



**Finalist Speech for *Crossing the Tracks*  
Barbara Stuber**

Years ago, before my mother occupied her own coffin, she told me that when she was four she had played under her mother's coffin in the parlor of their little frame house on the Texas border.

"It made my father mad," she said.

Eighty years later that event and her father's reprimand were vivid in her mind. She had still not crawled out from under that early loss, and the anger, and ache.

It shaped her whole life and mine, too.

Little did we know that she had just given me the heart of my main character, Iris Baldwin, and the first line of my book, "I'm under Mama's coffin."

On October 22, 1958 my Great Aunt Anna awoke in her farm house in rural northwest Missouri. True to her routine, she washed her teeth and brewed a weak cup of tea from a used bag. She then sat at her secretary desk and wrote her own obituary stating that she had died "unexpectedly" that very afternoon.

And she did! Quietly, alone, flat on her back in bed wearing slippers she had probably crocheted just for this occasion.

When I discovered Anna's obituary I knew I had my story setting - a rural place, one where the universes inside people were kept hidden, unexpressed.

It is magical how these family deaths generated so much life in me!

It is interesting how the death theme runs through all our Morris finalists this year.

Through writing I was able to create the very people my mother and my character, Iris, needed - people we all need in our lives. These are the folks who hold the lamp, who offer the power of their whole presence to one another, who give their undivided attention and patience.

I love these humans.

And you, members of the 2011 Morris Award Committee, understood this perfectly because you too offered this to us - your care and undivided attention to what was precious to us - our books.

How incredibly helpful this has been for us first time writers who are so often convinced we would be better off writing our own obituaries than writing books!

On New Years Day 2008 I visited a dilapidated Shinto Shrine in a ancient bamboo forest, outside Kyoto, Japan with my husband and son. In the freezing drizzle I lit a skinny incense stick and on a rectangle of balsa wood wrote my “ema” for the New Year. An “ema” is a statement of one’s greatest longing, one’s hope, which for me was, of course, finishing and publishing **CROSSING THE TRACKS**. I hung it with hundreds of others on the shrine.

After New Years all across Japan these “emas” can be burned - the smoke carrying our hopes heavenward. I believe my mom sniffed my mine and said, “Hey, I gave you the first line for your book, Barb, now go finish it!”

I am so incredibly grateful that smoke eventually floated to New York City where my agent, Ginger Knowlton, and eventually my editor, Karen Wojtyla, and her assistant, Emily Fabre, at Margaret K. McElderry Books sniffed it and said, “Yeah, let’s get together and publish this thing.”

It was just that easy - isn’t it?

The last line of **CROSSING THE TRACKS** is, “When lost, use the stars.”

I believe young adult books should be just that – stars, guides for those crossing the treacherous tracks between childhood and adulthood.

Thank you all for recognizing our stars and for helping them shine.