



Margaret A. Edwards Speech 2009

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I tweeted last week that what I should really do for this speech was to say “thank you” 50,000 times. My dog and husband talked me out of it.

So I will just say a heartfelt “thank you” to Nichole Gilbert and Beth Yoke of YALSA, and to David Mowery and his splendid, and dare I say, rather intelligent and insightful committee. This honor has changed my life. And thanks, also, for the use of the color orange as your signature this year. It’s given me much to think about.

Our family has had a couple of rough months. My mother died a few weeks ago. She had moderate dementia as well as a host of other illnesses. The dementia allowed her to enjoy the Margaret A. Edwards Award in a marvelous way. In the last months of her life, she could remember that I was due to receive a great honor in the summer, but she couldn’t remember what it was. I explained to her, over and over again, what the Edwards Award was for and who gave it. As the magnitude of the honor became clear, her face would light up. She’d slap her knee and shout out “Hot spit and little bubbles!” with joy.

So thanks for letting my mother enjoy this award several dozen times.



We had planned for my husband to be here, but his father is quite ill. Instead, my special guest is my daughter Meredith, who was nine years old when I wrote *Speak*. She just graduated from college and starts her career as a middle school science teacher in the fall. Thank you for graduating, sweetheart, and for landing that awesome job, and thanks even more for joining me here.

After your lovely announcement was made in Denver, a librarian friend wrote to congratulate me about this gracious award. She told me, however, that her daughter was not happy about the MAE. She thought that giving me a lifetime achievement award now meant that I would stop writing.

I'd like to state something for the record: I'm just getting started.

I live outside a small town in Northern New York state. It's a rural community; very poor, filled with folk who know hardship and appreciate joy. When you meet someone new in town, the first question is usually, "You from around here?" Then you and your new friend each explain who your people are – parents, grandparents, cousins, in-laws – and pick apart the web of connections that tie you to each other. Because there are always connections.

So if I may have your indulgence, I'd like to tell you about my people, my stories, and the threads that connect us together.



My father came from a large extended family of men who worked in the stove-making factory and women who sewed shirt collars. The plan was for him to finish high school, get a job pumping gas, and one day, if he were really lucky, run the gas station. At 18, he was drafted. World War II was nearing its end. My father shipped first to England, and then to Germany where he was with the American troops who opened the concentration camp at Dachau. What he saw and experienced there had a profound effect on him, and subsequently on me. He is 82 years old now, and still wakes up screaming at night from the horror.

My father is a poet and a very good story teller. As a child I would often creep down the stairs after I'd been tucked into bed so I could eavesdrop. He always told the best stories when he thought I was sleeping.

My mother was a woodsman's daughter. Her father was a ranger in the Adirondacks who could move through the forest in absolute silence. My grandfather taught me about trees and how to be still enough to see and to hear the world around me.

Mom never understood my fascination with reading and writing, but she gets all the credit for letting me ignore my chores frequently so I could finish a chapter or an entire book. My mother was my first audience and I loved making her laugh.

Watching her face closely as I told her a story – often exaggerated for effect – I



picked up lessons about pacing, the correct level of detail, and ruthless editing that I use every day.

When I was in first grade, my father, who had been a village preacher, became a chaplain at Syracuse University. This meant a move south to the big city for us, and a new neighborhood and school for me.

My elementary school years in Syracuse were idyllic. We lived in a neighborhood bursting with kids who were loved by their parents. I was shy, except when it came to games of pretend or putting on plays. Then I turned into Miss Bossy-Pants, which was tolerated, barely, because I was good at making things up.

One of my favorite places as a child was the library of Edward Smith Elementary School. On the days the librarians stayed late, I was right there with them, usually on my belly between the stacks, deep, deep in a book like *The Borrowers* or *Little House on the Prairie*. Books opened the world to me, one story at a time.

It wasn't just fiction, either. I was just as happy to read non-fiction. One of the kindest things my parents ever did for me was to purchase, volume by volume, the version of the *World Book Encyclopedia* that was written for children. I think they paid for them with green stamps. I read every single article. I can still remember my astonishment when I read the entry about potatoes. Who knew there were so many varieties! And they came from Peru? This, of course, led me to look up Peru.



Once I got past third grade I was pretty much allowed to wander where I wanted, as long as I was home by the time the street lights came on. In the summers I'd take the thickest library books I had, some McIntosh apples, and a salt shaker. These I carried three blocks to Oakwood Cemetery. Once through the gates, and after checking to make sure there were no dreary mourners hanging about, I'd climb on top of one of the enormous ornate Victorian tombs and read and munch until the sun headed down.

