



## Printz Honor Speech

### A.S. King

When I got my call from the Printz committee on January 9<sup>th</sup>, I was watching the 1976 Candace Bergen episode of *The Muppet Show* with my daughters and I was saying the same things I always say to them about the misogynist Muppet hick who's using Candace as a servant in the "Put Another Log on the Fire" skit.

I say, "What do you think about that guy? What do you think about how he's treating his wife?" I say, "Girls, you have to be careful."

I say stuff like this to my daughters because they don't understand that fiction on *The Muppet Show* is based on something very real and they're too young to grasp that great satire often begins inside of darkness.

Plus, it annoys them a little, and it's my way of getting them back for waking me up too damn early in the morning.

Anyway, Candace Bergen's character, in her awesome woman-power t-shirt, had just shot open the door of the hillbilly shack and escaped the backward-thinking Muppet guy when the phone rang and I looked at the unfamiliar number on caller ID and bitched about how telemarketers shouldn't call on Sundays. And then I answered it and my life changed. It felt like that part in a movie where the audience's heart stops because something amazing happens to an underdog. To tell you the truth, this whole thing still seems unreal.

So first I offer a bow of gratitude and heartfelt thanks to the Printz committee and to YALSA and *Booklist* and to every single librarian, teacher and bookseller who



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understood what Vera Dietz was trying to say and who helped her say it to more readers.

I also want to thank Paulo, Janne, Lucy and Marcus for writing remarkable books that remind me why I do this every day. I want to thank three of my favorite guys: Andrew Karre who found me a place where I belong after 15 years of writing novels. My agent, Michael Bourret, who keeps me sane and worry-free. And Topher King, who did me the favor of marrying me 20 years ago because he was silly enough to believe in soul mates just like I do.

Mostly, I must give an enormous thank you to everyone at Knopf Books for Young Readers, most especially to my editor, Michelle Frey, who made sure Vera, Ken, Charlie and the pagoda said exactly what they were supposed to say in the way they were supposed to say it, and to Adrienne Waintraub, Lisa Nadel and Tracy Lerner for their tireless work with libraries and schools and for getting me here tonight. In short, I am awed, honored and will be forever grateful to all of you who made this happen.

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I dedicated PLEASE IGNORE VERA DIETZ to my parents. This was not a random dedication.

When I was 15, my mother was admitted to the hospital on a Friday night in November. The next morning after early basketball practice, I went to the hospital with my father to see her. She hadn't slept yet, convinced that if she closed her eyes, she would die. She was 46 years old and had a lifetime of nursing experience behind



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her, so she wasn't kidding around when she said this. But still, we knew she needed sleep.

My father and I sat in the hospital room that Saturday morning and told her we'd stay with her while she slept and we'd be there when she woke up. So she dozed off, snored a little, and Dad and I smiled at each other, happy she would finally get some rest.

About a minute or two later, a nurse arrived with some juice for my mother and behind her came a physician who needed to examine her right then, even though she'd just fallen asleep for the first time in over a day. The nurse gently shook Mom and called her name, but she didn't respond. The shaking became more violent and still, my mother wouldn't wake up. Soon, we all realized the same thing. Soon, there was an oxygen tank and spotlights and beeping machines and paddles and the scene we all see on TV.

"Clear!"

Before they dragged us out of the room, I stared at my dead mother. I was 15 years old. Nothing can prepare you for this.

My father and I were asked to step into the day room across the hall, which was painted an annoying pastel yellow. I have no idea how long we sat in that room. I think it was about seven trillion years.

Then, after the seven trillion years passed, a nurse came to the door and told us my mother was alive and asked us if we wanted to walk down to the ICU with her



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and we did, right beside the wheeled bed surrounded by beeping machines, each of us holding a hand.

I was the only teenager there.

And all the adults were in shock.

And I was in shock too, except that I was a teenager in shock in a land of adult shock. And things are different for teenagers. Especially a teenager who had just witnessed the death and violent resuscitation of her mother.

When I think back to that hour of my life, I realize a little part of me died that day. And a little part of me was resuscitated, too. And it was that part of me who became a writer and created Vera Dietz.

My mother had to stay in the hospital for a month, which left my father and me home alone, my older sisters being long moved out at that point. I think if I could have, I'd have taken the whole month off school and sat in that hospital room talking with my mother, but I couldn't. I had to go back to life and to school the same as my dad had to go back to work and we'd visit her when we could—every night and on weekends. One day during that month, this doctor who wore those tan corduroy pants with flying mallards on them told me that my mother had about six months to live. And then, after he told me, he handed me a bunch of brochures and he got up and left.

No one wanted to talk. Not about any of it. Not on my level, anyway. Not on that honest teenage I WANT TO TALK ABOUT THIS NOW level.



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Which was new for me. Because my mother, a nurse and an educator for decades, never held back when it came to telling me the truth and talking about it. I watched world news from an early age and started reading the newspaper before I was out of elementary school. In our relationship, questions were asked and then answered. Didn't matter how hard the question was. It was answered. With no sugar coating.

