

Sarah Dessen 2017 Edwards acceptance speech

Thank you for this amazing honor. I want to express my gratitude to YALSA, School Library Journal and all the members of the Edwards committee. I'd also like to thank my parents, who put up with a LOT on the road to getting me respectable enough to even be considered for a lifetime achievement award. And finally, I want to acknowledge my husband Jay and my daughter Sasha. They aren't here today because we had a long planned vacation already in the works, which means at this moment they are most likely bobbing on White Lake, NC in inner tubes, together. I am lucky and grateful to have my editor, Regina Hayes, here as well as my Penguin Family. I couldn't ask for a better group to cheer me on.

Truth: I'm not a person who wins awards. In college, there were annual writing awards and I never even came close. I have won *things*: a mountain bike, a pager and a trip to the Veronica Mars premiere with Kristen Bell as my date. But that's just luck. And yes, ask me later and I'll show you pictures! The fact that this one is based on, and around, the world of books makes it that much more special. Because reading for me---and I'm sure I'm not alone here---has always been a solace. I'm not exaggerating when I saw there were even times that it saved me.

I grew up in a house where people were always reading. My parents kept books stacked on shelves, and when they got full, overflowing onto side tables and any other sturdy surface. Every Saturday, we went to the library, where I'd check out as many books as I was allowed to lug home and devour over the coming week. We never passed a bookstore without going inside, even if just to "look," although it was rare that we could resist buying a least something.

This was the mindset of my household. As an adult, I know now that not every child gets this, and that I was fortunate. But at the time, it was as normal as our 6:30pm dinnertime and the fact that nobody but my father touched the thermostat, ever. As in, just how things were.

Which was why, one day in late middle school when I was meeting some girls from school at a local mall and was early (that was another thing about us Dessens, we got everywhere fifteen minutes before we needed to be there) I went into the bookstore to browse. I lost track of time---bookstores do that to me, still---and then looked outside the front window to see my friends standing there, waiting for me. When I went out, one of them raised her eyebrows. "Were you in the BOOKSTORE?" she asked, as if it was akin to, say, the proctologist. I felt myself redden. "I needed the bathroom," I explained.

Okay: I'm not proud. I threw that bookstore, a blood-sworn friend, under the bus for two girls whose names I cannot even remember. (I do, however, remember the store: It was called The Little Professor, adjacent to the campus of UNC in my hometown of Chapel Hill. It may be the "Rosebud" on my lips at my deathbed. We'll see.) But being a teenager, and all the tumult and emotions that come along with it, will make you do things that make you wince at upon reflection later. Truthfully, forsaking a bookstore was the least of many sins of my teenage years. But that's another speech, so.....

I never stopped loving reading. But I did get a little more quiet about it. At home, though, I was still tearing through books, not as much out of joy but, I realize now, necessity. High school was hard for me. I was lucky to have good friends who

had my back---when if they weren't huge readers---and parents who kept a watchful eye. But there were struggles, and bad choices, and moments when I felt so alone, even with many people I loved and who loved me close by. At times like those, often it was ONLY In a book that I found something that felt true and real, a voice I could relate to, a character who made me feel less alone. Judy Blume's heroines struggled with all the awkward questions I couldn't ask aloud. Stephen King's ghosts and nightmares reassured me that high school wasn't the scariest thing I could face. And Anne Frank, in a circumstance I couldn't even begin to imagine, saw the good in a world beyond the one she found herself in. Between the pages of a book, and where books lived, I could do the same.

This became a constant. In the fall of my senior year, my first real boyfriend dumped me only a couple of days into the school year. I was devastated, and pulled back from everyone, preferring my own company, ideally in tears. Every day at lunch, I huddled in a study carrel at the school library, reading whatever I could get my hands on, and just waiting for the day to be over. In college, I never felt safe enough to doze off anywhere on campus but in a lumpy couch in UNC's Undergrad library, surrounded by dusty tomes. When I suffered from panic attacks in my early twenties, the only activity that calmed me down was reading: it was literally the only time my mind couldn't race to other things. And after college, when I was working as a waitress at the Flying Burrito, where emotions and drama always ran high in the small working space of the wait station and kitchen, I regularly stopped at the Chapel Hill Public Library for a few minutes of peace reading magazines before entering the chaos. By that time, I was also writing a novel of my own, guided

solely by advice from teachers and what I had learned all those books I had read since my own childhood. It seemed impossible, arrogant and insane to try to do this. But by then, books had been my escape for so long, I couldn't help but try.

The first time I went back to my high school to speak---maybe after my second, or third novel?---I was set up in the library. I could see my Senior Year crying carrel easily from where I stood, only a few feet away. After my speech, there was a Q&A, and at one point a boy raised his hand.

"So you went to this school," he clarified, when I called on him. Yes, I said. "And you graduated." Again, I said yes. He thought for a second. Then he asked, "Why, in the name of all that is HOLY, would you COME BACK?"

This was a good question. I was the girl who couldn't wait for high school to be over, who sat at graduation with classmates weeping around her, already nostalgic, and thought, "I never want to see any of you people again." But here I was, a YA writer, putting myself back there every day. Why, indeed? All I could think was that I still had stories to tell. My senior quote was Pink Floyd (which tells you all you need to know about me then, I think): "The time is gone, the song is over, thought I'd something more to say." And I did. I'm still telling it.

Since I'm being honest, I'll also tell you this: when I heard I'd been given the Margaret Edwards award, I thought for sure there had been a mistake. My books are not the kind that get shiny stars or medals on their covers. Instead, they are the dog eared ones with pen underlining passages, stained with coffee, pool water and occasionally tears. And that was fine with me, better than fine. The award I'd gotten, and still get a times, was from the readers that said, "Your books got me through

high school.” The thought of my book being the one someone is right now clutching in their own crying carrel, getting them to the end of lunch bell....well, that makes me want to sob right here.

Then, though, I did some reading up on the Edwards Award on the ALA website, and one sentence spoke to me specifically:

It recognizes an author's work in helping adolescents become aware of themselves and addressing questions about their role and importance in relationships, society, and in the world.

That self awareness is what I needed, and found, in books. I was that adolescent wondering what my role would be, if any, in this world that seemed at times to have no place for me. And it's why I put Annabel, my narrator from *Just Listen*, in her own school library as she hid from what had hurt her in high school. Why Macy, from *The Truth About Forever*, finds a peace and stillness behind the circulation desk after a year of loss. And why Louna, my newest narrator from *Once the For All*, turns to fantasy books when reality gets to be too much. All these girls are me, the way I was and the way I am now, with a nine year old daughter who lugs extra books to school to read on the bus, Hermione Granger style, making me both fear for her posture and so damn proud, all at once. As a safe space, books grow with you. Between the pages of a story, or the aisles of a store or the stacks themselves, we come together. Even when we are alone.

And it's when I'm alone, that I often think about that day at the Little Professor, those hours spent at lunch away from my friends at the library at Chapel

Hill High. I can still hear the questions too. "Were you in the bookstore?" "Were you in the library?"

Yes, I was. I am.

Thank you.