



## 2010 Michael L. Printz Award Acceptance Speech

### Libba Bray

Hello! Welcome! You all look GORGEOUS. I would like to begin tonight by offering some copious and possibly obsequious thanks.

I'd like to thank YALSA, *Booklist* and the Printz Committee. Actually, I'd like to buy each of you a sparkle pony that burps diamonds and rainbows every day. Thank you for championing such an oddball of a book. I cannot believe there are so many people who are as weird as I am and that they are all on the same committee, but I am deeply grateful for and humbled by this amazing honor. Thank you.

A big thank you to the entire team at Random House who did not visibly flinch when I said the words, "mad cow disease, road trip, string theory, and Norse mythology." You people have some serious ovaries. And a special thanks to my wonderful editor, Wendy Loggia whose extraordinary talents made this book what it is. In this or any parallel world, I would be your fan.

I'd like to thank Cynthia and Greg Leitich-Smith for forcing me to finish a first draft and for allowing me to lap dance in a samurai costume in your living room. You don't scare easily. I'd like to thank teachers and librarians for being teachers and librarians, which is like being part therapist, part magician, part Marine, and wholly awesome. You rock.

I'd like to thank readers. Every time you open a book, it is a strike against ignorance.



Thanks to my agent/husband, Barry Goldblatt for living through so many deadlines with me and not developing a drinking problem yet. Thanks, too, to the many generous friends who read copious drafts, offered insightful critique, and removed all sharp objects.

Last but not least, I am deeply honored to be up here with Rick Yancey, Deborah Heiligman, John Barnes, and Adam Rapp, whose work inspires and thrills me and reminds me of what's possible. You raise the bar, good people. Which is nice because I am short and can just slide right under it.

Does everyone feel bathed in the warm, glitter-confetti glow of appreciation? I hope so. Now, I must deliver some bad news: **We're all going to die.** It's true. Hopefully not now or before dessert but, you know, sometime.

I'm sorry.

Mint?

I mention this because the subject matter of *Going Bovine* seems to have made some people very uncomfortable. People have asked, "How can you write about death for teenagers?" As if being a teen somehow protects you from loss and pain. And they asked, "Why is this book so weird? Are YOU that weird?" And they asked, "Why is Cameron so hard to like? Is all that profanity really necessary? What are you saying about American culture? How can death be a comedy?" And finally, "Why?" Why was I writing a freaky, five-hundred page quasi-jazz riff on *Don Quixote* and the meaning of life starring a misanthropic stoner with mad cow disease who



goes on a road trip to DisneyWorld with a death-obsessed dwarf, a sugar-addicted punk angel, and a Norse yard gnome, all of it woven together with musings on quantum physics? After all, I had just written a very successful Victorian fantasy trilogy with a built-in audience who wanted more. Was this a willful act of career suicide? Was I on crack?

I seemed at a loss to explain the why and the how of this book. That I had been mulling it over in some fashion for years. That, as with all books, I needed to write it for reasons that were not clear to me yet and that, yes, I was terrified. Because I knew on some level that *Going Bovine* was deeply personal. It was my Wizard of Reckoning, and I had been running from it and now we would do battle.

So now I stand before you trying to find the words to answer those questions. Part of me doesn't want to explain anything because I feel that once a book is in the hands of a reader, he or she owns that reading experience, and whatever meaning is assigned belongs to the reader and should not be clouded by any musings on my part. But the other part of me doesn't want to talk about it because, quite frankly, I have a love/hate relationship with honesty. It's easier to be safe and say nothing, but then I feel like a total wuss.

I'm going to try to pull together the observations, experiences, thoughts, and emotional truths that made up this book. Hopefully, I will pull those strands together into a cohesive whole. But it may be like the potholder I crocheted in third grade that was supposed to have a dog pattern but which ended up looking more like an unfortunate goat. At least when I finish, you can drink. Here goes.



It begins as many things do, with a library and a book—the first book I truly loved: *Bread and Jam for Frances* by Russell and Lillian Hoban. I checked it out of the Corpus Christi Public Library again and again, with an almost Bernie Madoff-insensitivity to the reading needs of other four-year-olds. “It was breakfast time and everyone was at the table...” the story begins, and it goes on to recount the tale of Frances the badger sticking it to the man who wanted to oppress her freedom of food choice. Or so I saw it. Frances was a funny, odd little thing trying to make sense of the world. She made lots of mistakes. I sensed in her a kindred spirit. It comforted me to know she was in the world, to know that I could visit her at the library any time I needed to.

