

Calla Devlin, 2017 Morris Award Finalist Remarks

I am deeply honored to be nominated for the Morris Award, especially alongside such powerful books by Rani Patel, Jeff Zentner, Bonnie-Sue Hitchcock, and M-E Girard. Each of their novels tell stories of courage, resilience, and survival. These books are more relevant and important than ever. I'm humbled to be in their company. Thank you to the 2017 Morris Award Committee for considering *Tell Me Something Real*, and my deepest thanks to the American Library Association and to the Young Adult Library Services Association.

When my novel first came out, an old friend contacted me to speak. Brian Boies is the young adult librarian at the main branch of the Oakland Public Library. He filled the room with middle schoolers from a school downtown, walking distance to the library. The kids were a little older than my oldest daughter, and as they restlessly waited, whispering and shoving and giggling, something struck me. They were comfortable. It was obvious that they visited the library often. They looked at home.

I knew the feeling well. In my unstable childhood home, books were my salvation, and something my single mom rarely could afford. The library was my refuge and connection to the larger world. I wouldn't be the reader I am, the writer I am, the person I am, if it hadn't been for my local library. As Brian told me about the job fair he was holding the following night, and how hundreds of teens would attend, I understood that the library wasn't just a second home for these kids. It was their future, as it was mine.

So I saw those middle schoolers as kindred, and I was grateful as they politely listened to me read the first chapter of my book. When Brian asked if they had questions, they were slow to respond, but then more and more hands went up, and afterwards when about a dozen of them came to chat with me, telling me about the adventure stories they wanted to write, one eighth grade boy asked, "What if no one wants to hear my story?"

I told him I wanted to hear his story and the world needs his story.

We live in a time when so many people are told that their stories don't matter. Voices are silenced. Whole communities are categorically dismissed, labeled as unwanted or even dangerous. Seasoned journalists are threatened and bullied into silence. This hurts all of us, but young people are especially vulnerable. One of the most important parts of being a teenager is finding one's voice. In this time of division and oppression, we need to honor stories more than we ever have. We need to listen and lift up voices so we all are respected and heard.

This is why libraries are essential. Shelf after shelf of books that will change so many lives like they changed mine. This is why librarians are heroes, because, with such thought and care, you introduce books to readers. You introduce whole new worlds to teens. You create futures.

It took me years before I had enough confidence and courage to call myself a writer. I never would have if not for those afternoons at the library when I was young. In addition to the librarians, teachers, and professors who opened so many doors, I would like to thank Simon & Schuster/Atheneum for bringing *Tell Me Something Real* into the world and being the best possible home for my books. My editor, Reka Simonsen, publisher Justin Chanda, and the library marketing team, including Michelle Leo and Candace Greene McManus.

I'm also grateful to my agent, Faye Bender of the Book Group, for believing in this book and being my champion.

When I finished *Tell Me Something Real*, I had one dream: for the Babcock sisters' names be printed in ink and bound into a book. I hoped readers would connect with these girls whose lives were imploding, and, who in the middle of such pain and betrayal, learned that they deserved to be loved. I want my readers to feel the same—to understand that they are worthy. That their voices matter. Thanks to each and every one of you for sharing stories. Thank you for this honor.