



Printz Honor Speech

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In a novella called *The Suicide Club*, by Robert Louis Stevenson, a pair of young men go out for a night on the town. They're in a bar, and a third guy comes in with a dish of cream tarts that he's trying to give away. Nobody wants a suspicious cream tart from a stranger, and every single time he is refused, the guy eats the tart himself. He's making himself sick.

The two start talking to this guy, and invite him to go out for dinner. He explains that a couple months ago he fell in love. He is well educated and accomplished, but has squandered his family money. When he found he was in love, and had stupidly lost his fortune and could not propose marriage to the woman he loved, he embarked on a project to punish himself by making himself destitute —and forcibly ingesting pastry.

The cream tart guy invites his friends to visit a club he's recently joined. A suicide club.

It's in a fancy house. There's a myserious host —a weird dude in a velvet jacket. Each night cards are dealt to the members. He who gets the ace of spaces will die tomorrow. He who gets the ace of clubs – has to kill him.

The members spend every night together, drinking and carousing. They have a curious bond with one another. No one passes moral judgements. What the club offers them is not really a chance to die. It's the opportunity to live, however briefly, as if they might die tomorrow. Free from responsibility, free from consequences.

Stevenson's story lent its name to an actual club that formed in the 1970s, which Frankie writes about in *Disreputable History*. The San Francisco Suicide Club's members refused to abide by certain unwritten rules —social codes for behavior – and they made people aware of the existence of those rules by breaking them in public situations. They partied in sewers and graveyards, rode city buses dressed as clowns, climbed the Golden Gate Bridge.

My own book pulls from Stevenson's the notion that membership in a club involves a renegotiation of oneself in relationship to the rules of the larger society; from the San Francisco club, the idea of people staging events that are rebellious and funny. Kind of like theater and kind of like protest. Also the idea of people scooting around in sewers or steam tunnels, climbing the outsides of buildings – I imagined those as ways my heroine would challenge the orderly rules of the boarding school society in which she lives.

Another influence on Frankie was *Brideshead Revisited* by Evelyn Waugh, a writer famous for savagely satirizing an aristocracy to which he he was also strongly attracted.



In *Brideshead*, a young, middle-class man named Charles goes to a very fancy college and befriends the gorgeous, dissolute Lord Sebastian Flyte. Charles ends up falling in love not only with Sebastian, but with Sebastian's whole family. With their beautiful house —Brideshead. With the way they live.

I was interested in writing about a person who does that – falls in love not with just one person, but with a *whole group* of people, a way of life, and becomes completely immersed in that other person's world only to realize that the essence of that world is something she can never have. Charles can never be a member of the Flyte family nor a member of the upper class, and part of him doesn't love Sebastian or Julia so much as he wishes to *be them*. Same with Frankie and Matthew.

All too often, I think, both well-meaning and nefarious adults treat YA novels as if they are billboards. As if the books are moral lessons cloaked as entertainments, and the youth of today should read these novels in order to learn to have hope, stay strong, or speak out. We also fear they'll read the wrong things and lust for bad boys, embark on disordered eating patterns or experiment with drugs.

But books are not billboards. They are meant for complicated responses. They are ambiguous. They are meant to be argued over, unpacked, disagreed with, loved and hated simultaneously, and reread at different times of life for different meanings. That is the wonder of this art form, the way it invites multiple interpretations.

Nothing has pleased me more than to receive mail denouncing Frankie as borderline psychotic and boy crazy, and other mail lauding her as a feminist heroine —plus one note from a seventh-grader who asked very sweetly why Frankie couldn't have ended up with Matthew, since he was so cute.

There is no right reading. *Disreputable History* is not a billboard. No book is. I am grateful to the Printz committee for recognizing and celebrating complex literature for teenagers.

I wish there was some wonderful compound German word like *weltschmerz* or *schadenfreude* to indicate the state we authors get into where we love and admire another writer to the point of mild hatred born of envy. *Hervorragendbuchenneid*, perhaps. Excellent book envy. Or *verblüffendtalentbegehrlich*. Astonishing talent covetousness.

Anyway, I have it for all the writers named for the Printz award and the Printz honor tonight, and I can hardly believe I am here with them. I want to state my supreme debt to editor Donna Bray, and to the entire staff of Hyperion for its support. Gratitude to the Printz committee and most of all to you teen librarians, for the incredible work you do.

As Frankie would say, I am grunted. Thank you very, very much.