



**John Corey Whaley**

**Morris Acceptance Speech**

Before I get sappy and overly confident in my rhetoric, I should thank the several amazing individuals to which I owe the past year of my life. Thank you, Ken Wright, agent extraordinaire, for saying it may take six to seven weeks to read my manuscript and calling me six days later instead. To my editor, Namrata Tripathi, my literary soul mate—your passion and wisdom made me fall back in love with *Where Things Come Back*, and made me see it for what it could be and what it could mean to others. Thanks to Paul Crichton and Siena Konscol—the best publicity team in the business, for making sure bookstores all over didn’t ignore my little book about a boy, his brother, and a bird. Thank you Justin Chanda and John Anderson for believing in my weird little story. And thanks to Michael McCartney for designing a book cover that screams Arkansas with beauty and simplicity. And, of course, to everyone else at Atheneum and Simon & Schuster for their tireless work on this book. I will forever sing your praises and I will never forget the grace and genuine love you all share for your work. And, lastly, to my fellow finalists: Your books are why I write and why I read. Stories filled with adventure, mystery, heartache, and angst. To be on a list with you has been my greatest honor and I can only wish for such convergences with brilliance in the future.

Now to the part where I ramble: I get to be a writer and I can't adequately explain to you all how it feels to say that and really mean it. For so many years I was that guy who also writes books on the side, that guy who started things and never finished them, that guy from that small town where big dreams don't ever come true. I tell you right now that my life is a constant state of shock. I wake up and remind myself that I get to be what I've always wanted to be, that I get to tell stories and that people actually read them, and everyday I feel more blessed than I deserve to feel.

When I wrote *Where Things Come Back* I had no idea that I was writing YA. I didn't really consider the audience for the book, only the story I wanted to tell—the story about a kid who feels stuck in his small Southern town and how he has to grow up even when the world around him tries to make that impossible. I never meant to write a story about faith or loss or hope. But that's what happened—that's what happened when I became obsessed with an extinct woodpecker and an obscure book of the Ethiopian Orthodox Bible. And, as it turns out, I wrote a YA novel and now I've discovered that there's no other community I'd ever want to be a part of—no other group of people whose passion and love for books is so contagious and beautiful and sincere.

So thank you, people of YA—you booksellers, you teachers, you bloggers, and you librarians. Thank you for knowing that being a teenager doesn't mean you can't connect to literature on the same levels, if not many more, as adults. Your belief in kids and words and storytelling makes people like me never give up in our efforts to provide new stories and new ways to tell them. And to the teenagers of the world—the cool kids who run into things while

walking and reading—thank you for your enthusiasm and honesty and courage. Telling your stories, from the painful to the hilarious, is the most fulfilling thing I can think of.

Lastly, thank you to the Morris Committee for this surprising and humbling honor. To be among the amazing writers who have previously won and been up for this award is truly unbelievable. To even be mentioned in the same breath as the late great L.K. Madigan is an honor I will never forget. I was a miserable, bitter teacher who wrote a book in a camper in the Arkansas woods five years ago and now I'm surrounded by brilliant, passionate people who have changed my life forever. I mean, you can't make up a story that good.