

Morris Speech

Bonnie-Sue Hitchcock

I am so grateful and honestly stunned to be here with these four amazing debut authors.

I cannot thank the members of the Morris Committee or YALSA enough. A super quick thank you to my editor Wendy Lamb of Wendy Lamb Books and Alice Swan at Faber and Faber. They both worked overtime on this book. Thanks also to my agent Molly Ker Hawn and everyone else at Random House and Faber, that list is as big as Alaska. I am so grateful.

I have no idea where she is but I also really need to thank Mrs. Long, the librarian at Gladys Wood Elementary in Anchorage, Alaska in the 1970's.

Mrs. Long would pick out books specifically for me and she'd have this huge stack waiting for me every single week when our class went to the library. I was so shy, I could barely talk to anyone but somehow she had taken the time to notice me, to notice what I read and the kinds of books I liked. At that time, I loved historical fiction and reading about places I never thought I'd see. (So, basically that meant pretty much everything that *wasn't* Jack London.)

Picking up that stack of books from Mrs. Long was about more than just reading. It was about someone actually seeing me as a person; noticing what made me tick. It's stayed with me forever. So I want to thank librarians, because what you do runs a lot deeper than you might think.

When I did decide to write *The Smell of Other People's Houses* it *wasn't* because I thought there needed to be a story that showed this tiny slice of life from this specific place in time. It was mainly because I *didn't* know another place well enough to set a book anywhere else. Even *today's* Alaska is not the same place it was when I was growing up, so I'm even more stunned to be here now talking about it. That shy little kid I was in 1974 would have never thought anyone would be interested and I'm sure *she's* hiding under the bed right now, probably reading something set in Malaysia. But I am very grateful to all of you.

Ironically, throughout this publishing process whenever someone would call it “the Alaska book,” I cringed a little bit. Partially because I think it’s a book about family that just happens to be set in Alaska. And partially because Alaskans are really touchy about quote unquote, ‘Alaska Books.’ We get so used to seeing romanticized versions of our state, and rightfully so. It’s just one of those places that seems to grab onto the imagination and doesn’t let go. It’s all about perspective.

A few years ago, I heard an interview with a 97 year old woman who grew up during the Russian Revolution. She said, “as a kid, you just know what you know. I thought everyone stepped over dead bodies in the street on their way to school.”

Of course, that really stuck with me. Thank goodness, I did not step over dead bodies on my way to school, but I would say if there was one universal theme for those of us growing up in Alaska in the 60’s and 70’s it was this: “Don’t be vain and never, ever talk about yourself.” If you’ve read my book you will know that in my world there was severe consequences for vanity. The irony of writing a book about how you should never talk about yourself and then have to give a speech about it, is not lost on me. So I’m going to wrap this up.

To close I just want to thank everyone again. Especially YALSA and the Morris Committee and all librarians for the work you do and for honoring writers who are trying to give kids the best possible literature, because we all know how important that is.

Thank you.