

Morris Awards Speech—Stephanie Oakes

Minnow Bly, the main character in my book, has never learned to read before arriving at a juvenile detention center. She's been kept illiterate, purposefully, by the adults in her life. In juvie, she learns to read with the help of a teacher, a friend, and a librarian. And she teaches herself, gives herself words as weapons, the first tools she's ever had in her life.

I didn't realize how closely my own story mirrored Minnow's until years into writing and revising this book. As a young child, I was hurt, badly, by someone that I trusted. I did what a lot of kids who've dealt with abuse do—I became silent. While the world around me spoke, shouted, gesticulated, laughed, I felt like someone had pressed my mute button. As a kid, I used to have this recurring daydream about screaming at the top of my lungs. I don't know what exactly I wanted to shout, what specific words or phrases. I think I just longed to use my voice, for once.

When I was twelve, I found reading. I had been a very poor reader up until this point, struggling through phonics programs and basal readers in elementary school. No matter how hard I flexed the muscle of my brain—often to the point that my brain actually hurt—the words on the page were reluctant to shift into meaning. That was until one day, when my mom handed me a new book that she told me was making waves in the UK. I looked at the book, easily three hundred pages, and halfheartedly told her that I'd give it a try, though I knew there was no way I'd be able to read it. I'd never managed to read a book on my own before.

It was a struggle, but somehow I devoured that first Harry Potter book, then the next, and in between waiting for the next books to come out, I found other books. In a year, I was a full-fledged bookworm. Just like Minnow, I was gathering words, hoarding them, though I didn't know what for yet. I found many of these words at local libraries. Libraries, I learned, were rarely silent. They bustled with activity, and even when the people were quiet, there were the books, calling from the shelves. The books were accepting. They didn't care that I didn't answer back, that I was still a voiceless person. The books said, "I'll speak for you." Books put into words things I hadn't known I believed. Books entertained me, and distracted me, and taught me about the world.

In high school, I found books like *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson at my local library, books that began to build me up in a way nothing in my life ever had before. In college, I got my first library job. My favorite place was the children's and young adult area. It was in the basement of the university library and was generally pretty quiet. Sometimes, when I was out with a book cart to shelve and nobody was around, I'd stand in the stacks of children's books, eyes closed, taking in the feeling of that place. It was the feeling of important things being said. It was the feeling of words acting like a balm.

Around this time, tentatively at first, I started writing my own stories. I started using my voice. Now, I realize that writing is that feeling that I daydreamed about when I was

little, the screaming at the top of my lungs. It's saying "I exist," and "I'm not nothing," and "I'm here."

I learned that silence is itself a kind of violence. I learned that I *have* to use my voice. I won't be silent again.

I can't really articulate what this feels like, for this book to be recognized alongside these amazing authors. I want to thank the people who brought this book into existence—my editors, Stacey Friedberg and Nancy Conescu, everyone at Dial and Penguin, and my agent, Jennifer Laughran. And most of all I want to thank YALSA, and the Morris committee, and every librarian in this room. I'm a school librarian now, and I know how difficult it is to know if you're making any kind of difference in the lives of your patrons. Let me assure you, as a kid who was given a voice by libraries, that you most certainly are.