

Wow. There isn't a room in London this big. Except for maybe at Buckingham Palace, where obviously I hang out all the time. When I'm not at Downton Abbey.

That's my only joke. I really only have one mode for speeches I'm afraid, which is kind of weird fanatical mystical philosophy.

You know, for kids!

But before I get into the weird fanatical mysticism, first of all, I want to say thank you from the bottom of my heart for this award. I'm so honoured, in what was such a strong year for YA fiction, to receive it. I understand, too, that the process of choosing a winner can be a little... fraught... so thank you to everyone on the committee who read so many books, and spent so many hours discussing them with nothing but coffee to sustain them. My hat goes off to you. Well, it would if I had a hat. I need Jon Klassen to hook me up with one.

It's especially meaningful to receive the Printz here, in my home town of Chicago. Not really: I think you can tell from my accent that I do not hail from these shores. And that makes me only more grateful that you have seen fit to bestow this accolade on me. Still, if Patrick Ness can come and steal our awards, I guess I can come and steal yours.

I thought for a long time about what to say today, and I came to the conclusion that I wanted to talk about circles. Does this have anything to do with *In Darkness*, you ask? Possibly. Will it make sense, you ask? Probably not. But I'll try.

So: circles. I'm fascinated by them. The circle is an apotropaic symbol, for instance. Apotropaic: a wonderful word. Which means something that wards off evil – like the evil eye. The house I live in, in England, has a fifteenth-century stone doorway – a Tudor arch for all the architecture geeks in the

house – and carved into the stone is a circle, to prevent badness from getting into the house.

That sort of magical thinking is something I keep coming back to when I'm writing. In a way, my doorway with its apotropaic symbol helped to inspire *In Darkness* – the idea is present in the stone Shorty carries, the *pwen*, which contains a loa from the old country and protects him. It is his apotropaic symbol.

But also I think I keep coming back to it because it seems to me that the ordinary world really is magical and wonderful. I mean, the kind of sympathetic magic that the sociologist Marcel Mauss wrote about most certainly isn't real – you can't shake a stick that sounds like rain and make water fall from the sky; you can't eat dog hair to cure a dog bite. But there are lots of ways in which the scientific and the mystical meet, lots of ways in which something that is true is also something magic.

For instance, a circle.

Something that fed into *In Darkness* was a scene in one of John Crowley's books in his Aegypt cycle. Crowley is preoccupied with epistemology, with the philosophy of knowledge. And in one very small scene he encapsulated something that pretty much blew my mind. His character Moffett is thinking about God and about eternity. About the enormousness of infinity. About the intimidating scale of the idea. But then suddenly he is struck by an epiphany: we think of eternity as big, as huge, but this is a cognitive bias. It's not *true*. Moffett, in the book, contemplates a piece of jewelry, a ring.

Like this one.

He says to himself: this ring is small. But it's also infinite. The circle never ends.

So: infinity isn't necessarily big. Something small can contain enormity. This is mathematically true – this ring *is* infinite. The concept holds in physics too: use a powerful enough microscope and look inside a human body, and what you will see closely resembles a universe. We are *enormous*. Composed of billions upon billions of atoms and electrons separated by vast gulfs of space. Structures repeat, on the small and on the large scale.

All of this, I think, fed into *In Darkness*. Shorty and Toussaint l'Ouverture form a circle, after all. Shorty is possessed by Toussaint, and Toussaint is possessed by Shorty. In fact, it was only when I realized this that I had the key to the story – before that, I had the idea of writing something about Toussaint, because I wanted to celebrate him, and I had the idea of Shorty in the rubble, but I didn't know why I was convinced they were somehow the same story. It was only when I thought about the fact that Toussaint died in a dungeon, and thus that at a certain point he and Shorty are in a sense in the same place, trapped down underground in the darkness, that I realized there was a circular structure there where the two could swap places, across the thin membrane of time. And that was when I started writing.

But also, in a practical sense, Shorty is Toussaint's descendent, biologically – at least it's strongly suggested in the book he is – and thus he carries Toussaint inside him in a real and empirical way. Not as a universe of atoms and electrons but as a universe of genetic code.

And this is another kind of everyday magic, and one I keep coming back to in my thoughts. It's also an idea that definitely influenced this book, since my wife was pregnant with my daughter when I was writing it. And since inheritance and the preservation of that which seems to be lost is something that deeply concerns me anyway.

