

## Librarians and Books as Positive Forces in the Teaching of Reading

Thank you to those who made it possible for me to be here today: The Saskatchewan Arts Board; the Canada Council; Red Deer Press; and thank you to *Booklist*, the award sponsor, as well as the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) and the Printz Awards Committee.

In addition to thanking particular people and groups related to my writing, I will be offering some ideas this evening about diversity and the importance of stories, as well as the role of librarians and books in promoting reading.

First of all, a huge thank you to some important people who have supported me in my writing. This circle includes: my editor, Peter Carver, and the rest of the team at Red Deer Press; the Canada Council; and my friends, family, and co-workers with Saskatoon Public Schools and the University of Saskatchewan. Special thanks to my husband Dwayne, who is here with me today, and who has journeyed with me alongside Taylor Jane in all three of the books devoted to telling her fictional story.

Stories are important. They help us sort through ideas about who we are and offer us possibilities about who we might become. I grew up in the warm embrace of what stories can provide, thanks to a mother who was a wonderful storyteller. One of the stories my mother told, often, was the story of *Johnny and the Pear*.

My mother attended a one-room prairie school, and in 1924, when she was about eight years old, an incident happened in that school that she would tell and retell. It was autumn, a time when in the rural areas, crates of peaches, plums and pears would appear from British Columbia, fruit that was not common on store shelves at other times of the year. One particular day, Mary, a friend of my mother's, was excited at having a pear in her lunch. When lunchtime came, Mary got the empty jam tin that she used to carry her lunch, opened the lid, and exclaimed, "My pear is gone!"

The students all looked over at Johnny, an immigrant boy, new to the school, who didn't speak much English. Since his arrival in the district, Johnny had often been at odds with the other kids. One of the boys said he'd seen Johnny go out to the back-house during class, exiting through the cloakroom where the lunch tins were kept. "I bet Johnny took that pear," exclaimed someone else. Soon Johnny was running down the dirt road, with all the other kids pelting after him.

It wasn't long before two of the big boys caught up with Johnny, and pinned him down in the dust. "Say you took Mary's pear," said one of them, "And we'll let you go."

"I took it," said Johnny.

The students marched Johnny back to the teacher, and told her that Johnny had admitted to stealing Mary's pear. The teacher strapped him. Here, my mother would always tell of hearing

Johnny sobbing, from where he was made to stand at the back of the classroom, all through that long autumn afternoon.

The next day Mary came to school and whispered to a few of her friends that when she got home, the pear was sitting on the windowsill. Her mother had forgotten to pack it. Nothing was said to the teacher, or Johnny, about his punishment the previous day.

Listening to this story as a child set something in motion regarding my thinking about differences and how, if we let them, differences can divide people. I'm certain that by telling and retelling this story, my mother tried to revisit the past in ways that would help her change not the past—for that is impossible—but the future. And I think she was successful in her attempts. She certainly changed me through this story, and affected the kind of teacher, and writer, I became.

Stories do that—stories change people. I believe that writing is one way of changing the world, one reader at a time.

My story *The White Bicycle* is about a young woman with high functioning autism but, just as important, it is a coming-of-age story about universal themes people share including the search for independence in a world that is at times unreceptive and confusing.

Respect for diversity is a theme that I hope appears in my work. It's no accident that my special education background has prompted me to choose protagonists who haven't commonly been represented as leading characters in children's and young adult fiction.

I learned a lot about autism from my fictional work with Taylor. I am grateful to this character for finding me, and connecting me to a gap in work produced for young people, where characters who are differently abled have not often been considered hero material.

In my recent academic work exploring patterns and themes in Canadian young adult novels that include characters with disabilities, I didn't see the "kill or cure" mentality that's evident in classic works where authors were unable to imagine a happy future for people who were differently abled. I did, however, see contemporary trends that are almost as troubling. One such trend involved the fact that very few of the characters with disabilities, in my study sample, engaged in travel. That is the reason why, in my final book about Taylor Jane, the story is set in France, where Taylor travels from Canada for summer employment. I was fortunate in visiting the south of France when researching this novel, and I really enjoyed all the experiences I had, including, like Taylor, the incredible crème brulee.

The Printz honour book award is especially meaningful to me because it is named after a school librarian—Michael L. Printz,—who was also an active member of YALSA (the Young Adult Library Services Association). Mr Printz had a passion for books and the development of reading in young people. I am grateful to have my book, *The White Bicycle*, connected to him.

It seems to me that in North America it is our librarians who are important constants in the formula for teaching reading...librarians and books.

Alongside variables that relate to teaching strategies, programs, theories, curricula, and governments either too involved or not involved enough, in supporting authentic literacy development, a clear constant in the teaching of reading to the general public, since the origin of the printing press, has been the book.

In spite of cautions by Socrates that reading and writing would be civilization's downfall, cautions subversively recorded by Plato, the book has managed to emerge and withstand numerous metamorphoses in terms of purpose and form into what we have today in our schools, libraries, and homes, in print as well as digital form.

And along with the book, we have librarians to assist with connections between people and reading. These connections honour some of the very things that are difficult to otherwise address related to the teaching of reading: things like teaching to individual gifts and challenges, teaching to contextual interests, and teaching to particular reading levels.

Librarians have championed a respect for diversity that has, at times, been missing in our schools and communities. Librarians have included books in library collections that classroom teachers could not address in classrooms, and librarians have protested against the banning of books where they believed these books were necessary mirrors and windows for young people—mirrors and windows that would help kids accept themselves as they were and consider themselves in terms of who they might become, mirrors and windows that tell us that it's okay to be different and help us understand the differences of others.

When differences in terms of gender, social class, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, and ability have put up barriers between people, books that librarians have insisted be part of library collections have served to take these barriers down.

It is no wonder that I am thankful for librarians like Michael L. Printz, and the librarians here tonight, for the work that you do. You are not secondary to authors, but partners with authors in a deliberate journey to achieve social justice, to create a world where equality is evident in practice as well as in principle, and where kids, no matter what their differences from each other, feel safe and appreciated. Thank you for your support for books and for young people. These two things go together in critical ways, upholding with tenacity the reasons why young people read and, in turn, enabling their development as readers.

To all the librarians here tonight, and the people who support them, my heartfelt thanks—for the honour bestowed upon my book, but more than that, for the important work that you are doing.