

Margaret Edwards Award Speech 2018

A CERTAIN KIND OF WRITER

by

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Good afternoon.

It's always been difficult for me to speak for an allotted amount of time. As I get older it becomes even more difficult because I truly want to acknowledge the gravity and honor I feel when what I do is recognized.

That said, I shall tell you a couple of stories about my life leaving home to what at first I saw as book signing and author visit disasters. But I find that the world is wonderfully strange. These disasters are the only reason I am standing here and being kindly recognized for work----that might never have existed.

Once, a few years back, I was questioning my craft.

Something that had once been so joyous and came so easily had become difficult and sometimes painful. Writing had always been a natural part of me. But I began to struggle and wondered if I should let it go. I had no idea what I would do. A friend suggested that I just make a career of going out to lunch a lot and complaining about my writing.

Of course book signing disasters and author visits fiascos are a part of the business----- no matter the planning. You get over them and move on or you become wary and paranoid. I know a few writers who choose to be paranoid, but still participate. Others hope for the best and usually get it. I have learned to have a sense of humor that sometimes surprises, then comforts the person hosting me. Let's face it, they have your well being in their hands. Smile.

There was the time a woman spilled hot coffee on my white shirt when she leaned forward to have me sign her book. I smiled through the burn and laughed hysterically when she tried to take off her own shirt in line to give to me.

I once missed a speech and signing when my driver got hopelessly lost and we ended up in the middle of nowhere beside a cornfield. We found a truck stop and ate french fries while she cried, I laughed and a trucker hearing our story--bought us pie.

But the strangest incident happened to be only my second school visit. . . .

I flew out of state for a school visit, checked into my hotel, woke up the next morning, had breakfast, went out to a driver waiting for me who whisked me off to the school where I would spend the entire day. When I got there---no one knew who I was or why I was there except one fourth grade girl name Sarah (whom they strangely called down to the office on the intercom). It seems the librarian was no longer working there. Only the school administrator was a bit sketchy on the reason.

But as I was there I was told I could sit in the library and if children had a free period and wanted to talk to me---their teachers would send them down.

Sarah escorted me to the library. Showed me where the bathroom was (adults usually only give directions to where it is). She got me water. Got me a lunch from the cafeteria and told me lovely stories about working in the library with Ms. X who she missed very much. She loved Beverly Cleary books and could recite long passages. I listened in awe and began to wonder if Sarah attend any classes at all or was she just amazingly left to read Beverly Cleary books in the library for the last year.

A handful of children came down during the day. We talked about books that they loved. One child talked about how he had to move again and was afraid. One third grader said he hated the library because he couldn't read very well. So I read to him. It was a calm strange day with almost no adults on the scene.

At the end of the day as I thanked Sarah (who had popped up at intervals during the day) as she ran into the librarian's office--took a letter opener and pried open a drawer. She ran over to me with a white envelope saying Ms. X always kept important things in her top drawer. It was my check. She hugged me and I went out to a waiting car to be whisked to the airport.

But the signing disaster than I first reference happened when I was thinking about giving up writing altogether. My words had stopped flowing. I felt I had written everything I could and had nothing else to say. Meanwhile I had been invited to give a breakout session at a children's literature conference at Ohio State. I went. The conference was great.

A local children's bookstore heard that I would be at the conference and asked if I wanted to sign at the their store. Of course, I wanted to. I figured

it might be the last time I signed anywhere. The owner said she was happy that I had said yes because she wanted me to meet one of my greatest fans. I felt I had no fans.

I could not understand how I could further connect to a young people as I had nothing else to write for them. But I left the campus headed for the bookstore a couple of miles away. It was a Friday night. When I arrived the bookstore was empty except me and the owner. It continued to be that way for the next two hours because we had picked a signing time when who but-----Maya Angelou was speaking in Columbus.

But fifteen minutes before the signing was officially and I had drank enough coffee to fly over Columbus, a small disheveled young girl appeared at the door. Her eyes were the biggest I'd ever seen. The owner pointed to me then the girl walked up to me, wrapped her arms around me with a ragged copy of one of my novels and wept. We stood there for hours, it seemed--but of course it was probably only a minute.