So let’s take Frances with us on our journey. Spin the cosmic carnival wheel and I’m in a record store in Austin, Texas. “Ever listened to Miles Davis?” the cute employee asks me. I don’t think I like jazz, but I like the dude, so I take home the album. The music is strange and haunting and it takes me somewhere I’ve never been. When I hear it, I think of all-night diners. Gas stations by the side of the road, their neon signs garish against the night sky. The sad faces in an Edward Hopper painting. The lonely grace notes of American life. It’s as if someone has shaken the snow globe of me and all my molecules are settling in a new pattern. “You can spin out and improvise all you want in jazz,” a drummer boyfriend explains to me a year later. “You just have to remember to keep coming back to one.”

But let’s go back further. I am sixteen, and quite possibly the biggest asshole of a teenager ever to exist except for my brother. Once again, there is a library and a



beloved book: *Catcher in the Rye*. It is my Bible. Holden Caulfield is also impossible, but in his hurt, I see my own. I have found the spokesman for my difficult adolescence—at the library. Make room, Frances. Here comes Holden.

Years later, I'll ride that same Central Park carousel with my eight-year-old son. As the cab takes us home over the Brooklyn Bridge under a sky dusted with clouds like angel wings, he asks me, "How do you know if you're really living your life? What if you're just part of somebody else's dream?" It's a revelatory thought, and before I can formulate a wise answer to this, he says, "Can I get an Xbox?"

2006. A coffee shop. Brooklyn. I'm reading physicist Julian Barbour's theory that time is an illusion; that we exist in all time always, a series of "Nows," and that in theory, we could reach out our fingers and grasp the moment when we were ten or the time when we will be ninety. It is physics as Taoism: "everything is everything," and it makes me think of time as a palindrome, the same thing forward and backward. And all I can say is, "Wow."

Hold on, because we're zipping forward. I'm at DisneyWorld with my family, and why didn't anyone tell me about DisneyWorld? This is what it's like in my head ALL THE TIME, PEOPLE! Can we talk about the miracle that is the Small World ride? Like an acid trip drag show. I feel deep and abiding love. Then I have the weirdest thought: What if the afterlife is like this? Full of wonder and song and sparkly things and you just keep getting to ride? Wow. We pass a Don Quixote puppet. Keep coming back to one.



I'm at my father's bedside in a nursing home in Colorado. He is in the end stage of AIDS with cryptosporidium, which sounds like the comic book nemesis of a gay superhero. I've spoken to his hospice worker, whose name is Dorothy, because really, sometimes the irony gods just get drunk. On the radio, Judy Collins sings about having seen life from both sides now, a song I know from childhood. That moment joins this one, a moment squared in meaning and resonance, as if I could reach back in time and hold the hand of that little girl on her father's shoulders under the impossible blue of a Texas sky, all the molecules of memory coalescing. An annoyingly chipper nurse comes in with medication. "Time for your applesauce, Mr. Bray," she says. My father gently refuses. He knows he's going to die; it's not a secret, and why should he pretend otherwise with meds-in-applesauce? Stick it to the man, Frances. But the nurse insists. There are rules and regulations. The machine of life will go on. The applesauce, which will make him sick in about twenty minutes, is eaten. The nurse goes. It's just the three of us: my father, me, the silence.

"You know the best part about dying?" he says at last.

I'm instantly on guard. I'm not sure I'm ready to know this. "No. What?" I say.

"In heaven, there will be no fucking applesauce."

And there it is—the defiance of a laugh. Like a punch, comedy. It strikes back. It tilts at windmills. Go on, laugh. It is dissent. It is acceptance.

On a Friday in June, 2004 or so, I read a newspaper article about black holes singing in B flat. And I wonder if we could shimmy right through those singing



mysteries of space and be reborn as something else, somewhere else. Like coming back to one.

Open a door, and there is my mother, the English teacher. She's not an emotional woman. She pays her bills on time and wields a red pen. She is incurably Presbyterian. But she talks about books the way poets speak of love. She shows me how writers leave wonderful clues hidden on the pages—allusions to other works, symbolism, themes and metaphor. She turns reading into a delightful scavenger hunt in which we collect tools for unlocking the world, for understanding how hard and beautiful it is to be human. Every time I read, I know I am my mother's daughter. Thanks, Mom. I will never spell "constant" with a "K."

