

Anna-Marie McLemore – Morris Award Remarks

First of all, *un abrazo fuerte* to the 2016 Morris Award Committee. Thank you so much for considering THE WEIGHT OF FEATHERS. I'm deeply honored and so grateful to be in the company of these four incredible authors and their wonderful books. And thank you so much to the American Library Association and to the Young Adult Library Services Association. It was at ALA and YALSA events, on panels and in conversations with librarians and other book advocates, that I first found my voice to talk about being a queer Latina author, and for that I will always be immensely grateful.

I have much more to thank all of you for; we'll get to that in a minute.

As a teen, I made the decisions that shaped who I was and who I would become. As a teen, I came out as queer. As a teen, I decided to stop spending so much of the life I had in me trying to pass for white. And as a teen, I fell in love for the first time, with a boy from Colorado. To me, Colorado sounded like a fairy tale of pine trees and winter frost, because I'd grown up in hills scarred by droughts and wildfires, and I'd learned to love the deserts of California the way my great-grandfathers had loved the deserts of Jalisco.

This boy I loved was also a boy who had been born female. It took us both a while to get around to saying the word transgender. But even early on, who he was, and the fact that I loved him, threatened me. I had spent years denying the truth of my own queerness—didn't being mixed-race Latina make me different enough?—and all that denying had made me small, and sometimes cruel. It made me repeat homophobic and transphobic things I heard friends say, until these things sounded so familiar in my own voice that they became mine.

Falling in love with a boy who had been born female did not make me forget these things. Falling in love was not a fairy tale spell that made me less cruel, or less small. I had to unlearn all of this. And I am lucky that the boy I loved, the boy who was coming to love me,

understood that I did not believe the things I had said. That they had come from a place not only of fear but of hating who I was.

In *THE WEIGHT OF FEATHERS*, Lace Paloma, a Latina girl, falls in love with Cluck Corbeau, a Romani boy. But before she falls in love with him, before she knows anything about him, she calls him a racial slur. Both to his face and behind his back. It's the same racial slur she's been taught to call his entire family.

She should know better. Of course she should know better. She's Mexican-American, and racial slurs directed at her and her family are a familiar wound. But she does it anyway. And I think it's not just because she's been taught to. I think it's because, when she looks at Cluck Corbeau, she sees not only his otherness but her own. She sees in him the truth of both of them, that they've been marked by people's suspicion, fear, and even hatred. But for her to recognize him as like her—and for that awful slur to disappear from her tongue—she first has to recognize him as someone with a story of his own.

Stories make us human to each other. And fiction, however made-up, makes us real to each other. It takes us past slurs and stereotypes, and into the deep ocean of understanding that every person, real or imagined, cannot be reduced to a word or a few words. Each one of us is four hundred stories.

Why four hundred? Because growing up, four hundred was my infinity. In Aztec folklore, the number four hundred stood in for the idea of the innumerable. Our stories, and our hearts, are innumerable.

Thank you to readers, not only those who've welcomed Lace and Cluck, but all who love books, and value stories. Thank you to my fellow finalists, four authors I admire deeply and am honored to be among. Thank you to the Morris Award committee and everyone at YALSA working to get books to the readers who need them. Thank you to my agent, Taylor

Martindale Kean, my editor, Kat Brzozowski, my publicist, Michelle Cashman, and everyone at Thomas Dunne Books and St. Martin's Press. Everyone I've had the privilege of working with has embraced not only this story but every queer and Latina part of me I thought I had to hide.

And thank you to all librarians. Stories, of course, not only show us each other; they show us ourselves. Before librarians put books in my hands about Latina girls, I was beginning to wonder if I existed. I certainly didn't think there was a place for me and my family on bookshelves. The world of stories felt like a world locked to me, until librarians showed me the way in.

Part of me will always be seventeen not just because I fell in love as a teen and came out as a teen, but because, as a teen, librarians helped me find my way into that locked place. Before you showed me girls like me and families like mine on shelves, I was disappearing. So to all librarians, *un abrazo fuerte*, now and always. Thank you.