She cried. I hugged her.

She cried more---I hugged her more.

When she finally stepped back she was smiling through the tears, at me. I asked her if she wanted me to sign her book. She shook her head no, turned around, looked back at me, then left the bookstore. I cannot recall her name

Then finally I understood it all. Somehow I had failed to truly understand and see the children and teens who were reading my books. I had been troubled because I believed I was writing for the adult I had become; but had lost the ability to make my words connect to my audience. I worried so much about not understanding their world.

I remember that night back at my hotel that the lights seemed brighter at the bookstore as the girl closed the door and disappeared into the night.

I had not written a word in two years.

I went back to my hotel and started writing again.

So it is an honor to receive this award. It took me so long to understand about the emotions behind a story that speaks to you. I had forgotten, you see. So I am always shocked by awards. Always, truly shocked.

Actually, those who know me intimately will tell you embarrassing stories about how clueless I usually am about when ALA is or how I have to be told to answer my phone already! Or how I have to google the criteria for different awards. I don't want anyone to ever think any of this lessens the joy I feel when recognized. A hint email has rendered the phone call less frightening as answering my phone is something I rarely do. Phones to me are like social media. I treat them like a new invention, am boggled by its use, and am constantly asked why no one can contact me on it.

Of course when I am actually asked to write my thoughts down and stand in front of a moderately large group of people and speak them---I think it will be a disaster. This is not like pontificating to family and friends who just shrug and laugh.

It's not like yelling at the television when politics get completely absurd and you should just throw away the remote and stream episodes of Mr. Rogers until you see a happier day ahead.

The first thing I think when asked to give a speech is---- I'm going to have to wear shoes.

Comb my hair.

Will I wear actual adult clothes?

Can I remember to answer questions in complete sentences and remember to thank all the right people?

Can I give a speech that is poetic and seering that speaks to my life as a teller of tales? Will I be able to use all the time given to share what I do, what I don't do or whom I blame for me not doing it?

I am a disjointed speaker. I tale stories in circles and swirls that sometimes never meet the other end. It seems lately when I have to stand up and share with people who I know would understand and appreciate almost anything I shared with them---I falter. Will I share too much or not enough?

I have always loved the scene in Amadeus where Mozart is told that there were too many notes in a piece he has composed. When he answered there were just as many as there should be, no more or no less.

I don't have too many notes. So here we go .

Years ago, I wanted to be a certain kind of writer. Of course that was when I thought there were certain kinds of writers. In high school I used to sit under trees during family get togethers with a book and my journal. I was reminded of this by a cousin who I had not seen in thirty years. I had forgotten. He had not. I was the girl who read. And wrote. And seemed so serious all of the time. (Actually I wasn't and am not now). I always wanted to be with the funniest people. I was a born to laugh when my face wasn't in a novel or my journal.

But there were impediments to being a writer in northeastern Ohio in the late seventies. It was simply being a writer. I didn't know any. I never had

spoken to any. And if they were anything like I ended up being, they would not have wanted to talk to me about writing anyway.

When in high school I decided calculus wasn't going to help me become a great American novelist; I begged the high school counselor to let me take not only the Beat Poetry along with Brit Lit (I was loving Beowulf)---but the Bible as Literature. I had been thrown out of Sunday school long ago (unfairly). And when I was asked to leave girl scouts I found the handbook even more interesting than ever, too.

My high school counselor was an unfunny, cruel man. He let me know that I would have all the time in the world to read and dream of being a writer because he saw me doing repetitive factory work. I slowly stood up and said--"Nothing wrong with factory work as my dad is an autoworker.

Then added . . .

" But if he would be so kind as to remove the extremely long stick from his.

. . . "

Well, you know.

When made to apologize to him by my Literature teacher (who'd given me the hall pass to talk to the counselor)--- My apology to him was "I'm sorry you have a stick up your"

Three days in school suspension.

Still---I was practicing to be a certain kind of writer.

There was not enough time in my days to get there. I read great literature, mediocre literature and books I was told were divine. I read gothic novels with governesses running across moors. I read biographies and autobiographies of villains, saints and sages. I read the autobiography of Malcolm X so many times the paperback dissolved into pieces which I taped together again.

