



Printz Honor Speech Marcus Sedgwick

Good Evening.

I'm delighted to be here, and delighted, too, that *Revolver* has received this recognition.

I would like to thank YALSA and *Booklist* for sponsoring this award, and, of course, the Printz Committee; you are all obviously incredibly wise people with exceptional taste.

I'd also like to thank Simon Boughton and all of his team at Roaring Brook. It is the most important thing for an author to feel that their publisher believes and cares about their work, and I'm grateful for the energy Roaring Brook has put into publishing my books.

And I'd like to send some thanks back home to the UK, to Orion, who continue to support my work superbly.

Actually, this touches on a further reason why I'm so pleased by this recognition. I think it's even harder to get your work noticed abroad, and, I have to say, when I took the call from the committee late one Sunday night (my time), it seemed like an almost miraculous moment. I'm deeply flattered and, although this might sound odd, proud of *Revolver*.

It was an interesting book to write for one simple reason: it was the first time that the feeling I had in my head was what appeared on the paper, in the finished book. Other books I'd written I may have been more or less pleased with, but this was the first time I got the feeling in my head down in print exactly.

And that, after all, is why we write. It's a strange thing if you stop to think about it, to decide to assemble the random dreamings in your mind and put them in some kind of order so that other people might derive emotion from them. But that's what we do, and we do it because there's an itch in our minds telling us to; a feeling that we want to convey to others. And with *Revolver*, it was the first time I think I'd managed it.

Maybe because it's a short book, I was able to hold all the strings at once and feel in control of it. Whatever the reason was, it was a blast of a book to write. I'm usually the kind of writer that likes to research, on the basis that researching a book is a damn sight easier than actually writing one, and on the basis that you can find things that make the writing, when you eventually get to it, a bit easier.

For example, on a trip to the Arctic Circle in Swedish Lapland, while stopping at the roadside to take a photo of a mountain one day, I fell through a thin, hard,



crust of snow into chest-high, soft snow underneath. I waded out again, waving to the Swedes passing by in their cars, laughing at the silly Englishman who didn't know a thing about the snow. A moment later, however, I realized this was something I could use in the book. I'd been trapped by the snow, and that's just what happens to Wolff in the novel.

Other aspects of my research led me to Eastern Europe to fire live weapons at an ex-Soviet rifle range. Gun laws being as strict as they are in the UK, it was easier to go to Estonia, where, I was told, it's easier to get license for a gun than to drive a car. I fired various guns that day, in about 10 degrees Fahrenheit, and got the answer to two questions I had been asking myself: One, is it hard to fire a gun? And two, is it scary? The answers by the way, for me, were: One, no, it's very easy, and two, sort of. Firstly because of my answer to question one, and secondly, because of how much you want to do it again when you've done it once. That's what was scary about it to me.

Revolver contains some difficult episodes for the reader. I noted just before I came out here that the debate on what is appropriate in a novel for teenagers has blown up again. I won't dwell on this because I'm sure there has been much debate on the subject. If the US anything like the UK, this conversation crops up every eighteen months or so, alternating with the one about whether books for children should have age ranges printed on them, and every time it does people on both sides of the debate get hot under the collar. That's fair enough—it's because we care about our young adults that we feel passionately about what they read, though to me the greater challenge remains how to get and keep them reading at all.

My own view on this subject, from the point of view of the author often trapped in the middle of the debate, has always been that it's not so much about what you do, it's how you do it.

I think this is true of all aspects of writing. I'm not the first person to point out that books should only really be categorized in one of two ways: good books and bad books. Even then, the question of what makes a book good is probably, ultimately, unanswerable. But with respect to the question of content, I'd like to just briefly mention one particular scene in *Revolver*, that of the rape and murder of Maria, Sig's mother. I wrote this scene in such a way that very young readers will not even understand exactly what has happened, only that Maria is dead. For an adult reader it's obvious, and, somewhere in the middle, the young adult reader may or may not spot it.

For me, because I didn't write the scene coarsely or graphically, I was therefore relying on the reader's own abilities and knowledge to do half the work and to impart the true and final meaning of the scene. What this means, is that at some point the maturing reader will be aware enough to spot what is happening, and that that, by definition, is therefore the right moment for that individual reader to read it.



Now the interesting part of all this to me is that I didn't write it this way because I said to myself, "I'm writing a book for young people, I ought to restrain things a bit." I wrote it that way because I thought it was *better writing* to do it that way, whoever I was writing for. So I say this because next time you hear a row going on about the content of a book, don't react to what it is that's being argued about, react instead to how it's been done. Has it been done well, or has it been done poorly?

I hope these remarks will now stand as some kind of defense ahead of the imminent publication of my next book, *White Crow*.

White Crow is possibly the darkest book I have ever written, and although it contains a drop of blood or two, it's not dark for that reason. I think it's dark because of the nature of the relationship at the heart of it. *White Crow* was born out of my desire to write a Gothic novel, but one set in the modern world. I thought it would be an interesting challenge, and challenging it was. It turned out to be a difficult book to write. A very different experience from writing *Revolver*, in fact. I only did a smattering of research this time: the setting, a doomed village called Winterfold, is based on the real coastal village of Dunwich, a place that has literally been falling into the sea for 800 years. This seemed the perfect metaphor for the decay that ought to be found in a Gothic novel.

Then there is the title, which derived from a quote by William James, brother of the novelist Henry James, who was interested in the question of the existence of the afterlife and hoped to prove it by finding an example of a genuine medium. "If you wish to upset the law that all crows are black," he said, "you mustn't seek to show that no crows are; it is enough if you prove one single crow to be white."

The only other piece of research concerns the extraordinary experiment I read about conducted by a French scientist into the existence of the afterlife by communicating with the decapitated head of a guillotine victim in the moments after death. Unpleasant, gruesome, and extraordinary reading though the account of his experiment makes, the real surprise for me was the date. The word *guillotine* brings to mind the revolutionary era, but this experiment took place in Paris in 1905, which is the same year that Einstein published his special theory of relativity, and therefore, one might rightly consider, the start of the modern world.

But that was as far as my research went this time, and the heart of the book concerns the relationship between the two teenage girls, Rebecca and the elfin Ferelith. I don't know why I wrote this. My own daughter was stepping into teenagehood at the time and so maybe I was thinking about the way some teenage girls, particularly, form very intense friendships, often quite healthily, but sometimes a bit too intense. My own daughter is not one of those kinds of girls, but I've seen some that are. I thought it would be fun to take such a friendship and exaggerate it, to meet two girls, to see them become friends, and then, at some point again of the reader's own making, to realize that one of the girls is not what she seems, that she is seriously manipulating the other.



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That's *White Crow*. As to the suitability of its content, I leave that for others to judge, but I do think it's a mistake to underestimate young adults. I think it's all too easy to forget what it was like to be fifteen: what we could cope with; what we wanted to know; what confused and scared us; what delighted and excited us. Surely a thoughtfully written book is a good place to explore all these things?

I would like to thank you all again for this wonderful honor that has been accorded to *Revolver*, and to thank you for a warm welcome in New Orleans.

I wish you all a lovely evening.

Thank you very much.