

I am so incredibly honored to be here, to be a finalist, to have my name and my book mentioned alongside these four tremendously talented authors and their gorgeous books. I was four years old when I first dreamed of being a published author, but never in my wildest dreams did I imagine that my little book would be an award contender. So, thank you to the Morris Committee and YALSA for this honor.

Five years ago, I read about a tormented ten-year-old boy who killed his white supremacist father. It was a news article that most people probably glanced at and moved on, but it stuck with me. Until I sat down to write this speech, however, I didn't fully understand why. Why couldn't I shake this article? Why did I want to know more about this kid and the way he'd grown up? The answer is because I know people, too many people, who share hateful views like that boy's family.

Growing up in the South, you grow pretty accustomed to racism. Growing up white in the South, you grow accustomed to other white people saying racist things to you because they think it's okay since you share the same skin color. Friends, family, neighbors, strangers. You also grow accustomed to silence, to not ruffling feathers, to letting things go because you don't want to ruin a relationship or because it's not polite to call out your elders. *I* grew accustomed to silence.

It's something that always bothered me, but I didn't know what I could do about it. I started extricating myself from conversations where racist comments or jokes were made. Saying things like "I'm sorry, but I can't listen to this type of talk" and walking away. Always apologizing. Always feeling bad for making others uncomfortable, even though they made me uncomfortable in the first place.

That article made me feel uneasy and it sparked a dozen questions. Predominantly, when hate is all you've ever known, how do you learn to love? There's a rap song from the 90s that asks the question how do you learn with no one to teach you? As I read, this character came to me. A boy who desperately wanted to be better, but didn't know where to start. A boy and a story that I was terrified to write. I was afraid of the kinds of material I would have to research, that there weren't many books like this in the market for a reason, that this story would be harmful to marginalized communities that didn't need more harm, that I didn't have the skill to tackle a story such as this. I had a million reasons not to write this book.

But two thoughts kept circling back: that nothing will change if people stay silent, and that books are a gateway to empathy. It's easier to empathize with a person or situation if you have a connection point. Books can be that connection point.

I didn't set out to write an issue book, and I didn't have an agenda in mind when I started writing. But as I wrote, I realized that I had a hope for the book after all. I wanted the story to touch one heart. To plant a seed of empathy in one person and maybe that seed would grow, would pollinate other hearts which would do the same.

I wrote this book because silence hurts people. My silence has hurt people, and I refuse to stay silent anymore. Even if that means relationships are damaged or I make people uncomfortable, I'm done apologizing. We have a responsibility to stand for what is right. To do more than

passively remove ourselves from the tough conversations, but to actively engage those who do and say harmful things. A book may plant the seed of empathy, but seeds don't grow on their own. They require action: watering, fertilizing, pruning.

Based on the reader feedback I've gotten, I feel like I've succeeded in my goal of reaching one person. And thanks to the Morris Committee and YALSA, this book has the potential to touch more hearts, and for that I am more grateful than I can ever express.

I'm also grateful for the entire team at Sky Pony Press, especially my editor, Alison Weiss, for my agent, Mandy Hubbard, all of my critique partners and beta and sensitivity readers, librarians, bloggers, readers, and the entire YA community. I'm grateful for my husband, Phillip and my family and friends for all their support, and God for the talents and abilities that he has provided me. Thank you all for the opportunity to fulfill a lifelong dream.