

Jeff Zentner's Morris Award Acceptance Speech for *The Serpent King*

It's hard to convey the surreality of standing here today. I began writing *The Serpent King* on January 20, 2014. I wrote it mostly on my iPhone, on the bus to and from my day job. I never imagined that the quiet story I was writing about three misfit kids in a dead-end Tennessee town would someday allow me to be in this company.

I thank everyone who made this possible. My beautiful wife Sara and my son, Tennessee. My parents. My amazing agent, Charlie Olsen and everyone at Inkwell. My brilliant editors Emily Easton and Tara Walker. Phoebe Yeh at Crown and Barbara Marcus at Random House Childrens. Casey Ward and Mary McCue. The amazing team at Random House. Thank you to the librarians, teachers, booksellers, bloggers, and reviewers who have put my book in people's hands. Thank you to my incredible readers.

I want to thank YALSA and the Morris Committee, for what is unquestionably one of the greatest honors of my life. I am so honored to share it with my fellow finalists, Bonnie-Sue Hitchcock, M-E Girard, Sonia Patel and Calla Devlin

In *The Serpent King*, I wanted to talk about the most ferocious sort of love between the sort of friends who fill the role of family in each others' lives. I wanted to talk about wrestling with faith and the courage to take a different path than the one that was set for you. I wanted to talk about the weight of a name, and blood, and legacy. I wanted to talk about the sort of hope that lives like a burning ember even in the darkest night.

I wanted to talk about the increasing divide between the haves and the have-nots in this country. The incredible privileges that being born to certain circumstances can afford you, and the tremendous hurdles that being born to certain other circumstances will place in your path.

Rural America is a beautiful place. There are many of the qualities that made America a great nation. But there's also a festering poison in Rural America. One that causes people to fear people who are different. One that causes people to fear imagined threats, while true threats steal in. One that causes them to look fondly at the past, even though many of their fellow Americans could not have participated in society as full persons during those times.

In *The Serpent King*, I wanted to show young people struggling against this poison, to rid it from their bodies and lives. I did this because I believe in the power of stories.

I believe that our nation is sailing into tumultuous waters and that it's a fundamental failure of empathy that's caused America's moral compass to malfunction. Stories are the ultimate exercise in empathy. To enjoy a story, you have to be able to invest yourself fully in the lives of totally fictional strangers in situations you may or may not have ever experienced personally. To enjoy a story, you have to be able to experience the world through another's eyes. It's very hard to want to deny someone a full measure of personhood if you've seen the world through their eyes.

We in the story business have a lot of work to do in the days to come. Stories lift us up from despair and give us hope. They teach us the truth of other people's lives. And we're in the business of providing stories to young people at the most formative times in their lives. We have to get to them first with the best stories. Our stories have to defeat the narratives of fear and hatred that others will provide them. The soul of our nation literally depends on it.

The work being done here of identifying the best stories is such an important work and I am so humbled and honored to have had a small part in it. It means so very much to me, and I am eternally in all of your debt for allowing me it. Thank you.