I liked reading in the graveyard. It was quiet there.

My father's job made me aware of the bigger world at an early age. Social justice and peace were the foundations of his ministry. He marched on Washington for civil rights and against the Vietnam War. One of his proudest moments was when he found out that the FBI had tapped our phone. I grew up believing that everyone could make the world a better place, and was, in fact, called to do so by God.

There was no key to our front door. It was never locked. Our house was a haven for countless college students who would show up at all hours for a home-cooked meal and family atmosphere. One night, a group of students spray-painted a trail of footprints from the center of the quad, at the heart of the campus, to our front door. My mother thought it was a little showy. My father beamed.



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The college kids became my big brothers and sisters. They spoiled me rotten. They made sure I was an avid fan of the original Star Trek series and taught me to love rock and roll at a rather tender age. I was broken-hearted when I was not allowed to go to Woodstock.

My childhood was filled with shades of green and grey. We don't get much sunlight where I'm from. Most days are overcast, threatening rain, or a couple feet of snow. Winter is still my favorite season. I like it cold and dreary. Summers at home are vibrant and short. When I was a kid, we spent most of our summers in the woods, where I was free to explore, imagine, dream, and read.

Leaf by leaf, page by page I grew.

Orange was a rare color, compared to green and grey. My father always put an orange at the bottom of our Christmas stockings. When he was a boy during the Depression, his parents always saved up to buy he and his sisters a Christmas orange. It was the only one they saw, much less ate, every year. He said they would eat it like an apple, biting through the rind and chewing it along with the pulp.

For me, orange was creamsicles, pumpkin pie, candy corn, or the disgusting French dressing that I poured on my daily wedge of iceberg lettuce. Orange was also Syracuse University, which loomed large, one block away from my house. The kids on our street made extra money on Saturdays in the fall by allowing people who



came to town to watch Syracuse football games park in our driveways. My best friend, Margot, and I were creative entrepreneurs. We charged a little bit more than our competitors, but we gave bouquets of marigolds as an incentive.

“Burnt orange” was all the rage back then, often partnered with the slimy “avocado green.” The combination was atrocious. Stepping into my mother’s kitchen where those two colors battled on every surface guaranteed you’d lose your appetite.

The Russian artist Wassily Kandinsky was not forced to live through the horror of 1970’s interior decorating and so was fond of orange. He described it as “...red brought nearer to humanity by yellow.” It is an in-between color, liminal.

Orange presents a great color metaphor for teenagers. Orange is bold, vibrant, intrusive, creative, energetic, and loud. It is everything that can be both frustrating and endearing about teens.

My orange years were muddy. As I drifted from childhood into adolescence, my world disintegrated. My father had a wrenching falling out with the church administration and he left the ministry. This meant we had to leave our wonderful house, for it was a parsonage owned by the church. Daddy fell into a crippling depression and Mom had to find a way to support us and find us a new home and schools. In their confusion and pain, they kept family and friends at a distance.



All of a sudden we had moved into a cheap apartment in a town where I knew no one. My father spent most of his time in bed. My mother worked every hour under the sun. I was 13. I was lost.

If it hadn't been for the trauma of those years, I think I would only be known as a writer of historical fiction. I write historical fiction because I love our country, I am proud to be American, and I want the next generation to have stories that will help them understand who our people are and how we are connected.

I write YA fiction because after a wonderful childhood, my nuclear family had a nuclear meltdown. The fallout poisoned us for decades.

Orange is that sliver of a moment when the traffic light takes a breath between yellow Caution and red Stop. Orange is the flash of detonation before the impact of the shock wave.

I'd rather not drone on about the breakdown of my family or my painful teenage years. For one thing, any certified therapists or counselors in the room will present me with a bill when I walk out of here. More importantly, it doesn't matter.

This is something I repeat over and over to my readers; we have little control over the bad things that happen to us in life. That's one of the ugly truths of growing up.



But that ugliness can be balanced by grace, for **we have almost total control over how we react to the bad things that happen to us in life.**

If you choose to focus only on the fact that Life knocked you down, you will never figure out how to stand up, brush yourself off, and try again. If you stay on the ground and wallow in the dirt, you'll miss everything.

We are all scarred. Physical scar tissue is interesting; it is often stronger than surrounding tissue, but too much of it reduces flexibility. Scars don't stretch well.

The emotional scars I accumulated as a teenager did not bind me or turn my heart rigid. Why not? I was saved by Story.

The stories I heard around the campfire and when I was hiding on the stairs showed me where I came from. The books in my high school and public libraries showed me where I could go. Margaret A. Edwards wrote in her book, *The Fair Garden And The Swarm Of Beasts*, "books are literary atom bombs capable of destroying stupidity, cant, insularity, and prejudice – if they are read."