See: this ring I'm holding is my father's ring. He died, violently and unexpectedly, when I was relatively young. Which if you've

read the book you know is something Shorty deals with too, so in that sense it ended up in a very literal way in the story. But it also ended up in there in more abstract ways. If there is a single idea that *In Darkness* explores, it's the idea of mortality, or rather the *limitations* of mortality. Because, yes, if you view it from the perspective of the individual, then people die. But if you view it from the perspective of the genes, of the code, then nothing ever dies – individual lines maybe but not the whole.

If there's a message to *In Darkness*, and I don't know that I consciously intended there to be one, I think it's that: it's this notion that nothing and no one is ever lost, that even in darkness, there is always the possibility of light coming again, of hope. I know that many have found it a very dark and depressing book, and have seemed surprised that I view the ending as hopeful. And I know also that some have questioned the audacity of writing a book set in another place and culture – a perfectly legitimate concern. But I hope it stands as at least partial mitigation that to me the entire story is about goodness, about love, compassion, hope, and infinity, about the impossibility of anything being lost or destroyed, and the inevitability of things coming full circle.

It's about my daughter, who was born just as this book was, yet who contains my father, who died long before I wrote it. Another circle there. And the absolutely biologically true fact that each of us carries within us a genetic code that, with minor variations, has existed since the beginning of life on this planet. There is not one of us in this room who cannot trace their genetic ancestry back to the first bacteria in the primordial soup. Apart from maybe Daniel Kraus. He has a feel of the alien about him.

In fact, short snippets of our genetic code will have been preserved absolutely verbatim for a billion years. Isn't that just the most miraculous thing? A shaman from Nigeria might say – as I recently saw one say in an interview – 'my ancestors live

inside me'. The thing is, a geneticist would say the same thing. It's another magical truth.

So: Shorty is Toussaint. He carries his ancestor inside him. And in this way Toussaint can never really die. And what is it that Shorty carries inside him? Code. Letters. Short fragments of amino acid that enact the construction of his body and the brain, sections of information-containing units, which stand for certain shapes. *Words*, essentially. For an author, there's something just dizzying about that idea. And also something it seems to me that young people, young readers, need to know. So many books written for them are about relationships, about romance, which is important, of course it is. But I think I wanted to say something about loss, and how it isn't real, and how it can be overcome.

If there's one thing I want to impress upon you tonight, it's the utterly real and scientific existence of magic in this world, the possibility of wonder in the everyday.

The next circle I want to talk about relates to the interface between psychology and myth, and it speaks to the incredible work you all do, every day of your lives; and it speaks to the magical power of the book.

So: the practical benefits of reading are much discussed. We know it's an essential skill. I know this personally. I'm second generation middle class: my father came from a very poor family in the north of England. He was the first in his family to finish school let alone to go to university. And he did it by reading books from the library. Recent research has shown that children who read regularly perform better in life even than those with educated parents¹. But I've come to think that

¹ "Being a frequent reader is more of an advantage than having well educated parents. Finding ways to engage students in reading may be one of the most effective ways to leverage social change." *Reading for change: performance and engagement*

reading, for young adults, is actually also an incredibly valuable part of growing up – of becoming a functioning adult.

This is a room full of librarians so I imagine many people here are familiar with Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with the Thousand Faces*. In it, he develops the idea of the 'monomyth', a structure underlying much of the world's mythological stories, often referred to as the Heroic Journey. Campbell illustrates it with a circle. The hero starts off in his own community. Then he is taken, usually by a guide character in what is called the Call to Adventure, to a place where he is prepared for a quest, given special clothes, perhaps magical objects. Frodo's cloak and the ring itself. Then he is sent out into a dangerous, liminal other world, where he must fulfill a quest. He's sent to Mordor. And finally, he comes back, having defeated the monster, or found the thing that needed to be found, having made sacrifices and faced the abyss, and he returns – full circle – to the community, to his world, only it is a world subtly changed by his journey, and so is he.

Mostly, this idea now gets discussed in creative writing manuals. It's used as a template for writing stories. But the aspect that gets forgotten is the anthropological roots of the theory. Campbell was inheriting the tradition of the Cambridge Ritualists. And these thinkers were in turn inspired by Arnold van Gennep, the anthropologist who identified a formal common structure to Initiation Rites, or Rite of Passage, rituals throughout the world. That structure? Also a circle.

The initiate is first prepared. Given special clothes, made to sweat in a lodge for a day, their head shaved, and so on. Then they are sent out into some sort of sacred landscape, some sort of liminal zone, to undertake their spirit journey. Perhaps they don't return until they have found their spirit animal, or perhaps they have some other task, some other quest, or perhaps they

across countries: Results from PISA 2002. Organisation for Economic Change and Development.

just have to endure unpleasant tattooing or drugs or some such. Then they return to the fold, to the community. Lest this sound very tribal, think of a wedding ceremony. The bride and groom being separated for a night. Made to wear special clothes. Given magical objects – the rings. And then coming back together in front of the community.

