

2012 Printz Award Speech-John Corey Whaley

Let me start off by saying thank you one billion and a half times to YALSA, ALA, Booklist and the Printz Committee. You gorgeous bunch of book jockeys really did it this time, didn't you? You have gone and changed everything. That you all loved my strange little story so much means more to me than you'll ever know. Thank you infinitely for this. I promise to stare at it with a proud, devilish grin on my face at least three times daily and to read my own bad book reviews while pressing my cheek against it and laughing maniacally. You have forever given me the power to shake off all the haters and for that, I thank you one billion times more. And I want to add a special thanks to every single librarian in this room and every single one not in this room. You do something remarkable, you know? You connect teens to worlds beyond their imaginations and, in doing so, you give them the power to create their own worlds. In the age of facebook and twitter and YouTube, you continue to do something that most people fail to do—you enrich their lives with something that can't be turned off, something that can't be logged out of, something that never needs time to buffer. You give them lives on paper and ink that will never go away. God bless you for that. And to those kids—those teenagers who have supported me and offered me high-fives and knuckle-bumps and called me an ass-hat over the past year. Thank you for reaffirming my faith in your generation, for proving to me that young people actually do care about a lot of things aside from texting and Snooki. (although, can you believe she's having a baby? OMG, right?) And to Christine, Maggie, Daniel, Maira, and Craig, it's a tremendous honor to be recognized alongside such wonderful, talented people. Congratulations to all of you.

And now for some semblance of a balanced, planned out and semi-structured speech:

I am a creature of habit. Let me rephrase. I am a creature of bad habits. I bite my nails. I curse too much. I eat too much ice cream and candy. I correct people's grammar. And I am sometimes overly cynical. And, yes, I have the bad habit of worrying about things well before they present themselves as worry-worthy.

So, I wasn't sure how to say thank you to the massive amounts of people who have changed my entire existence. How does one do that? How does one, using just words and nervous speech and hand movements, tell a group of amazing people that he can barely think about them without breaking into tears? How does he say "I owe you every single moment of happiness and stupid whimsical magic that has been this crazy ride"? It's impossible to transpose the feelings I feel through words. So, I thought "Maybe I can do this through some new-agey telepathic means." So, let's pause for me to stare awkwardly at all of you and see if it works.

PAUSE-STARE.

Did it work? Okay. So maybe there's still a few of you left, a few of you who, sadly, don't have good telepathic reception.

Now what do I do? I thought...I'm thinking...and I realize that I should do what I did when I was writing *Where Things Come Back* and would come to a situation that literally froze me with fear and confusion. I need to approach this whole thing as if I am Cullen Witter.

Now, if you're familiar with the story at all (and, if not, please see your way out) then you know that the main character, Cullen, is obsessed with book titles. He collects them and hides them in a notebook under his mattress. This, of course, was stolen directly from my own childhood and college years, in which I would, instead of actually writing stories or books or

anything useful, I would collect hundreds and hundreds of book title ideas in cheap notebooks or Moleskine journals or poorly named folders on my desktop. So, that's what I have to do: I have to deliver the remainder of this speech in book titles, titles that would and will somehow attempt say everything I need to say.

And so: Book Title Number One: The Wright (spelled with a W) Man for the Job

I was teaching school in Shreveport, Louisiana, home to William Joyce, riverboats, and a statue of Elvis Presley (listed in order of importance), and I had been trying to get my manuscript into the hands of an agent for going on 3 and a half years. I was tired. Frustrated. And I was teaching school like a mindless zombie and taking two hour naps at 3 o'clock in the afternoon. Every day. And then eating massive amounts of take-out and watching 30 Rock. That was my life.

So I get an email one afternoon from a man named Ken Wright and he says he wants to read the rest of my book, says he thinks "I have something here" and I jump up and down and almost slip in my kitchen and almost hit my head on the sharp corner of my counter, before sending him the rest of my manuscript and then checking my email 1.8 million times for the rest of the day.

I get a reply reading something like "Thanks, pal. Glad to have this. But, I get a lot of submissions, so please note that this may take six to seven weeks to get to."

