

Astonishment

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Thank you all so much for coming. It's bittersweet to be here in Orlando celebrating books after the tragic events a couple of weeks ago, difficult not to feel helpless, difficult not to wonder if our work is that important. But it is. It is. I was drawn to Christopher Myers's essay, "Orlando," just published in the Horn Book. "Narratives like the ones we steward...return people to the fullness of their selfhood. This is the revolution we can effect...Each time a body falls, there ought to be a story there to catch them." So, I hope the stories we're writing and the ones we're championing and will champion, catch and embrace as many kids and teens as possible, especially our most vulnerable.

I've been asked what makes YA fiction YA fiction—voice? Subject matter? Theme? I'd say it's the willingness to be astonished instead of nostalgic. I am astonished that the Printz Committee chose to recognize *Bone Gap* among so many astonishing books published in 2015. And I'm astonished to be up here with Ashley and Marcus.

If it wasn't for the for the saint-like patience of my husband, Stephen Metro, who had to listen to me whine about this book for eight years, *Bone Gap* would have never been written. And it would never have become an actual book if Tina Wexler, my agent, hadn't taken a chance on me, and if my editor, Jordan Brown,

hadn't turned himself inside out to help me make sense out of what I'd put on the page. Thanks, also, to Kate Jackson, Alessandra Balzer, Donna Bray, Caroline Sun, Patty Rosati, and everyone at Harpercollins for your enthusiasm and support.

About a year ago, right after *Bone Gap* was first published, I was talking to creative writing students at a local high school. During the Q&A, one girl raised her hand and blurted, "Why bees?"

I said, "Besides the fact that they're awesome?" Of course, that's not really an answer, so I gave her all sorts of bee facts until she finally raised her palms in surrender and gave me a look that said, *Okay, lady, I get it, you like bees, calm down.*

But as I was driving home, her question stuck with me. *Why* had I written about bees? Or corn? Or Finn? Or Roza? Before *Bone Gap*, I'd published seven books in three different age categories and four different genres, I was already a marketing nightmare. Why did I make it worse with some banana-pants book that can't decide if it's a fantasy or a fairy tale or notes from a 4-H club meeting?

Like many writers, I am A Child of the Library. I grew up in New Jersey in the 80s, when everyone's parents were too busy getting divorced to pay attention to what the kids were doing, especially kids as shy and dreamy as I was. So, I was raised by sympathetic librarians and mountains of books. Because I was so

dreamy, the stories I read were alive to me. And some of those stories have taken up permanent residence in my head. Not just the books and the characters that I've adored, but books that I've wrestled with, screamed at, thrown across the room.

In some respects, *Bone Gap* is in conversation with them all.

Or in a brawl, depending.

Because I was A Child of the Library, the few books I owned I received as gifts. One of these books was called *The Wife Store*. If you read *Bone Gap*, you might recognize that title, because I gave this book to Petey Willis, the beekeeper's daughter. In this book, a lonely man decides he needs a wife. He goes to the wife store, where he sees shelf upon shelf of wives, in all varieties. He buys one, and goes home with her. The two of them are happy until they are not, and they go to the children store, and so on, probably till they got to the pet store, but I don't remember, because I never got that far. I read the beginning of this book again and again, not because I loved it, but because I kept waiting for something different to happen, I kept waiting for a woman to go to the husband store, or for everyone to go to the playground instead. Like Petey Willis, I kept waiting for justice.

Another book I owned was a biography of Mary McCleod Bethune by Ruby L Radford. Bethune was African-American activist and educator born in 1875 to formerly enslaved people. She founded the National Council of Negro Women and was an advisor to presidents among a million other amazing things. But her passion and purpose was education, particularly the education of young black women. In 1904, starting with only five students, she founded the Daytona Normal and Industrial Institute for Negro Girls in Florida, which eventually became Bethune-Cookman College, one of the few places that African-Americans could pursue a college degree. Bethune stayed with the college for almost four decades.

I was reading these books around the same time of my life. One book with injustice baked into the concept, the other book about an activist who fought against injustice. Since I was all of seven years old, since stories were alive for me, these two books lived together uneasily in my head. I couldn't figure out why I was so unsettled, like a hive poked with a stick.