Why on earth is he talking about this? you are wondering. Well, it's because of something a radio DJ in Florida said to me about *In Darkness*. He said: this book is a spirit journey. Shorty, in the darkness, goes on a spirit journey where he is Toussaint, and he comes back more complete, more healed, and is then freed back into the world. The darkness of his entrapment is his sacred landscape, the place where he undergoes his trial. And I thought: yes, that's probably true, though I hadn't intended it.

But then I thought: it's true of almost all young adult literature. There are, of course, books that don't follow the Heroic Journey monomyth. Much of adult literary fiction doesn't, because it's a feature of storytelling and myth more than it's a feature of literature. But it is overwhelmingly predominant in YA and also in middle grade. Harry Potter, Percy Jackson, Colin and Susan in *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen*, *Coraline*, *The Knife of Never Letting Go*, *Seraphina*, even *Code Name Verity*. The list goes on and on. Again and again, characters enter a liminal world, an adventure, that changes them. *The Hunger Games* is perhaps the purest example: the journey to the Capitol, the dressing by Cinna, the ritual preparation, then the adventure in an actual, physically separate arena that represents the other world of adventure. Followed by return to District 12, Katniss now the same but different.

The question is: why? Why do we find this structure so much in fiction for kids of around 10 and older?

I think the clue is in the writings and theory of Mircea Eliade. Eliade is a philosopher of religion, and his overarching theory is

that all human cultures share a consistent religious urge that expresses itself in two broad ways – first, a kind of nostalgia for a past that never existed which he calls The Eternal Return, and second, a deep desire for explanation and answers. Interestingly, he rejects the idea that we have moved from a religious to a secular society: in his view, science *is* religion, just in a modern form – it’s a quest for answers. So in other words we still behave in a very religious way even if we’re not religious.

And what about the Eternal Return and what does this have to do with Joseph Campbell? The concept of the Eternal Return is probably the most influential in contemporary religious studies. The idea is that frequently in religions there is an idea of a pre-lapsarian time when direct communication with God was possible, and that people through their religion yearn to return to it. Eden is the obvious example. But also, in Greek myth, the idea that there was a time when the gods walked the earth. And one tries to return, symbolically, to this time by going to church, or by dancing in a temple to Dionysus. In the present, we do it in part through things like watching *Downton Abbey* on TV, escaping into this simple pre-modern world where God-like aristocrats still ruled. I really mean that: I’m not just being sarcastic. But also of course through rave culture, through sporting events, and so on, anything where we let go of the present and enter some kind of dreaming.

And, crucially, as Eliade saw it, we enact the Eternal Return through rite of passage rituals. In fact rite of passage rituals are almost the prototypical Eternal Return. In Eliade’s theory, they’re about going into this sacred landscape, this dreamworld, and being changed by it and returning as an adult. They recapitulate the history of the world – the initiate, like the world itself, begins in this other, liminal, sacred space, then comes back out into ordinary modern reality, only now changed by it, and carrying something of the divine inside themselves. (Jung, incidentally, called the post-initiate a ‘pneumatikon’. Someone with the breath of God inside them.)

And of course you don't just emerge changed – mostly, you emerge as an adult, since virtually all rite of passage rituals are tied to the end of childhood. Which is hugely important, of course, when considering literature for young people. Rite of passage rituals mark the transition from childhood to adulthood. They're about growing up. And growing up is not easy. Jung considered it to be the greatest challenge for a person. To put aside the simplicity of childhood and move into an adult world full of complication, contradiction and confusion. In *The Structures and Dynamics of the Psyche*, he says that, "Something in us wishes to remain a child, to be unconscious or, at most, conscious only of the ego; to reject everything strange, or else subject it to our will." Becoming an adult is HARD. I certainly sucked at it. I'm sure some of you sucked at it too. Again I'm looking at Dan Kraus.

In fact the great philosopher of misery Nietzsche agreed about how much it sucked: he believed that the whole unbelievably hard great challenge of life was contained in the single line: 'Werde, der du bist'. Become what you are, having first worked out what that is.

It sounds simple. But as Nietzsche knew, and every fourteen year old knows, it really, really isn't.