I read them. I drew strength from science fiction, from fantasy, from historical fiction. I read obsessively.... Everything except the books that were assigned in English class. Those stayed closed.



I knew I needed to get away from my parents' house so I spent my senior year abroad as a foreign exchange student. I knew I had to be educated, so I milked cows on a dairy farm, took out loans and put myself through college.

I kept choosing the paths that would take me up and away from the situations that had become so painful. I took control and made my own choices. I certainly wasn't planning on it, but somehow I became an author.

Any writer's work is usually their life seen through a distant, shadowed mirror.

Fever 1793, Catalyst, and Speak are evidence of this.

Fever 1793 is perhaps my most plot-driven book. It was written for one simple reason. I had never heard of the yellow fever epidemic of 1793 and I wanted to know more. Plus, I'm a sucker for gross medical stories.

I started researching the book in 1993, three years before I wrote *Speak*. Once I had the details of how the people of Philadelphia reacted to the epidemic, I saw the parallels between that public health disaster and the way Americans were reacting to the spread of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Both diseases brought out the best and worst in people. Both diseases were mysterious and frightening.

But it took me much longer than I had anticipated to write the darn thing. By the time the book was ready to submit, Americans had grown in their understanding of



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HIV/AIDS and were treating the victims of the disease with more compassion. This led to yet another revision (there were countless revisions for that book). It was for the best. The story stands on its own.

Mattie faces choices under pressure and often if caught between two bad choices, with no way of predicting the outcomes. She stumbles, unready, into the adult world. She emerges from the fires reborn and in control.

Most of the fan mail I get about *Fever 1793* is from readers who enjoy the historical setting, of the gory medical details, or who want to know if Mattie is going to wind up loving Nathaneal. My favorite letter came from a sixth grade girl in New Jersey. Her father was working in the Twin Towers on 9/11. He survived, but it was hours and hours before he could contact his family. This girl found comfort in Mattie's story because Mattie was the only person she knew who had lived through such an intense experience and come out OK.

Catalyst is, in many ways, a reflection on two paths I did not take as a teenager. Kate is the girl I think I would have become if my family hadn't imploded when I was in middle school. Teri is the girl I could have become (minus the abusive father) if I'd continued the destructive experiments I started in ninth grade.

In addition, *Catalyst* is my meditation on the frustrations of being a preacher's kid, and the temptation to get lost while running away. It also allowed me to play with



the notions of faith and myth, which is an ever-running conversation in the back of my skull.

My challenge to myself in writing *Catalyst* was to see if I could get inside a character whose skill sets and interests were as far removed as possible from what had been mine in high school. I passed Algebra with a 68. I passed Geometry, Trigonometry, and Chemistry each with a 66.

(Of all of the characters in all of my books, Teri Litch is the one I'd like to write about again. Shhhhh.....)

Speak started it all.

It's really interesting for me to talk to new writers who know oodles about the publishing world and have an MFA and a blog and a fifty year plan. I imagine it will work, for some of them. I stumbled into my writing career and into the writing of *Speak* with no plan at all. I suspect if I had developed a career plan before I wrote the book, I'd be back milking cows by now.

I wrote *Speak* twenty years after high school. That's how long it took me to find my voice. I was quite sure it would never be published. Who would want to read a strange little book about a girl who won't say anything?



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I was wrong. It turns out that the fears and demons that tormented me as a teen, are the same things that torment millions. That *Speak* has endured through a decade of rapid culture and technological change is testimony to the fact that our children don't feel like anyone is listening.

They need us.

They need you to rediscover that energy that drove you into this work. They need you to recommit to the principles you believe in; the freedom of information, the right of access to materials, tolerance for all worldviews, and compassion. They need you to fight for your share of the budget, for their share of floor space, and for the BBYA. They need your passion.

Sara Siebert, who was the president of YALSA the year I was born, was a teenage patron of the Enoch Pratt Library in Baltimore where she encountered Margaret Alexander Edwards. Ms. Edwards chased Sara around the library, books in her hand, to get the teen to read them. It worked.

Margaret A. Edwards wrote "We must feel that the job is bigger than we are, that it calls for all the energy, time, thought, and devotion we have, and that is worth all we give it."

I couldn't have said it better.



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If you swear to do your part, I swear to do mine. I will dig down deep, set aside my personal cares and shut up the monkey mind that is ever trying to distract me. I will stop thinking and start writing. I will ask the spirits to move through me and let the words drip out covered with honey and fire.

Do we have a deal?

Thank you for raising up my dreams and honoring my stories.