It was my mother who taught me how to joke about the hardest things in life and who made me understand why that *Muppet Show* satire was funny. It was funny because Candace shot the door off the shack and she escaped. It was funny because if we live through a thing, no matter how hard, we still have what matters most—our life.

So dedicating a book about ignoring huge issues in our lives and our society to my mother, the ultimate underdog, who is still alive 26 years since I got that “your mother is going to die in six months” lecture from the preppy doctor in the duck pants, and to my father, who may not know the profound influence he had on me during those months I spent as a daughter expecting to lose my mother any day, was a no brainer.

When I was writing PLEASE IGNORE VERA DIETZ, I thought a lot about the month in my house with just my father and me. There was something about our quiet understanding throughout that month and the unconditional love we have but have



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never talked about that somehow came through in the novel, and I was especially happy this reached my readers.

Because so often in this business, we are told as authors “what teens want to read.” I heard a few times during my journey with Ken and Vera Dietz that “teens only want to read about teens” and some suggested I cut Ken Dietz (and his flow charts) out of the book entirely.

But as someone who once lost and regained a parent in the span of a few minutes, I know all too well the importance of adults in teens’ lives. As teens, our worlds, whether we like it or not, revolve around and are controlled by adults.

My life (and your life) *still revolves* around adults who control us with their laws and their budgets and their definitions and sometimes, their very small ideas of “what teens should read,” and I would like to take a minute and give maximum respect to all of you who fight daily the challenges from those people who think teenagers should grow up in a bubble.

My inner Vera Dietz wants to shout WHAT FREAKING BUBBLE?

There is no bubble for teens to grow up in that is safe and sweet-smelling and full of happy rainbow unicorns. There never has been.

Teens *know* horrible things are happening to people all around them. Not just natural disasters or political uprisings—but all those uncomfortable things we don’t want to talk about, like abuse and rape and child pornography and bullying and domestic violence. Teens see all of these things and they know that most adults don’t want to talk about any of it happening *for real*. That’s the part that hurts me so



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much. Because at least one of those things will happen to one in four teenagers. One in four. And those teenagers will most likely be surrounded by a bunch of quietly uncomfortable adults who don't want to talk about it and who will ask them not to talk about it either.

To quote Vera Dietz: "I'm sorry, but I don't get it. If we're supposed to ignore everything that's wrong with our lives, then I can't see how we'll ever make things right."

My mother had this great trick to bring up uncomfortable subjects. She used the newspaper. She'd find an article about something—say, a drunk driving accident or a child's abduction or a hate crime—and she'd explain it or read it aloud and say, "Now what do you think about that?" The older I get and the further I get in my parenting experience, the more I realize how genius this was. Everything a human can ever go through is right there in the newspaper, and if you use it the way my mother did, for a few cents a day, you can teach your kids about the real world without having to lecture them. You can involve them subtly and earnestly without ever having to tell them what to think because they will think all by themselves if presented with the information.

Honestly, I think the older we get, the more of a bubble *we* construct around our *adult* selves, the more mired we become in how we think and the less interested we become in the questions because we are so busy knowing all the answers. And I think this bubble world impedes so many parents from talking to their kids about serious subjects.



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To them I say: Find a book! Find an article! Find a librarian!

Only thanks to a book did my 8-year-old talk to me about the Civil War, which led to discussions about slavery (Now what do you think about that?) and modern wars (Now what do you think about that?) and the physiological reason behind why the bodies at the battle of Gettysburg all bloated so quickly. (Now what do you think about that?) Thanks to a newspaper, I learned that it wasn't safe to go walking alone at night. Thanks to a book, I learned that some men hit their wives and children. Thanks to *Newsweek* magazine I learned that those little kids in Atlanta who disappeared when I was growing up were never going to come home. My inner Vera Dietz has never stopped reading and learning and asking that question: Now what do you think about that?

My inner Vera Dietz refuses to ignore all that stuff that makes people cringe. It's not that it doesn't make her cringe too. It does. She's just too busy cracking jokes with the survivors to pretend that they're not there.

But my inner Vera Dietz, though she speaks loudly, is more gentle than she is badass. She came from a very quiet and lonely and frightened place—that day back in 1985 when I realized that life is very precious, when I realized that adults are very important to teenagers, and when I realized that our time on Earth is far too short to distract ourselves from reality, no matter how ugly it is.

Something important stayed with me from those few moments I had no mother. Part of me stayed in that “immature” zone where dreams can come true if





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you work hard enough, where reality is exactly as it seems, where cynicism has little power and where soul mates can really happen.

I am very proud to say I still live in that zone. And I'd like to invite you all over any time you might need a break from the bullshit grown-up bubble world. No need to RSVP. Just drop in whenever you feel like talking about the truth that everyone else is ignoring. Stop by when you feel like asking "Now what do you think about that?" Be prepared to laugh. And bring your library card.

Thank you very much.