



Rules of the Game

2010 Edwards Award Acceptance Speech

Jim Murphy

Thank you very much for that generous welcome. And thank you for such a wonderful introduction. I am very happy to be here to accept the Margaret A. Edwards award, and humbled that I'm the first nonfiction writer to be recognized! So let me begin by thanking the Edwards' committee members and the Young Adult Library Services Association and *School Library Journal*.

I have to confess something. When I received the phone call telling me I'd won the award, I was, of course, very excited. But then I thought: it's a "lifetime" achievement award for a "body" of work. And I immediately felt for my pulse.

But receiving the award did make me reflect on my — gulp — 40 years (good God can it really be that long!) 40 long years of, first, editing books for young readers, and then writing them. Exactly how did I end up here?



2010 Margaret A. Edwards Speech | Jim Murphy

Well, I guess the easiest explanation is that I was and in many ways still am a visual learner. If I can picture it in my mind, it will pretty much stick in there. And I think a lot of kids — maybe even most kids — start out learning in the same way.

It's why stories and characters and scenes had such a powerful impact on me. And why the fact-laden, dates-laden, laden-down texts of the nonfiction books I had to read when I was young never registered at all. The only thing I recall of the many, many biographies, history books and informational books I read is a single scene from a biography about a football (American style football, that is) player named Red Grange. It was a short, simple scene where a very young Red Grange is playing on a horse-drawn ice wagon as it's slowly moving down a street. The wagon hits a bump, Red tumbles off and has his legs crushed flat under the wheels. Now that stuck with me!

So I've tried to write very “visual” nonfiction books that have real story lines, use primary sources that allow readers to hear the voices of the people involved, and — when I can find them — show that young people were more than mere observers of history. That they were actively involved in shaping the history of our country. I want readers to



2010 Margaret A. Edwards Speech | Jim Murphy

experience history — to see it — as if they were eye-witnesses at the events.

When did I start writing like this? I'd have to say it was in a book that very few of you have heard about and even fewer have read. It was called *Tractors* and was published in 1984. Yes, I wrote a history about tractors.

I remember finishing the text for *Tractors* and being so happy and proud and relieved. (It takes me forever to research and write a book so I'm always relieved at this moment.) So I finished the text and captions, had all the pictures safely bundled up, and there I was telling my father about these gigantic machines with ten feet tall iron wheels and ear-splittingly loud steam engines, and...well, all the other fun stuff about oversized farm machinery.

When I finished talking, my Dad leaned back in his chair, got a little smile on his face (he had a very wry sense of humor), and said: "Jimmy, that's going to be a big hit in Russia."

Now I thought that line was very funny; it made me laugh out loud. But when I got home a growing sense of dread began to settle in. I suddenly wondered what kid in their right mind was going to



voluntarily pick up a book about tractors? Would a kid in Russia even want to read it?

Which led me to discover **Rule #1** of writing: *Never Underestimate the Importance of Fear and Panic in the Creative Process.*

I was supposed to send in the manuscript to the publisher the following week, which meant I had several days to sit stewing about my upcoming publishing disaster. I couldn't think of any quick way to salvage the manuscript, and out of sheer desperation I started reading through my research.

Which is when it really registered that the men who created the first tractors were a bit loony, to say the least. You would be too if just about every steam engine you built and tested blew up. So I started adding material about these individuals and when possible using their words to tell their stories. And guess what? No, it never became a bestseller, either here or in Russia. But it did receive a starred review from (bless you) *School Library Journal*. And the review specifically cited the personal stories about these inventors.

After this I began searching for and collecting first accounts of...well, anything. A young girl sailing with her parents across the



Pacific, a family's covered wagon journey west, a single woman homesteading on the prairie. Interesting people in interesting situations. I have a couple of hundred autobiographies, memoirs, diaries and collections of letters. I don't buy them because I intend to use them in a book. I just enjoy hearing their voices and getting a sense of who these people were and what it was like to live one hundred, two hundred years ago.