And so I breathe heavy. I shake it off. And I am ready for rejection...the same rejection that my book had gotten countless times from countless other agents in big ole' New York City.

And then, six days later-BOOM. An email. From Mr. Wright. Was it a mistake? Did I send the wrong file? Was it so bad that he just gave up and changed his mind altogether?

No. Ken had read the book in one day and wanted to speak with me on the phone about working together. And speak we did. And work together we did. And Ken sold the book within 3 months, calling me two days before Christmas from an airport and telling me that we had an offer.

Me: “An offer? Like it’s going to be a real book?”

Ken: “You’re going to be a published author, pal!”

Me: SILENCE. Awe. Life-changing inner brain explosion.

Ken, that first email was nice, but I had no idea of how much it would change my life. I had no idea that I’d just gotten the best agent in the business and no idea at all that I’d just been introduced to someone who would be a dear friend for life. Your guidance and kindness have been more than I could’ve ever expected and for that, and for everything, I thank you from the bottom of my heart. You, pal, are a class act and one of my personal heroes.

Book Title Number Two: She Writes in Green to Spare My Heart

On my first trip to New York City, I met Namrata Tripathi, whose beauty and intelligence instantly intimidated me into speechlessness. I was also nervous about where we would have our lunch meeting because, well, I’m a terribly picky eater. So, Nami chose a nice Japanese place right near the S&S offices and I was relieved to see chicken fried rice; relieved that I wouldn’t have to explain my odd eating habits to this classy New York professional with her big words and MetroCard. But then I did it...I said to her, out loud like a dummy, I said to

her that I had been nervous about the restaurant and why. I am my own worst enemy. What followed then was our entire lunch meeting being consumed with what foods I will and will not eat. Nami was fascinated, enthralled even! And that's when I knew that we were meant to be. In fact, every trip I take to New York now includes some food adventure with Nami to see just how much she can test my limits....

And then we worked on *Where Things Come Back*...I got the first pass, with Nami's insightful remarks scribbled throughout in green ink. Not red...not harsh, fearful, "You Screwed Up" red, but green...my favorite color! How did she even know that!

I've taken to calling Nami my "literary soulmate" and it's hard to explain just how serious I am when I say that. Nami was able to see things in this book that I couldn't see, able to advise me how to say things she knew I was trying to say, but with which I struggled. I never once felt threatened or intimidated or out of place during the entire process. And, she gave me what I think has become one of the most important things about this book: she told me to treat the setting like I treated my characters, to not take for granted the experiences that I've had in a place like this where my readers haven't. And that changed this book for me. I think it changed it for everyone.

Nami, I'm so honored and blessed to have you as not only my editor extraordinaire and literary soul-mate, but also as my dear friend. Getting to know you and your beautiful family has been one of my favorite parts about the last couple of years. And the idea that I get to work on more books with you is too freakin' awesome to describe. I adore you, dear friend and I can't wait to work on a million more book with you.

Book Title Number Three: I'll Have to Talk to My People.

It started as a joke, way back when my career as an author had just begun. I would answer phone calls from friends and pretend to be someone else representing “Author John Corey Whaley.” Then, as time progressed and the book made it’s debut and I started booking events and the like, I realized at a certain point that I actually did have “people” now. People to look after me and send me places and tell others about my book and get me this interview and that one. And people to do so much more. It’s very important to me that everyone at the team at Atheneum and Simon and Schuster Children’s knows just how overwhelmed with gratitude I am for their awesome work with this little book that could have very easily flown way under the radar and into oblivion. So, those of you at Simon & Schuster who number far too many to be named, thank you.

You guys have made this way more fun than I ever could’ve anticipated. I actually feel like I’ve somehow managed to break some rule of existence and birth myself (sorry) into an entirely new, awesome family. For everything you’ve done, are doing, and have yet to do for this and all books, thank you.

