

YALSA AWARD REMARKS
by Dashka Slater

On November 4, 2013, Sasha, a white 18 year old high school senior who identified as agender -- not male, not female -- was asleep on the 57 bus on the way home from school. Richard, a sixteen year old African American boy, was also on that bus, traveling home from a different school with two older boys. At a little before 5 pm, Richard lit Sasha's skirt on fire. Sasha was badly burned and spent weeks in a San Francisco burn ward undergoing multiple surgeries. Richard was arrested at school the next day and charged as an adult with two serious felonies, both with hate crime enhancements. He faced the possibility of life imprisonment.

The crime took place in my neighborhood in Oakland, California, and, like most people, I felt shock and dismay – how could such a thing have happened?

But while most people asked this question rhetorically, my job as a journalist is to look for answers. I spent the next three years researching and writing Richard and Sasha's stories – first for the *New York Times Magazine* and then as a book for young adults. I had two questions when I started out. First, what did being agender mean to Sasha – how did they come to that understanding of themselves? And second, how should we think about a crime committed by a sixteen year old – was a life sentence the appropriate response?

All of us are here because we believe in the power and importance of stories. But true stories can be messier than fiction. Facts are sometimes murky. Policies have unintended consequences. And human beings are complex, sometimes even contradictory. Sasha and Richard both turned out to be complicated people whose stories defied easy categorization. That, to me, is their beauty – and the beauty of nonfiction storytelling.

At one point, when I was working on this book, I had a difficult phone conversation with an anti-bullying advocate who felt that I was presenting a view of the crime on the bus that was too complex. "I think we need to give young people a very clear, unambiguous message," she told me.

I disagree. I believe that young people are not only capable of understanding complexity and nuance, but that they require it. Young people do not live in a cartoonish world of good guys and bad guys, nor do they live in a world where everyone fits into neat categories according to gender, race, or class. Their world is intersectional and multidimensional. The stories that we provide them must be as complicated as they are.

Last fall, I got a letter from a sixteen year old white boy from an affluent school district who had read my book. "I would ... like to share how my feelings towards criminal law and incarceration are more uncertain than they were before reading *The 57 Bus*," he wrote.

His uncertainty was aroused by the fact that he identified with Richard, despite the differences in their circumstances. He didn't think he would ever light someone on fire, and yet, he wrote, "Richard and I both are affected by peer pressure and influenced by our friends. At times some of my friends make jokes about people who are other genders. If I was on the 57 Bus alone, I would just mind my business. However, if I was on the bus with 2 or more of my friends, I honestly think we would do something to mess with Sasha."

I wrote back to this boy, of course. I told him, that of all the words in his letter, the word *uncertain* was the one I was most pleased to hear. We live in a time when a high premium is placed on certainty – when it is seen as a sign of strength, decisiveness, and moral purity. Uncertainty is a humbler but a more honest place, and it is the place where curiosity is born, where investigation begins, and where understanding might be found.

All of us in the course of our lives have harmed and been harmed, in small ways, and sometimes in large. This is especially true for young people. What I want for them is a world where none of us is defined in just one way, where we focus on giving them the skills to do better next time, and then make sure they get a next time. A world where the definition of self can be fluid and evolving, and no one has to be stuck forever in one box, in one category, in one narrative.

All of us who are here, can help to create that world. Our young people deserve it. They deserve every gift we have to give them, but especially true, complicated and messy stories.

I am incredibly grateful to the people who helped me tell this one. My husband and son, who lived with the ups and downs for three long years. My agent Erin Murphy, whose calm, perceptive presence has kept me from the ledge more than once. Joy Peskin, my extraordinary editor at FSG, whose belief in the importance of this story has been unwavering. The entire team at Macmillan's Children's Publishing Group, especially Mary Van Akin and Lucy Del Priore, who made sure the world knew about it. A special shout out to Henry Sene Yee who designed the gorgeous cover. And thank you to the YALSA Excellence in Nonfiction Committee for allowing me to stand on the same stage as these other incredible writers. I'm deeply honored.