



## 2009 Michael L. Printz Award Acceptance Speech

### Melina Marchetta

I'm presuming you wouldn't quite understand if I said the words, "I don't know what to say" because it's been over six months since I received the phone call telling me about the Printz. But when I sat down to write this speech, I still didn't know what to say. So I'm probably going to approach this in the same structural way I approached the writing of *Jellicoe*, which means it won't be in chronological order.

The day after the Printz was announced, a US blogger wrote *Melina Who Jellicoe What?* To be honest, I liked the question. Back home, my first novel received a strong response because it explored the life of a young Australian-Italian girl juggling two cultures. At times, like many other writers of semi-autobiographical novels, I still feel quite defined by it, despite the fact that it's been almost seventeen years since its publication. So to feel like the new kid on the block in January this year, and to read the words "off the radar" made me feel quite liberated.

I found out I won this award on Australia Day. It was eight am in the morning when my phone rang. It came up anonymous and I rarely pick up the phone if I don't know who it is. Once I did, there was that far away, couple of moments of silence and I thought it was one of those telco call centres in India and since watching *Slumdog Millionaire* I've made it a point to be a lot more considerate, so I stayed on the line and didn't hang up.

Thankfully.

I met the Printz committee on Saturday night. It was wonderful to put faces to those voices I heard on January the 26th. Voices of such excitement and enthusiasm, like they were a bunch of kids who couldn't wait to tell me a secret. I remember asking, "What do I do now?" And one of them called out on the speaker phone to have lots of champagne.

Really, who was I to say no to such a request when Mary Arnold and the committee had been so kind to me?

I was told not to tell anyone until it was officially announced at 1.45 am Sydney time the next day. I kept that promise. For about three minutes. I rang up my mum and told her



not to tell anyone because it was a big secret and then I rang about fifty other people and made them promise the same thing.

I figured I was a long long long way from Colorado. Mary and the Printz committee would never find out.

We have a public holiday on Australia day and we have a Sydney festival in January and I remember it was the beginning of a magical week. I got to see Leonard Cohen in concert. I saw the Harbour Bridge about five times. I drank champagne for a whole week, because someone from the Printz committee told me to, and there were fireworks and because sometimes writers think the world revolves around them, I was convinced that Sydney put on a party just for me.

This award has truly been one of the greatest honours of my professional life and I think it means that much more because it's for Jellicoe.

I want to thank Farrin Jacobs, my editor at Harper Collins, for taking on a book that I've often referred to as my very misunderstood third child. I've always experienced such a polarised reaction to this novel. People either love it with intensity, or don't get beyond the first thirty pages. They say they don't know where it's going. Other people tell me they don't know where it's going but they trust my writing. Some of my readers wanted me to return to the urban cultural mixing pot of my first two novels. They couldn't understand the reason for this one and what I was trying to say.

But Farrin—well she loved it. She once told me something that would go straight to any writer's heart. That one of the reasons she went into the world of YA publishing was because of my second novel, *Saving Francesca*.

She emailed me on the day we found out. It was Sunday over here in the US and she had received a phone call from her boss, Elise Howard and she thought that she either lost her job or Jellicoe had won the honour prize for the Printz. I was happy for both of us that it was the Printz.

So thank you Farrin and Susan Katz at Harper Collins for not only publishing Jellicoe, but for also making it possible for me to be here. For Emilie Ziemer, Patty Rosati and Elise Howard and everyone else who has made the last couple of days so effortless.



I get asked over and over again, what the Printz actually means in the long run. People ask about money and sales and whether I get to travel, whether I'll meet J K Rowling and Stephenie Meyer. What am I going to wear when I meet the Printz, despite the fact that I spell the word every time I say it. Some have told me to wear a thick coat because Chicago's a really cold place.

But what it means to me, in all honestly, is that more people will read my work and ultimately, I think it's what most writer's want—for their stories to be read and to be shared and to be discussed. Even when it's not all good. I've enjoyed the diverse opinions on the blogs. I love the fact that young readers have bullied their parent to persevere with *Jellicoe*, rather than the other way round. I've even loved receiving letters saying: "Dear Ms Marchetta. I just love your novel *On the Jellicoe Road*. My friend hates it and my teacher doesn't understand it."

I've read the words "Your story hurt my heart."

I've read the words, "Teenagers won't be able to access this novel."

