



Printz Award Speech

Paolo Bacigalupi

(I think I cursed some here in the beginning, something along the lines of "I just won a fucking Printz award!" But that's all kind of a blur.)

Thank you. Thank you for this honor. I'd like to thank the Printz Committee, and YALSA, and the ALA. I hope you'll bear with me. I'm not really comfortable standing up in front of lots of people talking, my natural mode is to hide behind a computer, so there's a strange sort of sadism that goes along with giving a writer an award. "Wait, you want me to stand up and **talk?**"

I'd like to thank a few people who aided and abetted in this process. First and foremost my wife, Anjula. She's a rock star, and she is everything to me. I wouldn't have been able to do all of this without her.

I'd also like to thank Joe Monti, champion of science fiction extraordinaire, no matter what hat he wears in the publishing world. He knew about my science fiction writing for adults, and so when he saw SHIP BREAKER come across the desk at Little, Brown, he jumped on it. I'd very much like to thank my editor Jennifer Hunt, who helped me take control of the book and who is so fierce an advocate for excellent books for young people. I'd also like to thank Victoria Stapleton, Megan Tingly, Andrew Smith, Ames O'Niell, Zoe Luderitz, and David Caplan. Little, Brown has been fabulous to me, and they've been fabulous for SHIP BREAKER, and it's a wonderful thing to have your house passionately back your work.

The other person I'd like to thank is my father, because he's the one who introduced me to science fiction, which meant he was also the person who made me passionate about reading.

Science fiction was my gateway drug to reading. It was what I read in elementary school, in middle school, in high school, in college. So it wasn't just a gateway drug, it was *the* drug: genre fiction. Fantasy and SF were my crack, and I smoked a lot of it. And that's interesting to me, because we tend to hold genre fiction at a remove from what we like to call real literature, and yet if it didn't exist, I can assure you that I would not have been a reader, and I would not have been a writer, and I would have lived a poorer, less engaged life.

And that's one of the reasons I feel so honored that SHIP BREAKER has won the Printz. Science Fiction has won the Printz. Straight up SF. Adventure. Ass-kicking and bloodletting. And hopefully, that means that a new generation of readers will have SF pushed into their hands, not in the way that I had THE RED PONY shoved into mine--and which I hated and resented because I'd never read anything so boring in all my teenage days—and I'm not trying to dis Steinbeck, but I can honestly say that I wasn't ready for him, and to be told that that was what reading was all about... well, that was pretty much a negative advertisement for reading, as far as I was concerned. So



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thank goodness for SF. And hopefully this will signal to a new crop of readers that literature and ship-to-ship battles can coexist. That reading doesn't have to suck, and that big ideas and ripping story can support one another. And hopefully, it also means that kids will think reading is cool and that it does have something to offer them beyond boredom.

And I think that's important, because if there was ever a time when it seemed like we needed more readers and more people thinking about where we're going, it's now. SF asks big questions about what the world is like today, and where we're headed. It asks the question, "If this goes on... what does the world look like?" And we need to be grappling with that more and more, and I hope that SHIP BREAKER and SF can provide one of those stepping stones to asking those larger questions, because, more than ever before, it's feeling to me like we don't know what the future will look like.

What happens when energy stops being cheap? How high will our sea levels rise? How easy is it to disrupt an ecosystem and make it unravel? What happens if our political dialogue continues down this path of name-calling and denialism? What happens if the rich make up a microscopic percentage of a nation, but control the majority of its wealth?

What if? What next? Where are we going?

We live in a world laced with questions. We're running big experiments in this country, and the implications are going to be felt not by us... not we adults, who just flew in our jets from across the United States to come to this original drowned city-- but our young people. Our children and their children, they've got a stake in what results from how we organize our world. They'll inherit what we do to them. They'll inherit the implications of me getting on a plane and flying here. They are the inheritors of folly.

So I'm even more honored that this book is going to go out into classrooms and find its way onto book shelves, and that it's already made its way into libraries across the country, because these questions are worth asking, and the sooner our young start worrying about what we adults are doing to them, the sooner they're likely to realize that we adults are not their friends, no matter how much we might pretend otherwise.

Yeah. I'm always the downer at the party. I'm always taking the wrong turn down the speculation highway.