Which leads me to **Rule #2: *Seek and Ye Shall Eventually Find.***

One day I was going through my collection and realized I didn't have any firsthand accounts by people from the Revolutionary War. Which led me to wonder if there might be some intriguing accounts of the war by ordinary soldiers. So whenever I was in a used bookstore I would make a beeline to the history section and spend time grazing there...pulling a book out, looking through it to see what the text was about, who were the featured individuals, studying the author notes and sources.

It was during one of these expeditions that I found a university press book about Revolutionary War pension applications that were taken in 1830. Mind you, I'm not very good at math but I immediately



2010 Margaret A. Edwards Speech | Jim Murphy

figured that if a veteran was still alive in 1830 he might have been pretty young during the war. So I bought it.

The text was serious, scholarly, and dry as dust, but buried in there were real gems — the voices of soldiers telling about their time in the war (who they served under, where they fought and so on) to prove they had actually been in the war. If I remember correctly, over 35 of them were 16 years old or younger when they served.

One voice stood out from the rest: that of Joseph Plumb Martin, who was fifteen when he enlisted in 1776 and stayed in the army until hostilities ended in 1782. The author included some snippets from Martin's application detailing the good, the bad, and the ugly experiences of his years of service. As brief as they were, Martin's writing was lively and down to earth. And funny! You could hear his youthful eagerness and idealism, his unbounded energy, and his playfulness in every sentence. He sounded like a great kid, someone I wanted to know more about.

And happily for me, the author of the pension book mentioned that a copy of Martin's manuscript happened to be at the Ford Mansion



in Morristown, N.J., just a half hour from where I lived. That drive was the beginning of a journey that eventually produced *A Young Patriot*.

Rule #2 suggests that persistent, hard work will eventually pay off. And that's true a great deal of the time. But I've also discovered that — **Rule #3** — *Dumb Luck Helps As Well*.

My wife and I were on vacation in New Hampshire and we stopped at an ancient barn with a sign out front saying there were over 10,000 old books inside. And there were. Books everywhere — lines of shelves stuffed with books, piles of books on the floor between the shelves and on the stairs to the hay loft, which was also crammed with books. It was one giant fire trap ready to go up in flames, and I loved it.

We were there for almost two hours gathering up armfuls of books and I was wandering up in the loft when dumb luck struck. I happened to spot two identical books side by side. I've often wondered if I would have noticed the book if there had only been one of them. But I did notice, so I pulled one down and found myself holding *Chicago and the Great Conflagration* published just a month or two after the Chicago Fire of 1871.



2010 Margaret A. Edwards Speech | Jim Murphy

I had no immediate inspiration to write a book about the fire. But I liked the book I was holding. It was full of before and after drawings of buildings and it had this great map in the front that showed the spread of the fire in blood red. It was as if someone had shot Chicago through the heart, it was that vivid. So I bought the cheaper one of the books — it was slightly damaged — and took it home with a mound of other books.

And there it sat in my office untouched for months and months. During this time I was submitting ideas to Dianne Hess at Scholastic and she was rejecting them one after the other. Seven ideas shot down.

I have to say I was a little confused about what to do. And not very happy either. I thought they were decent enough book ideas but Dianne kept saying "try again." But how many times can you try before you have to give up? I decided to try one more time.

Not only did dumb luck lead me to buy *Chicago and the Great Conflagration*, it led me to pick it up now and actually read it. Almost the entire book — and it was over 500 pages long — detailed the buildings that had burned down and the dollar amount of losses. It was a catalog of insurance claims. Dreadful stuff really. But buried in the middle,



2010 Margaret A. Edwards Speech | Jim Murphy

hidden really, were two short chapters of personal recollections. And those were amazing eye-witness accounts, including one by a newspaper reporter who arrived at the O'Leary house about ten minutes after their barn caught fire.