There are other things. Trips to New Orleans. A war that is anything but mission accomplished. The Beach Boys' *Pet Sounds*. There is falling in love and a memory of family car trips along the Gulf of Mexico past the refineries with their fireball pompadours, like giant monsters, which frightened me. All of it coming back to one, to the soul of the novel.

Now. What would I least like to tell you about? What would make me most uncomfortable? This is the time in the writing of a book that I fear yet seek out: the hard stuff. How about this: My own brush with mortality. It comes three weeks after high school graduation. Life is full of promise and possibility then. I'll go to college in the fall. I might actually get a date. I'm driving. Driving feels good and free. I sing along to the radio, "L.A. Woman." And in a matter of seconds, my world is broken



into a before and after. The car spins out of control in the rain, hitting a phone pole at tremendous speed. I live, but my face is shattered beyond recognition. My left eye is gone. There are many surgeries, many hospital stays to come. But I'm getting ahead of myself. First, there are two weeks in the ICU, drifting in and out of consciousness. My body is its own sensory deprivation tank. The borders of time and self mean nothing. I am anchored only by sounds and the routines of the ward. A cough. The beep and whirr of machines. The faint hum of nurses talking. The crescendo/decrescendo of squeaky cart wheels in the hallway. A penlight shone under pulled eyelids. After a long convalescence, I am stitched up and pushed out into the world, but it's not the same world I came from. I'm an alien here. There are no words for the rage and despair I feel. There are drugs and booze, the usual suspects of self-destruction, and the story might end there. But there is also a small yellow journal, a forgotten graduation gift, and one night, in desperation, I begin to write down everything I cannot say out loud. The simple act of putting words on a page saves my life. Through this, I learn to live changed. I venture out to the library. There's a book. *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* by Douglas Adams. "Jesus," it seems to say. "Isn't life absurd? Isn't it awful? And wonderful? How do we survive it? Oooh, here comes a funny bit." I laugh often and very hard. The fist in the face. Thank you, Mr. Adams, and I hope to see you in the black hole. For a moment in the stacks, I have traveled through space and found my way back to one.

I cannot say whether we exist in all time always or if vibrating strings will reveal the answers to our universe. But I know that there is a place where the most





amazing parallel worlds do exist. It's called a library. And these extraordinary places are presided over by their own personal Dulcies. They are called librarians. And no matter where the road takes you in this or any other life, there must be a place where you can stop and rest and read. Where you can feel the joining of your story to all the other stories that exist. Books that comfort. Books that heal. Books that provoke and disturb, that make you question what we're doing here. Books dangerous in their ideas. Books which remind us of our fragility and resilience, of our connection to other hurting, struggling, flawed-but-trying human beings. Read them. Allow yourself to be opened. To be changed. To be connected.

And if we want to keep finding those books at the library, we'd better fight like hell to keep libraries open. Because you shut a door on hope when you close a library. We're all going to die someday, but hopefully not today, so whatever fight you've got, get in there and wrestle with the fire giants. Stick it to the man, Frances.

One last stop before we go. A small, everyday moment about six years ago, when this book was a tiny universe swirling into being. An apartment in Brooklyn with the sun setting over the Gowanus just as it set over the Gulf years before. Tomorrow it will rise again, but we're not concerned with tomorrow. We are here, in this moment, and it begins with a book and a child. My four-year-old son crawls into my lap and oh, that is a world—a lap, a book, a child. The spine of the cover crackles. The pages smell of library dust, an earthen, you-are-here smell, a smell that must exist in our DNA, a smell I would wear like perfume and hold that wrist to my



nose and inhale, to remind myself that we are always the story and the story goes on, the story must be shared, passed down. The story never really ends.

The child in my lap. The smell of the book. Be here now.

I see what he has chosen.

“Ah, I think you’re really going to like this book,” I say. The strands of time and experience come in for a brief kiss. A universe unfolds gracefully. We live. We die. We find meaning where we can and the rest is improvisation. His sweaty fingers rub against mine in anticipation, and I begin. “It was breakfast time and everyone was at the table...”

Everyone.

Every. One.

It’s okay. Play out your wild riff. Just keep coming back to one.

Thank you.