There were not enough time in the world for me to read it all.

So I tried to write down everything I felt. Some of it was so awful, some of it made me laugh. Some of it was so insightful for someone who had not a clue--my own words sometimes made me cry.

So . . . soon off to college I went. I would go for long walks in the rain with no shoes on, with a dreamy look in my eyes (which probably looked vacant to the casual observer) and mud on my ankles as I splashed down the sidewalks of Kent, Ohio in torrential downpours and thought of almost nothing else but the poetry I was writing and the stories that swirled round my head. I learned to carefully cross the streets of Kent as I was want to slowly amble onto a crosswalk without a thought for my own safety. I'd saunter through the white lines wondering how to end a story I had started the night before as the rain poured down my umbrella.

I lost so many umbrellas on my journey to be a writer. I'd leave them in coffee shops, on friend's porches, in other people's cars, libraries, bars, riverbanks, movie theaters and my favorite one in an ex-boyfriend's apartment. Sadly, after decades he still has my copy of Maya Angelou's Singin' and Swingin' and Getting Merry Like Christmas. That was such a heartbreak (the loss of my favorite umbrella and book, not the break-up) and I thought about climbing through his apartment window to get them back. But he left for grad school and moved on so an early life of literary crime was averted.

When I did go to parties at school I'd smile and wave with the bridge of a poem in my head and my journal in hand. I'd smile at a few people, enter a conversation in the middle then excuse myself to find a quiet space and write.

I recently read some of my journals from my late teens and early twenties. Why anyone ever invited me to parties I will never know. I never seemed to be that much in evidence after my initial aborted attempt at conversation. So many of my journal entries start, end or were interrupted by my noting---
"Dude with no shirt on looking for the bathroom. Two girls with a tub of ice--looking for the bathroom. Dude with no shirt on still looking for the bathroom. . . .Me, where's the bathroom?"

All I wanted to do was spend my days thinking of writing, reading, thinking of writing again---then actually writing. I still wanted to be a certain kind of writer.

I discovered soon enough that college wasn't truly working out so well if all I thought of was writing---- since I had actually left home intending to be a teacher of young children.

I dreamed of living in a cabin in the woods near a meadow of wildflowers. And I would garden and write. I considered myself a very good gardener. Well---I was a pretty good gardener. Well--actually I'm a pretty lousy gardener who hasn't done it in some time because I'm too busy being the kind of writer I never thought I'd be.

And the living in the woods thing. Turns out it's not for me. Spotty internet and bears at the door could literally kill any creativity I had.

I thought I'd be that certain kind of writer who got up everyday and had something to write about the world of children. Most mornings I just get up, drink coffee and tune into political shows that make me angry---which leads me to some children's television that sometimes appalls me---- which for some reason never leads me to my computer to write.

Most mornings the world becomes too big for me to focus on the part of it that I write about. But on those mornings I remember that I was never a person who wrote everyday anyway.

But sometimes, months go by. Even years.

And sometimes, I remember that I am not a certain kind of writer.

There are no hard and fast rules. There is no magic. Cabins in the woods
And fields of flowers would never help me to connect to a fourth grader who talked about Beverly Cleary or a silent weeping girl in a bookstore who only needed to know that the person who wrote the books that meant so much to her, existed.

My twenty one month old nephew walks into a room with his arms spread wide open like he's walking onstage greeting a hip hop audience---

He knows his audience. Family.

He moves around the room dragging picture books out of shelves.

Smiling at me, mostly, to do the right thing and read him a book.

NOW.

He reclines on the reader, content and laughing at a brown and red chicken in a market.

He quacks when there are ducks and growls when there are wolves.

Because he is almost two he wants his stories with animals---people not so much. And if you miss his favorite page says "OH NO".

He is every fierce reviewer with an attitude---only with a binkie.

Already he is a true lover of books. Obsessed really. And I wonder what he will be reading when he is seven.

Eleven?

Fourteen?

Seventeen?

I hope someone's words will grab, enlighten him, entertain him when he walks out into the world with his arms wide open.

Thank you.