Which is where rite of passage rituals come in. Jung was fascinated by these – he saw them as a key aid in making that very difficult transition to adulthood, by providing a structure, a clear delineation, that helps the individual to feel that they have shed their childhood self and moved into a new adult personality, one which preserves their essence while accommodating the complications of the adult world. In other words: you circle out of your comfort zone, out of your community, and then you circle back in as something not quite the same anymore. And this helps you to let go of childhood.

So: I've been thinking about all this. About how becoming an adult is really hard, and means embracing change and flux and contradiction and difficulty. About how YA books including mine so often seem to enact the structure of the rite of passage in their stories, and why that might be, why authors might feel drawn to do that. And a possible explanation struck me.

We live in a world where the boundaries between childhood and adulthood are constantly being eroded. Where fashion and culture at large fetishizes the young, where women and increasingly men are pressured to look like teenagers. Where kids act in some ways like adults, but adults act like kids. Where more and more there is a continuum rather than a formal divide between being a child and being grown up. Where rites of passage, these things that help you let go of childhood, are increasingly being lost. I mean, yes, some children take Communion. Some have Bar Mitzvahs. But these are rather pale rituals compared to the past – perhaps only initiation into armies preserves something of the terror, in the religious sense, of the past. Then I read something else Mircea Eliade said, which I thought was an extraordinary idea. He said that *reading fiction* is an example of the Eternal Return. Of people entering a sacred dreamscape, leaving reality behind for a while.

And so here we are, in a time when the transition between child and adult is becoming increasingly blurred, but also a time when – and I don't think it's a coincidence – we're seeing the emergence of a YA literature which addresses itself to people in that liminal state. And my theory is, therefore, that books are offering adolescents the initiation rituals of the past in virtual form – offering a vicarious experience that helps with what psychologists and philosophers agree is the hardest task of all for the psyche – becoming an adult.

So that's my second message, I guess, and here the long circle that has been this section of the speech hopefully comes back in on itself, in a way that possibly even makes some kind of sense.

Teachers, authors, librarians, publishers – we’re none of us well paid. And especially when it comes to teachers and librarians, there are regulatory hoops to jump through, there are budget cuts to contend with. It can all be incredibly dispiriting. And yes, there’s the consolation, much talked about, that books can help people to achieve more in their lives, that literacy feeds success. But I think it’s much, much more than that. I think on dark days when the budget has just been cut again, you can say to yourselves that these books for young adults are doing something vastly more important than increasing earning potential: they’re helping those same young adults to navigate the difficult path to maturity. Helping them to deal with the adult world by putting them in the head of a character going through an ancient journey, an ancient ritual, and coming out the other side. Giving them, if only in their minds, the tools to take that rite of passage.

Helping kids to grow up – and crucially, to grow up *well*.

Finally, there are two more circles involved in a book. One is the circle of people who made it. I’m a publisher myself so I am definitely with John Green in believing that it is not individual authors who make books. As such I’d like to thank my father and my mother for passing on the infinite code to me. I’d also like to thank my father for providing part of the inspiration for the book. My beautiful and scarily clever wife Hannah – always my primary editor – my agents Caradoc King and Louise Lamont, my actual editors Sarah Odedina, Melanie Cecka, Rebecca McNally and Cindy Loh, all of whom made this book much better than I could have done on my own. Everyone at Bloomsbury for publishing *In Darkness* with such love and passion. Also my two-year-old daughter Lyra, who brought me back to earth after the call from the committee by coming into the room and solemnly announcing, “Daddy, I did a poo.”

I should also particularly thank Katy Hershberger, Beth Eller and Linette Kim for taking me to Dallas last January and for looking after me here in Chicago so well, and especially Katy for flying and driving me so efficiently and entertainingly on a mini-tour through Florida, Georgia and Arizona in February 2012. In fact my next book after *Hostage Three* – out in October, pre order it now – is set in Arizona, and was inspired by that mini-tour. So if you love it, it's all down to Katy Hershberger. If you despise it, please address all hate mail to Katy Hershberger, care of Bloomsbury.

Lastly, there's the circle that's made by author and reader. The author puts the words on the page, but without the reader, they are nothing. They are a code that has to be fed into a device, a camera, that can interpret them – namely the human brain. And the magic comes when the reader picks up the book, starts reading, and creates in their head from that still-but-moving input, that reel of words on the page, a moving picture, a story, which hopefully resembles the one the author had in their head when they wrote it. Only then is the circle closed.

So: coming full circle back to the start of this speech, I would like to thank you again, from the bottom of my heart, for closing the circle, for reading the book but also for giving it this extraordinary honour, for taking this somewhat obscure, difficult, and maybe controversial book and widening its circle. I am more humbly and completely grateful than you can ever know. Thank you.