

Morris Award finalist remarks – Akemi Dawn Bowman, author of STARFISH

This is without a doubt the most surreal moment of my life. I'm so incredibly grateful and honored to see STARFISH considered alongside four powerful and amazing books written by authors I admire so much. I never imagined I'd be standing here today, because this was just too big a dream to ever dream. To the Young Adult Library Services Association and the Morris Award Committee—thank you. This means the absolute world.

I also want to thank my agent, Penny Moore, my editor, Jennifer Ung, and everyone at Simon Pulse who helped STARFISH become a real book. And to all the librarians who work so hard to get books like this one into the hands of the readers who need them most—thank you for knowing how important it is for teens to feel seen, and for making sure stories like Kiko's are heard.

When I wrote STARFISH, I wasn't sure if anyone would get it. I worried people would think it was too quiet, or too insignificant of a story to ever be published. But I also knew how important this story would've been for me as a teen. And I thought maybe, just maybe, it could be important to someone else too. I hoped so much that Kiko's story would find those readers: to help them feel seen, to help them heal, and to let them know they are not alone. Finding out STARFISH was a Morris Award finalist felt like that hope came true.

STARFISH discusses trauma, and racism, and abuse. It's a book about feeling like you're so alone, and trapped, and desperate to find acceptance in a world that doesn't want you back. And in some ways, when readers say they relate to Kiko, it breaks my heart because I know what that means. But when they say they've felt seen for the first time, or that it's helped them make sense of what they're going through—that puts my heart back together again. Because I know what that means, too.

Thank you for listening to Kiko's story, for helping STARFISH find the readers who need it most, and for recognizing how important it is for books to act as mirrors for the people who don't often get to see themselves reflected in stories. Because when they do, it doesn't matter how quiet a book is—to them, it's the loudest voice in the room.

Thank you for this honor. I am eternally grateful.