It's probably not a shock that I sought out the angry girls in books—Turtle Wexler of *The Westing Game*, Meg Murry from *A Wrinkle in Time*. I liked the sad and scared and confused ones, too, Rachel in Lois Duncan's *Summer of Fear*, Judy Blume's *Deenie*. But I found the angriest, most confused girls in horror novels. I spent the whole of seventh grade rereading Stephen King's *The Stand*, one of my very favorite books, and hugely influential on me. And yet, there's a passage

in *The Stand* that I tripped over every single time. In this passage, a nineteen-year-old pregnant girl considers her plight after a superflu wipes out 99% of the planet. What she really needs in the wake of this horrible apocalypse, she decides, is a man. Now, I was thirteen, and that was the year I was walking alone to my best friend's house and a car started to follow me, creeping slowly alongside for blocks. I didn't understand what was happening until he pulled up as close as he could and I saw what he was wearing, or rather, what he wasn't, until I saw what he was doing. I didn't know to be afraid of him until he smiled.

So, I am reading this book I loved and I stumble on the thoughts of this pregnant teenager, rambling about how the world was dead and feminism was garbage and ooh boy did she need a man and I thought: "A man? Look, unless he's an obstetrician, what you really need is a dozen flamethrowers and a tank. Possibly a giant titanium hamster ball to roll around in." I didn't understand how an author who wrote things that terrified so many people with such exquisite precision, didn't know what might scare a teenaged girl walking the streets alone.

We're not all scared of the same things.

When I was fifteen, I decided that since I spent all my time at the library anyway, I might as well get paid for it, so I got a job as the world's worst library page--that was my official title. One day, when I was supposed to be shelving books, I found a novel by Philip Roth called *The Breast*. I read that whole book while

standing in the stacks. It was about a man who turns into a 155 lb....breast. Kind of like Gregor Samsa in *The Metamorphosis*, except not so much. The man, an English professor turned mammary gland, just wants everyone to touch him. This is from a review I found in the New York Times: "brilliant...to celebrate the ordinary, to create a grotesque and extraordinary banality--a huge detached breast with human consciousness and feeling. The trick is so good, so obvious and easy and yet so rich with meaning, it's a little hard to translate from what it is, a piece of art, to reviewer's language."

This is adorable.

By this time, I was writing lots of awful poetry and stories about murderous girls and vengeful ghosts and monsters lurking under the bed. I had some wonderful, encouraging teachers, but some others wanted to know why I wrote about such silly stuff. I said, "This guy can write a whole book about a giant boob and I can't write about a mermaid?" And they said, "Laura, you have to be more realistic."

As I moved through college and beyond, mentors recommended all sorts of prize-winning books and stories. Much of the prose was stripped down and straightforward, often described as "muscular." No magic allowed. And absolutely nothing for children. Events in the stories were linear, moving from A to B to C. In these stories, a person, sometimes but not always an English professor, is unhappy in their marriage or relationship. Their ennui would be described in that

muscular prose for a while, and then, if this character was a man, they would make out with a grad student or bite into a particularly luscious muffin and have an epiphany. If the person was a woman, they'd skip the muffin, look out the window, see an animal—a fox, a cat—and then, you guessed it, epiphany.

Sometimes the woman saw a bird. Sometimes the bird was dead.

I wrote about foxes and cats and birds but a lot of mine could talk. Fellow workshoppers had questions: “Why can’t you write in order?” they said. “Is this a magical bear or is your narrator just drunk? Why does everything seem to happen on a single months-long Tuesday? I don’t understand why the girl stabs the guy with a cocktail fork. What kind of epiphany is that?”

One of my workshop leaders, whose name I have permanently blocked from my memory, told me that while my voice was strong, my characters just had too many feelings. I went back to all those prize-winning stories and there were just too many goofy descriptions of breasts, as if the way breast-having people were seen was far more important than the way they see, what they actually *feel*. And though I tried writing muscular stories of ennui plus dead bird plus epiphany, and occasionally succeeded, I felt hemmed in, as if I’d been trapped in a jar.

