* are not *her*.

ALSC? The committee? Previous Newbery winners? Is there a Speech and Spa Club Getaway Fund that Curtis and Applegate and Gantos and Naylor all contribute to? Are they them?

I end up in Key West. As it turns out, *they* is me.



# Newbery

## MEDAL ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

In between Ping-Pong and writing and parasailing, I check out the Mel Fisher Maritime Museum. Mel Fisher, the treasure hunter. Mel Fisher, who gave up more than ten years of his life, of his family's life, in search of a 1622 shipwrecked Spanish vessel called *Nuestra Señora de Atocha*, never knowing if it'd be found, yet each day claiming, "Today's the day," until July 20, 1985, when it *was* the day, and he found it. And, it had gold on it. Lots of it. So much that his find became known as "The Atocha Mother Lode." Perseverance, persistence, patience. I can relate to that. Like Mel Fisher, each word, each poem, each writing day has come with sacrifice and hope. Today's the day, I would claim while immersed in this novel. About Basketball. And Boys. In Verse. Mel Fisher immersed himself in a sea of possibility, crossed over miles and miles of ocean floor searching for a treasure, sacrificed ten years, and the reward was a discovery of 450 million dollars worth of gold. After six years of writing and rewriting, twenty plus rejections, and countless hours of self-doubt, I too discovered gold. My very own mother lode: *The Crossover*.

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The *Crossover* is, first and foremost, a novel about fathers and sons. About love. About family. It is not about my family, yet much of the energy that moves through each page of poetry comes from my own familial experiences. Each day, as I sat down to write, with straight-ahead jazz as my muse—in the Herdon (VA) public library, the Chesapeake (VA) public library, Panera Bread, the little coffee shop at the top of the hill in Ortimino, a little town in Tuscany—I'd begin my work by reminiscing about my childhood. The loving and attentive way my mother, the teacher, helped us navigate the world—friendships, homework, love; the strident way my father, the academic, taught us to think for

ourselves—math, lawn maintenance, basketball; the genius way they showed us how to dream big. Each morning I spent writing *The Crossover* began with remembering my mother's smile. And my father's glower. At some point in his life, I was sure my father had been a cool, likable guy, maybe when he was a tennis star in high school, maybe when he was a basketball star in the Air Force—*The Big Al*, they used to call him. But all that was behind him. Behind us. My mother often asks why I write so many poems about my father and never poetry about her. It's because my mother was "A Kiss to Build a Dream On," and as any songwriter, comedian, or poet will tell you, we write about the people and things that trouble us. My father gave us "The Weary Blues."

A few months into writing the first draft, I'm sitting in the café, listening to a jazz mix, brainstorming nicknames for the main character, when a song that sounds very similar to "Rikki Don't Lose That Number" comes on. But, after the opening notes and bass line, no vocals come in. And the song lasts eighteen minutes. Turns out, it's not Steely Dan but rather a piece called "Song for My Father," played live in Denmark in 1968 (the year I was born) by a pianist named Horace Silver. I immediately start listening to all of Silver's albums, become captivated, and get absolutely no writing done. However, something pretty incredible happens. I remember my first encounter with jazz.

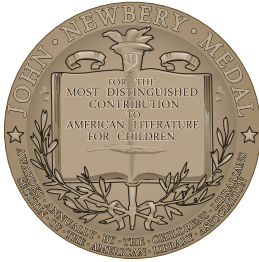
I'm in the attic. Meddling. That's what my grandmother used to say. "That boy's always meddling." I liked looking for stuff. Coins, letters, pictures, treasures. Searching and finding was a great way to spend a summer afternoon, and my parents' attic, filled with undiscovered possessions, provided the perfect hunt. So, I'm crawling around the attic, for what's maybe the third time in a month, when I see a box of records. I open the box, pull out some

of the LPs, read the liner notes: Sarah Vaughan's *Swingin' Easy*, Dave Brubeck's *Take Five*, Duke Ellington's *Such Sweet Thunder*, Miles Davis's *Sketches of Spain*, Billie Holiday's *Body and Soul*. I bring the box downstairs to the living room and play each on our record player. I must have listened to Nancy Wilson and Cannonball Adderley for three straight hours. I danced around the living room, in awe, inspired, in love. At the top of each record, stenciled, was the name of the owner of the records: *Property of The Big Al*. That is the moment I think I fell in love with my father. Any man who listened to John Coltrane's *A Love Supreme* couldn't be all bad. Had to be cool.

*The Crossover* is a song for my father. Yes, it moves and grooves on the court with the rhythm of verse. But it is first and foremost about family.