Those are the words I worry about the most. I'd like to think that it's challenging, but very accessible. I receive more letters and feedback from teenagers about *Jellicoe*, than any other. Their favourite part isn't Taylor and Jonah's love story, as I thought it would be. They mostly write to me about the community created by the five friends of the past. The community created by Taylor in the end when she stops being reactive and becomes proactive and begins collecting her own people.

I know some people have a thirty page rule. I wish they didn't. I'd like to think there are so many wonderful surprises on page 31 of someone's story. I'd like to think that the first line of a novel doesn't make sense if you haven't read the last. That they may discover that I've written a story about something more than territory wars between Boarders and Townies and Cadets.

For me,

*Jellicoe Road* is a story of love between people, regardless of gender and age. It's about the mistakes adults make for all the right reasons. It's about redemption being possible in the most tragic of circumstances. It's about girls challenging the boys they love and swooning when one tells her the extent of her importance in his life; and it's about boys



fighting the battles within the territory of their hearts. It's about staying individual and still belonging to a community. It's about pointing out the beauty of wonder in the midst of ugliness

So I'd like to thank Mary and the Printz committee for giving my purpose a platform. For introducing more readers to a story that in some parts, I regret writing because the circumstances break my heart.

I'd like to thank the community of writers I belong to. Those who emailed me back home and from afar, when the decision was announced. A writer spends a lot of time on their own. Even when we're with friends and family, a part of us is elsewhere constructing. Half the time we think we're geniuses. The other half of the time, with the same passion, we think we're failures. That no one will be interested in reading what we've written. Fellow writers kind of get it. They make you feel less lonely.

And for Margo Lanagan and Emily Lockhart and Tobin Anderson and Terry Pratchett for constantly writing at a standard that raises the bar, not just with these novels, but with everything they've written. It was like receiving a second award when I heard my name read out with theirs.

My agents, Jill Grinberg and Sophie Hamley, and my Australian publisher of Jellicoe, Laura Harris, for creating an environment of kindness in our dealings, who have never once made me feel like a product. In a world of construct, I've been lucky enough to be around people, who are in love with storytelling and language rather than marketing and readers' polls.

And for my mum who put an Enid Blyton book in my hands when I was seven, especially the naughtiest girl boarding school stories. Such novels may not be bursting with literary worth, but it sparked my imagination and I've been reading every since. And the beloved people in my life who keep me very grounded, who go around saying that Jellicoe has a bigger body count than Hamlet, who tell me every couple of years when a novel comes out, that sometimes they forget all the magical stuff is in my head trying to get out.

And I'd like to thank L M Montgomery for creating Anne Shirley and writing the scene when she wacks Gilbert Blythe over the head with a slate, and Harper Lee for creating



Scout and Jem and Boo Radley, and Charles Dickens for writing the words Never wonder, Luisa. Because the spirit of all those characters went into the writing of Jellicoe. For Yeats who explores the concept of solace in The Lake Isle of Innisfree because his words gave Hannah's House by the river its soul and for Louis Sachar for writing Holes and giving me a lesson in structure.

For Australian writers such as Margo Lanagan and Markus Zusak and Garth Nix and Sonya Hartnett and Judith Clarke and John Marsden and everyone else published overseas before me, for unleashing the Australian vernacular onto the world. It's so important for us to retain our voice in an overseas market, now more than any other time. But mostly, thank you to YALSA and Booklist for their generosity in allowing us foreigners to be part of such an important award.

Recently, at a YA festival in Sydney I was asked to comment on this genre of YA and my readership. It gets too complicated sometimes, because audience is the last thing you're thinking of when you write. But I just love that teenagers read my work.

It's a privileged place we hold in their lives. We have access to places that most people don't. We're in those bedrooms late at night; we're in the very dark place of a young person who feels rage at the world; we've been told we make black holes a bit smaller. We try to make sense of a world that stopped making sense to even their parents.

I don't think for one moment, that's our responsibility as writers, but I'm glad that it's our reality.

So thank you for allowing me to cast my net much further. To Michael L Printz for such a vision and passion. To whoever decided that this conference would be in Chicago.

But finally, to the librarians and English teachers.

Adult writers sell books, at times because of their literary worth, but also because of the enthusiasm of the mainstream press. Young Adult novels sell because of the passion of librarians and English teachers and booksellers and bloggers.

We survive on your word of mouth. You're the mediums between writers and readers.

You help us serve our purpose.



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Thank you.