It wasn’t till I stumbled onto Jeanette Winterson and Isabel Allende that I discovered my own slippery concept of time expressed in flashbacks and

endless, looping digressions, narratives steeped in magic, and thought, wait, you can do this? I read Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* and Lorrie Moore's *Self Help*, whose plots followed an emotional logic rather than dates ticked off on a calendar and thought, wait, you can do *this*? I carried around Anne Sexton's *Transformations* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* like talismans. I read Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved* in quick succession, and I couldn't write for months afterwards, not because I didn't want to, but because they kicked down walls in my brain, because they said, *we are not all scared of the same things*.

Here's a confession: I didn't set out to be a writer of YA fiction. I didn't set out to be a writer of fantasy fiction, either; if I have a path, I've only found it after the fact. I first got the idea for *Bone Gap* nearly a decade ago when my late father-in-law handed me an article about a woman who lost her son at the mall, but couldn't describe him to authorities. I was doing a lot of school visits then, driving in downstate Illinois through the endless cornfields, wondering about the strange whispering sounds the corn made, and what could be hiding in there. I even wrote a draft—a terrible, nonsensical draft with no magic in it at all. By that time, my father-in-law was dying and my stepdaughter was ill and when the people you love are sick, it's hard to believe in magic. On his last day on earth, my father-in-law was in and out of consciousness. In lucid moments, he told me what he saw. Angels, he said, angels made of shadow that floated up the walls toward the ceiling. And who's to say that's not what they were?

Still. My draft was terrible and I didn't know how to fix it. So I wrote another terrible book. Tried to revise something else and screwed it all up. For too long, everything I touched seemed to be the same degree of unfixable, unfathomable, terrible. After I'd been struggling for years, my dear friend Anne Ursu said, "Okay, so you know what you hate, but what do you love?"

Well.

"Kittens," I said. "Bees. Tiny goats that laugh. Fairy tales. Oh, and pierogies."

Because she is my friend, she said, "I'm sure you can make that work."

I've tried. A million years ago, my very first boss at my very first professional job in NYC took me out to lunch. He tapped my much beloved copy of *The Handmaid's Tale*, curled his lip, and said he'd tried to read it but couldn't believe a word. And then he leaned forward and said: "Doesn't it horrify you to know that you'll be spending the next forty years rotting on a commuter train?"

I was all of twenty-three. I had no idea how I'd be spending the next forty hours, let alone forty years, so that's what I told him. "I don't know about that."

He laughed and said, "What are *you* going to do, write a novel?"

Well, I was planning on eating this chopped salad, Misery Man, but now that you mention it...

Maybe I write for teens, maybe I wrote this book, because there are people who insist that the things young women love are contemptible and the dreams they have are laughable. And maybe I'm still a little angry about it, like a hive poked by a stick. When that high school girl at the Q&A asked me why bees, I told her that when bees find food, they dance for their sisters, that without bees to pollinate plants our food supply would collapse, that if a hive is attacked by a bear, bees will swarm that bear, even if they die in the process.

Bees are so metal.

As you might already know, I was teaching at Hamline University with Matt de la Peña when the ALA awards were announced. Now, for the last six months, he's been threatening to show up here and heckle me, "just a tiny, tiny bit," he said. Baptist church style," but as it turns out he's on a plane right now, so I get to talk about him instead. Anyway, for a week after we heard about the awards, Matt and I had these weird, stunned conversations in cars and in elevators, asking ourselves and each other what the eff just happened, and what the heck we were supposed to do now.

(We did not use the terms "eff" and "heck." Like most picture book writers, your

Newbery winner is a little salty, I'm just saying.)

But since books about bees and kittens and *Wife Store* rage take years to come together, since I revised *Bone Gap* about nine hundred thousand times until my editor had to pry the pages out of my hands and I'm *still* thinking about ways I could have reworked them, since I was a reader long before I was writer, *A Child of the Library*, there's only one thing for me to do. That itch of anxiety makes me hungry for new books that will take up residence in my head, ones that challenge and soothe and even implicate me, stories I will wrestle with and ones that I'll adore, like the brilliant work of my fellow panelists, writers writing outside genre and category and rules and expectations, writing stories that make us all say, "Wait. Wait. You can do *this*?"

If our stories are in conversation, and I think they are, we have a lot to talk about.

I'm eager to be astonished.

Thank you.