There are other science fiction writers who look at the world differently, and weight its trends differently, and I'm glad that they're out there, because frankly, I depress the shit out of myself, and I'd rather be wrong about everything I fear about where we're headed. But it occurs to me that I'm only going to be wrong if smart people start figuring out some pretty big solutions--social, political, technological.

And I think that's why I'm the most worried. Because solutions come from knowledge, come from seeing the world accurately, come from seeing what is, and engaging with it. You don't get to a



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solution to global warming, until you get past Exxon-Mobil and its public relations orcs, who spend their days sowing confusion so that they can eke out one more year of record profits. And you don't get past those PR orcs unless we have a functional, informed democracy. Because, let's face it, cynical enterprises like industrial PR rely on ignorance. They rely, and indeed cultivate, a democracy that no longer can distinguish truth from falsehood, that believes data is always partisan, that only acquires its knowledge via talking head, and that places scientific data in all its complexity in opposition to sound bites in all their simplicity. They can only thrive in an atmosphere where it's acceptable to deny reality.

If there was partisan gain, I'm pretty sure I could buy a senator to tell you that the sky is not in fact blue. But really, all those tricks only work if *we're* willing participants. If we *agree* to be a dumb democracy.

If I put my science fiction goggles on, and look around at our present world, it's with some concern that I watch certain memes gain traction in the public sphere: the idea that taxes are too high and government is always the problem, and above all, that the wealthy should keep what's theirs and shouldn't have to worry about anything else.

There's a study that shows that the richer you get, the less empathy you have. True story. Wealth withers empathy. So it's with a great deal of concern that I watch funding for public schools and public libraries dry up and disappear, and watch that process where we as a nation neglect our public education, and our public libraries, and as a result, work hard to concentrate not only money, *but also knowledge*, in the hands of the richest people: the people who can buy all the books they want, and who can send their kids to private schools, while they keep lobbying to lower their tax rates so that the rest of the country collapses into ignorance and decay, while their profits rise and rise.

A dysfunctional and ignorant democracy is a great place for wealthy thugs to operate. It's a profitable place. But it's also a place that would prefer to exist in my fiction, and not in our real world.

Recently I was invited to speak at a high school. To call it underserved, would be an understatement. They didn't have lightbulbs for their auditorium. They had a hard time moving the kids down to the auditorium to even hear me speak, because there were so many discipline issues. So there we were, all standing there in the dimness of the auditorium, barely any lightbulbs on, and someone was saying, "Turn on the lights." And someone else answered, "This is the lights." And the other person said, "Well, turn on the house lights, then." And the other person answered, "This is the house lights." "Well, how do we get more lights?" "We need Metro to come down and fix it."

And somehow, you knew, Metro was never going to come.

It's no coincidence that this was a poor school, serving poor students, who were also largely African American. These are the people we just don't give a damn about. They weren't bad kids.



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They were great kids. It was probably the hardest audience I've ever stood up in front of, but you could see that there was potential with them, just like any other group of kids. It's just that we don't care.

I write science fiction, but the trends are there to watch. I think that school is a data point. It tells us what we value. It tells us that we have enough money to run a couple wars on distant shores, but we don't have enough for light bulbs. We're cutting back on education everywhere. We're cutting back on libraries everywhere. We've decided to fund our present wars rather than fund our future prospects. If you want a world like the one in *SHIP BREAKER*, this is where it starts.

I want to thank you all for this award, I'm profoundly grateful. It's an honor to receive this award, because it's always nice to be recognized as a writer, but even more so, it's an honor because of who is giving the award.

You're librarians. I see you at the dikes, holding back a tide of ignorance so vast, and so terrifying. Too many people would be happy to see ignorance swamp this country. I worry about rising sea levels, for sure, but I worry about the rising tide of ignorance far more. I'm honored to be honored by you, the people who keep spreading knowledge and fighting ignorance, and who keep helping kids get the books they need to answer the questions they need answered most—the people who get kids to read, to think, to dream, and hopefully, also, to take deep pleasure in the many doors that reading opens. If I was going to extrapolate into the future, I'd say that whither libraries go, we all go.

Thank you so much for this award, and thank you so much for what you do.