Thank you, Mom and Dad, for introducing me to the song and dance of words and visual melody. Thank you to my wife, Stephanie. Happiness is you loving me, is you watching me dance and never leaving me on the floor alone. Nikki Giovanni, thank you for teaching me how to dance properly, for letting me find my own groove, and cheering me on. Thank you to the members of the 2015 John Newbery Award Selection committee, under the chairmanship of Randall Enos, for giving me a brand-new song, for changing my life. To Margaret Raymo, my editor, my partner on this journey under the stars, my Polaris, my bright and shining Yes in a sea of No. I am forever grateful.

Huge thanks to the American Library Association, the Association for Library Service to Children, Deborah Warren of East West Literary, Rubin Pfeffer of Rubin Pfeffer Content, Karen Walsh, Lisa DiSarro, and the entire Houghton Mifflin Harcourt team.



# Newbery

## MEDAL ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

To my firstborn, Nandi, whom I met for the first time in a dream in 1989, and who continues to show me the value of living with purpose. Thank you, my dear.

Finally, to Samayah, my darling six-and-a-half-year-old, who says that her favorite book is *The Crossover*, though I won't let her finish it yet. Thank you for waking me up one morning and asking me the question that would inspire this speech: "How do you win the Newbery?"

First,  
Use your words.

1971. Age 3. New York City.

Get your first dose of poetry under a red maple in Prospect Park...*And the Sun God Said: That's Hip*...Ernest Gregg. *Some of the Days of Everett Anderson*...Lucille Clifton. *Fox in Socks*...Dr. Seuss...Listen and watch your mother make all these words dance off the page and into your imagination. When your sister Sia comes into the world, introduce her to poetry. Model read-alouds for her like you're the parent enrolled in Early Childhood Education at Teacher's College. Take her *Uptown*, so she can meet *Stevie*. John Steptoe. Learn Words. Love Words. Become so immersed in words that one day, at Riverside Day Care, when you've finished building your magical castle of blocks that house the ideas galloping through your mind, and your classmates knock them down because playtime is over, protest, defend yourself with the only weapons you've been given: words. *Hey, man, that's not hip. Those were my blocks that you flipped. Lest you want a quick payback, come and fix my quick-block stack.* When your mother comes to pick you up that day, listen to the teacher tell her, "Your son intimidates the other children with the things he says. He is a little arrogant." Watch your mother answer with a smile, "Yes, he is. We teach him to use his words, thank you."

1975. Age 6. Fayetteville, NC.

When your mother tells you and your sister, "You can name the new baby," go to the bookshelf, pull off your favorite book, *Spin a Soft Black Song*...Nikki Giovanni...turn to the first poem, your favorite poem, look at the first line, the one with the name that sounds like an African dance, sing it loud and proud: *come nataki dance with me*...Brag to your friends in school that you named your little sister *Nataki*...On the final day of Ms. Virgil's first-grade class, get excited when your mother signs you up for the 100 Books Contest. Not because your friends are reading one hundred books (they aren't). Not because you want to spend your summer in the air-conditioned library (there's AC and plenty of books at home). Not because you don't have other things to do (you do—baseball, swimming, tae kwon do at Fort Bragg). You read one hundred books because you want the "I Go to Walker Elementary and I Read 100 Books This Summer" T-shirt. You read one hundred books because, next to your family, the thing you love the most is reading.

"How do you win the Newbery?"

First,  
Become inspired.

1981. Age 12. Chesapeake, VA.

Your words don't mean what they used to mean  
They were once inspired, now they're just routine  
I'm afraid the masquerade is over.  
—Herb Magidson and Allie Wrubel

Aside from the stories that your mother makes up to keep you and your sisters smiling and laughing, the songs she sings in the kitchen while preparing breakfast, your love affair with words is over. You simply don't care that *The People Could*

*Fly*, and even though you kinda liked that book with the gold seal on it by Mildred Taylor, you wish your parents would hear your cry for *No. More. Books*. They just don't interest you anymore, especially since you're now being forced to read the boring educational tomes your father has written.

In your garage are Queens Farms milk crates. Stacked to the ceiling. Crammed with books. Spines out. The floor is covered in junk—receipts, letters, magazines, newspapers, clothes, dirt—so every few months your father asks you to spend your Saturday cleaning the garage. "Get out there and do it," he yells. Before you get started, you scan the crates of books: *The Three Musketeers*. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes*. *The Bluest Eye*. *A Married Guide to Different Positions*. Wait. What was that? Pull it off the shelf. Read the jacket copy. Make sure no one's looking. Open it. See the pictures. Read the captions. "Come in, it's dinnertime, Kwame," your mother hollers from the kitchen. "No, I'm good, Mom, I just want to, uh, finish the whole garage first." From that point on, volunteer to clean the garage. Monthly. Even offer to alphabetize the library. One day, happen upon a book about your hero: *The Greatest: My Own Story* by Muhammad Ali. Read all 415 arrogant, flashy, brilliant, exceptional pages of it. In one night. Like it. Talk to your dad about it. See him come alive in conversation about it. His face, a golden sun. Hear him talk, with verve, about the editor of the book, a woman named Toni Morrison. Remember seeing her name on a spine. Somewhere in the deep, damp darkness of displeasure that reading has become for you, make a connection with your father, rediscover a little piece of joy. Become inspired, again.