Book Title Number Four: The Whole Fam-Damily

I’m one of those guys who was blessed with cool, laid back, liberal and open-minded parents who never pressured me to do anything I didn’t want to do and never once told me to stop trying for “unrealistic” dreams. Parents who consume books and quiz me on vocabulary and correct my grammar and stalk me on facebook and twitter. For all of that, and so much more, I want to say thank you to Wayne and Karen Whaley, who couldn’t be here tonight, but

who are so infinitely supportive and loving that to imagine any other childhood with any other parents would be impossible, ridiculous even. This award, Mom and Dad, is for you.

And to my friends and family back home---the ones who read my crappy short stories and poems for years and years and listened to me drone on and on about this book idea and that one without ever finishing a thing. This award is also for you.

And to my new friends here tonight, authors and librarians and the like, thank you for your ongoing encouragement and support. It would take too long to name you all, but just know that I love you and I have appreciated every conversation, every couch and guestroom, and every shared meal that you've provided over this past year of book touring.

Book Title Number Five: Woodpeckers and Angels and Zombies, Oh My!

In 2005, when I was a senior in college in North Louisiana, I was driving down the interstate on my way to my parents' house to do laundry and steal food from them. I had downloaded a podcast from NPR's website (because that's what all the cool kids do, right?) This podcast was the first and only podcast I had ever downloaded onto my iPod and I'd done so because it involved my favorite singer, Sufjan Stevens, and his writing of a song about an extinct bird in the middle of nowhere Arkansas. I'll be honest and say that I didn't care anything about this bird---hadn't given it two thoughts even. I just wanted to hear the new Sufjan song on the way home and this was the only way to do it. So, I'm listening and instead of just playing the song in its entirety, they intersperse interview clips from townspeople in Brinkley, Arkansas—all discussing what it means to them that their town has suddenly become world famous for the possible sighting of a long extinct woodpecker. And that's when it happened—I heard it in their voices, in all of their voices, this hopefulness laced with a thin line of dread, this desperate plea

in their words for it all to be true, for their small, seemingly inconsequential town to mean something, to have a second chance to be part of the world. It instantly reminded me of being a teenager, and especially of being a teenager in Springhill, Louisiana, where I felt like nothing for so long, where I watched people waiting and waiting for their second chances and never getting them. This was the story I had to tell, the one I was supposed to tell.

Really? A woodpecker? *That's* going to be my first book?

But I kept listening to these people and their familiar Southern accents and their hope and their dread and to Sufjan's song in the background and I thought about second chances and God and wings and things that fly and angels and being a teenager and being a teenage boy in a small town in the south and being a teenage boy in a small town in the south that suddenly becomes famous for the most absurd thing you've ever heard of, for something coming back from the dead. And then, naturally, I thought about zombies.

And then I pass this road sign shortly thereafter for two small towns in North Louisiana—Ada and Taylor. “Ada Taylor....she sounds like a lovely girl,” I thought to myself. And then I pass another town sign: “Cullen,” I say aloud “That seems like a wholly original name for a main character that surely won't pop up in any soon-to-be worldwide pop cultural phenomenon sagas about teenage vampires.” Thank God I took away the woodpecker's fangs, right?

And then, after teaching school for a year, I pulled a very Bon Iver move and wrote most of this book in my parents' camper in the Arkansas woods over the summer. Yes, a camper in Arkansas. Listen closely when you open the book and you may hear the faintest sound of banjos. And I titled it after a nickname for the actual Ivory-billed woodpecker: Good God Bird.

Or, God GOD Bird or Good God Bird? You see why we went with *Where Things Come Back*, right?

I've been accused many times of writing a sad, even disturbing story...a story in which a teenager goes missing, a young man loses his faith and takes his life, and countless others search desperately for the meaning in all the madness around them and sometimes, GASP, don't find it. And that's why I had to write this book, I think. I had to try as best as I could to answer a question that I've been asking myself over and over and over again since I was a teenager. Is it possible to grow up in an impossible world? A world that gives as much as it takes away sometimes. A world that plays cruel jokes and confuses us and sometimes surrounds us with the wrong people and leaves us in the wrong places at the wrong times. I'm not going to be egomaniacal enough to assume that this book answers this question for anyone other than myself by telling Cullen's and Gabriel's and Benton's and Cabot's stories. But it is my deepest honor to hear that it might mean something to all of you. *That* makes the world more possible for me.

