



Finalist speech for *Under the Mesquite*

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I received the news that I was a Finalist for the Morris Award while I was in class. I was in the middle of teaching my seventh graders how to embed sensory details in their revisions when, to my embarrassment, my phone chirped in my pocket. We don't allow students to use their phones in our classrooms, so I kept teaching, and I didn't check my phone until the break.

That's when I saw the message from Emily Hazel, my editor at Lee & Low, telling me the "exciting news." And how appropriate that I should find out about this award while I was teaching, for that is how it all began.

I wrote "Swimming the Rio Grande" in class for my students in early 1998 because I was trying to model the process of writing a narrative poem by focusing on a memory. I wrote that first poem six different times that day, across two blackboards, on the fly, erasing it and starting over again for every class.

But each time I wrote it, the memory of that day in the Rio Grande, with my father, my mother, my family became more and more vivid in my mind. I remembered things I had forgotten, and my heart swelled with love.

And so it went, every day I wrote new poems for my students, to model the use of similes and metaphors and personification and every other literary device out there. And every day I relived my life in poetic form. It was a joyful process.

At the end, my students and I had our very own collections of poems, words that recorded our memories, our lives. Only my collection grew over the years until it

became so big it looked like a book. And that is what Emily got, a collection of memories, little windows into a young girl's life.

I am so thankful that she peeked in those little windows and saw me--I mean really, really saw me there in those pages, sitting under the shade of the mesquite in our front yard in Eagle Pass. When she asked me if I would be willing to work with her on creating a novel-in-verse using some of my poems, I was so thrilled, so ecstatic, I accepted immediately. *Of course I could do this. It was a golden opportunity. The chance of a lifetime.*

And so it began, our journey to fictionalize a lifetime of memories, to reinvent my life along the Rio Grande, to give a young woman the courage and wisdom she would need to take strength from pain, to navigate darkness, to make meaning out of loss, even as her world fell apart.

But as I structured the book and thought about characters and conflict and theme, I began to consider the "job" I had accepted, the task I had undertaken, and it became very clear to me that this was not about me getting published at all, but about the young people who would be opening the pages of my book, leaving their little fingerprints all over it.

When I came to this understanding, the responsibility of it hit me--and I found myself thinking about my own reading experiences during my teen years. I reflected on the choices I made in picking books, the motivation behind those choices, and I remembered the ambiguity, the muddled emotions, the sense of turmoil and bereavement I went through as a young woman.

I remember being hungry for understanding. I wanted, above all else, to be moved, to be enlightened, to find solutions to my problems. The books I came to love opened my eyes. They showed the world to me--like friends, they were there when I needed them to comfort me. They helped me find myself. They helped me to grow by answering questions I didn't even know I had. In this way, they empowered me.

That's when I realized that I had to write not to be published, but to be read. I wanted young people to connect with my book, to have it make an impact on them. I wanted my book to help them.

You see, I have taught many Lupitas in my 23 years in the classroom. I've listened to them talk, to me and to each other, but I've also read their innermost thoughts, their dreams, their fears, their triumphs, their losses. Sometimes, their stories spill out of them, sometimes they keep their pain tucked away, where no one can see it.

I wrote this story for those young people who can't talk about it, for those who are struggling alone in the dark. I wanted to show them that they have great strength within them, that the human spirit is resilient, that the loss of a loved one does not mean the end of love, that we carry that love inside, that we can take it with us; it is ours forever.

I also want young people to realize that the dreams our loved ones have for us do not die when our loved ones are gone; they are gifts, bestowed upon us like wings, and to make those dreams come true is to honor their spirit, their love.

In Spanish, ALA means wing. I find that fascinating. Because in essence that is what YALSA does, bestow wings upon books so that they might fly as far and wide as they need to fly in order to reach the most important destination of all, the young reader's mind. By honoring our books today, YALSA has made more than our dreams come true, they have allowed our words to take flight, to soar, to glide and reach young people wherever they may be in life.

So I came here today to personally thank you for bestowing wings upon my little book. In honoring it, you honor my culture, my heritage, mi familia. But, most importantly, you honor my mother's short but very, very significant life--and that means the world to me. Thank you--I mean that from the very depths of mi corazón. I *am* and always will be grateful for your gift. Mil gracias.