"How do you win the Newbery?"





# Newbery

## MEDAL ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

First,  
Be interesting.

1986. Age 16. Blacksburg, VA.

Every Thanksgiving your family has dinner at Hunan Park II on the Upper West Side. It is ritual. Leave Virginia, take 13 North, cross the Bay Bridge, pass through Salisbury, Dover, the turnpike, and be seated by six p.m. After a delicious meal of shrimp with lobster sauce, retreat to the Stouffer's Hotel in White Plains and rest, because tomorrow you'll be on your feet. All day. Working. On the Friday after each Thanksgiving, your father always hosts a book fair. There are workshops, lectures, and signings all day. You and your sisters sell the books. Your mother leads children's workshops. Your father, tense and stern, supervises. There is no volunteer orientation. It's on-the-job training. Either you learn how to properly display books, how to recommend books based on purchases, how to be charming, or you face the consequences: Fussing. Interrogation, or Worse...actually, there is never a Worse, because each of you knows your job. You stand in the booth (you are not allowed to sit) and become intimate with Heinemann's African Writers series, Virginia Hamilton's books, Walter Dean Myers, Alice Walker. At these expos you realize that, sure, books are mirrors to our world and windows to opportunity; but they are also much more: they are actual doors to a life of sustainability and success, to our lives, and each of us has a responsibility to walk through them. That's way too much responsibility for a teenage college student, and you want nothing of it. So, you rebel. You abandon literature again. Books aren't going to be responsible for your mortgage. Believe that. You're going to be a doctor. And then sophomore year comes, and two things happen:

- 1) You encounter a course called Organic Chemistry.
- 2) You sign up for an advanced poetry class

taught by the Princess of Black Poetry. How hard can it be? You're the king. You've been reading poetry since you could walk. Her poetry, in fact. She's a legend. A fiery poet. On campus, you're a legend (in your own mind) and a fiery student leader. Naturally, you challenge her every remark and critique in class. You get one A minus, a few Bs, mostly Cs. She calls you into her office. It's about time she apologizes for giving you a hard time, for not acknowledging your genius with words. You sit down across from her. She tells you that "night comes softly." You say, "Nikki, there's a storm coming." She says, "Be bold...but be eloquent." You say, "I am. Like Nancy Wilson singing 'The Masquerade Is Over.'" She smiles, like your grandmother used to do when you thought you said something profound and you hadn't. "Kwame, go listen to Etta James or Billie Holiday sing it," she says, standing up. "You are a good poet and I can teach you the tools, but I can't teach you to be interesting." After a silent stare, you stand up and storm out of her office. Arrogant. Unconvinced. Angry.

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1994. Age 24. Washington, D.C.

You meet a woman. You have no car, no money, no residence, just a small efficiency apartment that your best friend allows you to sleep on the floor of. This woman owns you, and you have nothing to offer. But poetry. You write her a poem a day. For a year.

*if i am your heart  
imagine me inside  
beating, pumping, loving*

When you tell your mother you plan to start an imprint and publish a collection of your love poems, she smiles, offers passionate encouragement. When you tell your father, he laughs, tells you that there is no money in poetry, that you should reconsider your career choice. Then he hands you a check,

an investment in the poetry imprint he doesn't think you should start. Now there are one thousand paperback copies of your collection of love poems on the floor of the efficiency apartment. You've spent a lifetime learning how to sell books, from working for your parents to reading *Publishers Weekly*, and that's when you remember an article you'd read on the garage floor: "Stephen King Embarks on a Twenty-City Tour to Promote *Cujo*." So, you put yourself on a thirty-city book tour. You start locally. At a poetry conference. You purchase a booth. Stand behind it. Charm customers. Recite poetry. Sell books. You are now the supervisor. A woman comes up, says, "Hey, Kwame," in a familiar voice. It is *her*. The Princess. You brace yourself for more verbal sparring. You're ready this time, 'cause you've been listening to Ella Fitzgerald. She picks up a copy of your first book, hands you ten dollars without even looking at the poems, smiles, says congratulations, then walks away, leaving you standing there "Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered."