I began wondering if it might be possible to tell the story of the fire, start to finish, from the perspective of a few individuals. I imagined the book would be like an opera, with the burning city as backdrop to the adventures and near-escapes of the characters.

Which was when I remembered something else. When I was doing research ten years before on the Civil War, I'd come across the firsthand account of Claire Innis, who was 14 when she became lost in the Chicago fire. I had jotted down her recollection in a notebook, mostly because her writing was direct and vivid and active. I guess if you literally had to run for your life, your recollections would be pretty animated too! And luckily — mostly because I'm too lazy to clean up my office — I was able to locate that notebook and Claire's account. It was her story that became the centerpiece of *The Great Fire* and keeps the text moving forward.



2010 Margaret A. Edwards Speech | Jim Murphy

I have to say remembering these books and how they evolved from notions to written manuscripts to books does make me feel — I'm not sure how to describe it — as if I'm suspended between two worlds. Old time book publishing and this new fangled electronic book age.

I remember going for a job interview at Harper & Row back in 1970. When they were housed in a small brick building on 32nd Street. There was one of those metal elevators you could see into and a very kind gentleman running it who asked who I wanted to see, then took me to the correct floor and pointed me in the right direction.

No security at all. No metal detectors or locked doors or calls ahead to see if I was expected. Just a "Go through that door and you'll find who you're looking for." And while I didn't get that job — it was a secretarial position and I couldn't type; still can't — but entering the editorial floor with typewriters clacking away, editors reading those long pages of galleys, and Ursula Nordstrom holding court in her office was, well, magical. It was like arriving in Paradise and discovering it is even better than advertized. I have to confess that when I think back to 1970 and then think about publishing today, it can be a little disorienting. Take 2009.



2010 Margaret A. Edwards Speech | Jim Murphy

I had two books published last year, one about the Battle of Antietam, the other about the Christmas truce during WWI. I thought both books were pretty good and they both received some very nice reviews. Early on in the year my wife, Alison, suggested that I might want to read some children's literature blogs to see what folk were saying about my books and other nonfiction. So I did. I made it a point to read various blogs just about every day for months.

And what a dizzying blizzard of comments I found. One person touted a number of titles as fine examples of the "New Nonfiction for children." But not my books! Boy did I suddenly feel a little older.

Another blogger championed examples of "POV Nonfiction," while still another urged that their "Dramatic Nonfiction" was what young readers wanted and needed. Guess who's books weren't mentioned.

Someone said that history books shouldn't be about stories (What! Hey, wait a second pal!); History, this blogger insisted, should be about ideas, and not little ideas either. Big ones. I guess the Civil War, the Emancipation Proclamation, World War I and peace weren't quite big enough to make that list.



2010 Margaret A. Edwards Speech | Jim Murphy

And someone else said that we shouldn't be using primary sources because young readers weren't trained to interpret them with the eye of a historian. Foolish me. All along I was under the impression that one of our jobs was to introduce readers to primary sources so they could become familiar with and less intimidated by them. I guess not.

All of which was a little puzzling and depressing to me. I don't believe there is any one correct way to write about a subject; every event or every person from history can be approached in a variety of ways, and each approach can be as effective as the next at communicating with and engaging kids. But clearly some folks don't agree with me on any of this.

Then I wondered if maybe a lot of the bloggers were as nervous and uncertain as I am about the future of books and our place in it. Maybe making definitive statements gives them a sense of control, as opposed to being carried along by a swift and unstoppable current. You might think that I would have run screaming from blogdom, but I didn't. I'm a fairly competitive person (in a quiet sort of way) and I love a good challenge. So instead of getting out of the water, I decided to join in the swim.



2010 Margaret A. Edwards Speech | Jim Murphy

I am now the proud possessor of my own little blog (though I still can't say that word without giggling; the word reminds me of the stains on a garage floor from dripping car fluids) which is on my own little website (www.jimmurphybooks.com).