My favorite author, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., made up an entire religion in his novel *Cat's Cradle*—Bokononism, a religion based solely on the idea that everything is B.S. (he called it foma), but that embracing this foma will keep you healthy and happy and at peace. In this religion, one is said to be cosmically linked to other individuals in a significant manner...these individuals all form what's called a *karass*. And a karass, you see, works together, either knowingly or completely obliviously, towards an ultimate shared goal or theme, better known as a *wampeter*. But I don't want to talk about foma or wampeters or karasses, I want to talk about kan-kans. What are kan-kans, you non-Vonnegutians may be wondering. Well, a kan-kan is the instrument through which one finds his or her karass. You see where I'm going with this? This book, this seemingly unlikely combination of letters, numbers, and punctuation marks, is my

kan-kan. It's given me my karass. It's given me, well...all of you. All of you fellow authors, all of you publishers and editors and agents and bookish type. All of you bloggers and reviewers (I love you, love me back). And, of course, all of you beautiful, passionate librarians. Needless to say, after this year of my life, my karass is so big it barely fits into this room. I've got a HUGE karass. And you're all a part of it, for better or worse.

Book Title Number Six: Come on, Get Sappy

It probably won't surprise you to find out that I worked in my high school's library when I was a senior and that I loved every minute of it. Mrs. Nelda Hattaway, my sweet librarian in Springhill, Louisiana, let me label and shelve all the new books because I think she knew I wanted first dibs on them. I still remember the first time I saw Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, you know with that beautiful light green cover and the strange little photos in the corners? I checked it out the day we got it and I read it that night, read it and came to realize something important, as I had with others books such as *The Catcher in the Rye* and *Slaughterhouse Five* and *1984*. I came to realize that these authors meant something far greater to me than I'd ever noticed, that their ability to use characters to speak thoughts that I had only imagined as my own, had only dared think I alone could actually think, that the way they used words to make me feel all these emotions that the world around me tried so hard to suppress was magic, it was some kind of beautiful magic. And I wanted in. I wanted that power, that power to possibly change the way a person perceives the world around them. To alter existence, don't we all want a little piece of that? Don't we all want to leave some dent in the side of the world?

These books changed not only the way I read, but the way I looked at the world through my teenage eyes, the way I listened to people speak, the way I trusted words and actions and

motives. These *library* books changed my life and it comforts me to know that they sit waiting to change more and more. We always hear some new story about this book or that book being banned for “inappropriate content” and what not. We see parents angrily protesting a book that discusses sex or drugs or abuse (because, you know, those things only exist in GrownUpLand) But, we so rarely see the kids, the teenagers. We so rarely hear what they have to say about it all. I’ve done a lot of school visits this past year and, with no offense to anyone present, it’s the questions that teens bring me that are the most thought-provoking and honest ones. They want the truth about everything and they know exactly when they aren’t getting it. And that’s my hope, I guess. I hope I can always, no matter what I’m writing, no matter what direction a story takes me, I hope I can always be honest for them. And it comforts me to know that there is a place where teenagers can go to find answers and truth, a place full of people waiting to share their favorite stories, both happy and tragic. A library. The one place with infinite answers in an impossible world. Close our libraries and you close our minds.

In the final chapter of *Where Things Come Back*, Cullen Witter ruminates on the meaning of life. He quotes the mysterious Dr. Webb (who, if you hadn’t gathered, is his shrink at some point in the future). Dr. Webb says:

“Life has no one meaning; it only has whatever meaning each of us puts on our own life.”

I’ll be honest with you all and tell you that I struggled for a long time with what my meaning could be; why was I on this earth and why was I born to be who I am. In my 28 years of life, I’ve thought my meaning was to be (in this order): a scientist, a psychologist, a paleontologist, a journalist, a Methodist preacher, a filmmaker, an anthropologist, and a school teacher. I was wrong about those. Way wrong. And now you’ve all done something for me that

I can never repay, something that I couldn't do alone. With this award, with this year, with your support, kindness, enthusiasm, and love, you've all given me my meaning. Thank you for that.