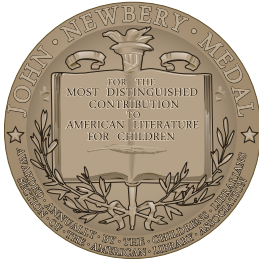
First your father thinks you shouldn't waste your time with poetry but gives you \$1,700 to publish poetry. Then Nikki Giovanni, the professor you thought didn't like your poetry, or you, buys a copy of your first book.

*I think that poetry found me. I think it swooped down, grabbed me by the arms, lifted me up...It was definitely a calling. There was a moment, when that first book came out, that I heard the call. That I knew poetry would be my life's work.*

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1996. Age 26. Los Angeles, CA.

I'm on the last leg of my first book tour. I'd been traveling to schools and libraries. Performing poetry at subway stops, in recreation centers, on college campuses. I'd even been booed off the stage at the



# Newbery

## MEDAL ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

Royal Shakespeare Theatre at Stratford-upon-Avon by a crowd of teenagers who were expecting a rapper, not a love poet. My final tour stop is a church in Los Angeles, where I am scheduled to autograph books following the service. Sitting in the back, in between listening to the pastor preach and the choir sing "Let the Circle Be Unbroken," I calculate the number of books I need to sell to get home, to pay the rent. It is somewhere in the neighborhood of forty-six copies. Now, the most I'd sold at any one place on the tour was maybe twenty-five books. But I am hopeful. *Today's the day*, I say to myself.

The pastor finishes the sermon and asks if I want to come up and share a poem. Of course I do, but I am a little hesitant because there are four hundred or so elegant-looking black women in church hats intently listening, and all I have are these sensual love poems. On a Sunday. In church. So I go up, and I'm staring out into this sea of beautiful faces, and all I can hear is: *Use your words... Be interesting...Be eloquent...Get out there and do it*. So I do:

*I have never been a slave  
Yet, I know I am whipped*

*I have never escaped underground  
Yet, the night knows my journey*

*I have never been to Canada  
Yet, I want to cross your border*

*If I were a poet in love  
I'd say that*

*with you  
I have found that new place*

*where romance  
is just a beginning*

*and freedom  
is our end.*

The silence is deafening. It's as if I'd been transported into a public library in the eighties. Did I go too far? Was I a little too arrogant? Was this blasphemy? Then it happens. The applause comes like a flight of bumblebees. Swift and sweet. They ask for another poem. I sell and sign 160 books, and put \$1,600 in cash in my sock because that's where my dad used to keep his money when we'd go to trade shows overseas, and in that moment, I know I'll be able to survive. I hear the call. I know that whatever the destination is, the journey will be full of wonder and possibility. In that moment, I commit to putting in the work, to saying yes, to learning how to live an authentic life so that I can have something worth writing about, so that one day when my daughter Samayah asks, "Dad, how do you win the Newbery?" I can tell her, confidently, "Beats me, darling. Ask your grandparents; they may have an idea."

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But here's what I do know: First and foremost, you have to answer the call:

*write a poem that dances...in the front of  
the room...wild and free...naked on*

*the floor...a gutsy poem...write a poem  
with tension...like some last-second shot*

*in the fourth quarter of a tied champion-  
ship game...let it cross over*

*time and place and circumstance...send the  
crowd into a frenzy...*

*write a poem that goes to school...a magna  
cum laude poem...*

*let it be momentous...learn something  
meaningful...share something*

*significant...write a poem that looks  
good...not homely or swaybacked...*

*give it posture, poise and profile...turn our  
heads when it*

*walks by...stomp our feet when it smiles...  
on some superficial  
level...make us want to marry it or at  
least...remember its name the*

*next morning...write a poem that works...  
write a poem that*

*works...has a job and does it...promptly...  
follows rules and responsibilities...*

*gets a raise or at least a head nod...and  
when it's not feeling*

*well...give it sense enough to call in sick...  
and not waste our time*

*with unmet expectations...write a poem  
that cooks...i mean it ain't got*

*to bake a cake...but at least know the ingre-  
dients...write a poem that*

*exercises...i mean cycling is not required...  
but steps never hurt*

*nobody...write a poem that runs for  
office...i mean it ain't got to*

*win...but at least campaign...get a clue  
poets...write a poem with an*

*inkling of suspicion...i mean it ain't got to  
solve a crime...but let it at*

*least offer us a tip...write a poem that is  
contagious...write a poem that is*

*contagious...let it inspire...make us...want  
to write a poem...about how brilliant...*

*and...beautiful...and breathtaking...and  
tragic...and interesting...life is.*



# *Newbery*

## MEDAL ACCEPTANCE SPEECH



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

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