I am member of a newly launched video-conferencing company which can be found on the INK (Interesting Nonfiction for Kids) Think Tank site (www.inkthinktank.com/index.html). So you can now arrange to see my mug from 12 inches away. I even participated in a publicity slam, which didn't really hurt as much as it sounds, but had me doing over 40 radio interviews in December. And surviving to tell about it.

And, yes, I did listen to what all of those bloggers were saying and I read most of the books they were getting behind, too. To see what worked and didn't work; to see if they really were that much different from what I do and what other people like Russell Freedman, Susan Campbell Bartoletti, Jim Griblin, and Candace Fleming have done. Was it a revolution, an evolution or just insistent self-advertisement? I came away thinking it was a little of the first, some of the second, and a good deal of the third! But it did show me that 2009 was an absolutely



amazing year for nonfiction for young readers and a good sign regarding the future of nonfiction.

And reading these blogs and books did help me remember the most important rule of all: **Rule #4: *You have to Trust Your Heart.*** Every one of those books I really liked were written by people who were driven to write them, who were fully involved in them emotionally and intellectually.

I remember when I first learned about the Yellow Fever Epidemic in Philadelphia in 1793 and being completely surprised and fascinated by the story — the collapse of every level of government, the squabbling in public by the doctors, the way the mayor of the city cobbled together an illegal government to keep the city running (and was later made to pay the tab), the way the African-American community stepped forward to nurse and in other ways help their white neighbors only to be criticized unfairly.

The epidemic had numerous levels and a giant cast of odd, interesting characters. Take Dr. Duffield, who insisted that the best way to ward off the fever was to put two inches of dirt in every room of your house every day!



2010 Margaret A. Edwards Speech | Jim Murphy

And I remember telling an editor (no one in this room, in case you wondered) about the idea and having it rejected. Pleasantly enough, but rejected nonetheless. I went home feeling empty and bewildered. I was so sure this was a good idea, but clearly that editor didn't think so.

Maybe there was a flaw in it that I couldn't see. I said something to my family at dinner, which was when our oldest son, Mike, chimed in. Dad, he informed me in a very serious voice, your mistake was to tell that editor about a gooey, gory disease called the Black Vomit *over lunch!*

So I decided to trust my heart, what my instincts were telling me to do. I decided to write the book without a contract or a publisher lined up in advance. If the manuscript was good enough, I told myself, someone would buy it. The result I'm happy to say was *An American Plague* and it did find a good home with Dinah Stevenson at Clarion Books.

The good news for children's books is that there are still people out there who trust and follow their hearts, even when the outcome is uncertain. My editors here — Dinah Stevenson and Dianne Hess — do that each time they accept a project for publication and even when they reject a project or two. Or seven.



2010 Margaret A. Edwards Speech | Jim Murphy

They want me to tackle strong subjects and they are wonderfully ruthless in getting me to work on a text until it's the best it can be. (Someday I'll tell you how Dianne got me to cut a 270 page manuscript down to 70 pages.) My editors want me to produce books that will be different from what I've done in the past, but will still connect and speak to readers. I want to thank them both for holding on firmly to their beliefs and holding my feet and non-typing fingers to the fire.

And it's comforting to know that you librarians are out there evaluating our books and weighing their worth with only one agenda in mind...to pair up a good book with an eager and sometimes not so eager young reader. A simple enough sounding chore but one that requires a deep knowledge of thousands of books and an intuitive understanding of hundreds of readers. That makes my job of writing one book at a time seem easy.

I don't know what the future holds for books in general or for me as a writer. After all, I write nonfiction, not science fiction. But I have a feeling that if we put aside iron-clad rules and all trust our hearts we'll create books (in whatever form) that touch young readers in ways they'll remember for years.



2010 Margaret A. Edwards Speech | Jim Murphy

Thank you again for this amazing award and have a great ALA and a great summer.