



**Winning Speech for *The Freak Observer*
Blythe Woolston**

To begin, I must say how honored I am to be in the company of such authors, of such books. I read them all. They are all amazing. Brilliant. I want to thank those authors for the books they have written. First, the *Woman of Valor* broke silence and gave voice to a story of agony and innocence. I am in awe of her courage. That is what the power to heal the world looks like. Barb, you come to us from the Heartland, and you gave us book rooted in what the heart remembers. You told us a story of resilience and finding home—you made us all cry. Barb, you owe me a hug, and I'm going to collect. *Tena koe*, Karen. I wish you could be here with us. Your book let me step sideways into a world both familiar and stunningly new. I loved being there, in that world you built. Thank you, especially, for an unexpected, kick-ass heroine. And, Lish, how do I start? First of all, you are a comic genius, but that's not the half of it. Every sentence, every word, works. You terrified me and broke my heart and made me laugh. If anyone says fantasy is fluff, I'll push them down in the street.

Next, I need to thank the people of Lerner Publishing Group and Carolrhoda Lab. Without their hearts and brains, there would be no book at all. Andrew Karre found *The Freak Observer* in the slush, read it on a plane, and said, "We can make a book of this."

And they did. I asked for a good, strong-bound book, fit to be on library shelves. And that's what they made. And they made it beautiful.

And now, you.

Hello you.

I'm Blythe the Reader.

I'm grateful to have the opportunity to thank you.

Thank you for recognizing *The Freak Observer*.

Thank you for putting Loa's story into the hands of readers.

But thank you most of all, librarians, for putting books within my reach.

I used to say that when I grew up I was going to be a cowboy or an astronaut. If I'd been a little more self-aware, I would have said that what I wanted to do was read.

The first library I knew was situated at the dead end of a hall in a rural elementary school. On the east wall, shelves held non-fiction, on the west wall, fiction. Even though I was puny, I could almost reach both shelves if I stood in the middle and spread my arms out like wings. It wasn't a very large collection. I would have run out of things to read pretty fast even though I wasn't picky. I even read the book about contour plowing with a team of mules—those illustrations haunt me to this day. I *would* have run out, but I had a secret ally. Every once in a while, a box would arrive from the county library, and I had new books to read. Because of those boxes, my library was endless. Worlds, the past

and the future, the stars in the sky, giant squids and cruel puritans: They were all mine, all given to me by an anonymous librarian.

I was thus initiated into the economy of knowledge where libraries are the beautiful savings and loan and books are good currency. It's a gift economy that creates a nation where a child has full rights of citizenship as soon some wobbly, letter-like marks can pass for a written name on a card. It's a gift economy where a person learns to respect the rights of others and take good care of common resources.

Every time a reader chooses a book, an independent vote is cast. Ideas open up.

Knowledge happens. The reader is transformed. Of course, none of that can happen unless there are books on the shelves.

There is a whole culture devoted to putting books on shelves. Book builders are a part of it. I have the pleasure of being part of the great book-building conspiracy. As it turned out, I was more suited to reading than repairing the Hubble telescope or arguing with cows. So I write indexes. It's a tiny role in service of books and readers, and it doesn't require a speck of bravery. But I know courage when I see it. I see it before me.

Librarians are on the front lines.

When you provide access to a book, you are defending the right to think. It runs much deeper than the right to speak: the right to think. It is the right to imagine and understand, to have thoughts. Shit happens in your brain when you read.

When you put a book on the shelves, the consequences are profound.

Loa Lindgren had a craptastic life. She also had access to libraries, to books, to knowledge. Nothing magic happened. No one waved a wand and rescued her, “Bing! You’re cured!” Loa had a brain and she had books. Loa learned something. That’s all. But it was enough to change her life, and that’s everything.

So thank you. As one reader on behalf of the many who would say it, thank you.