



Printz Honor Speech

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A couple of months ago, I was on tour in Australia. One day, my girlfriend and I were strolling around the “The Rocks” – the nineteenth century quarter of Sydney.

As we walked through the granite lanes, we heard violin music. We turned the corner, and were confronted by two miniature buskers – a boy of perhaps fourteen and a girl of twelve, both sawing away at violins, both dressed as Victorian ragamuffins. The girl’s smock was dirty and torn, the boy’s swallow-tail coat was patched, and both their faces were artistically smudged with dirt for maximum waif.

The boy, in particular, was a born entertainer. During a long set of solo variations, he not only stayed on pitch – despite hordes of party-tourists rollicking by – but put in little flourishes, depending on who dropped money into his case. Someone sent up a toddler with a fiver and he leaped towards her and played a trill and made her giggle with surprise.

I was delighted to hear that he was, by bizarre coincidence, playing a set of variations by the Italian composer Tartini, whose music *Octavian* – the violinist hero of my books – is forced to play one awful evening in the late 18th century. I had never really considered that any of my potential readers would actually be familiar with Tartini. For some reason, the Baroque isn’t big right now.

Then here was this kid who not only knew Tartini, but was playing him with delight, speaking to the audience through the violin, dancing through the music, winking and bowing with his bow, laying on the double stops with gusto, and hamming up the sobbing soliloquies.

My girlfriend and I somehow managed to get his address without attracting the attention of the police, and a few days later I sent him and his family copies of several of my books relating to music, with a note in *Octavian* about where he could find the description of the hero’s own miserable night playing Tartini.

Thinking about this kid, I realized yet again how often I underestimate teens – how often we all underestimate them. I sometimes need an incident like this to remind me that teenagers are not the bland, banal, perfected ciphers we see sleazing around the groves of So-Cal on HD-TV. Those are the teens created by panels of writers terrified to alienate any demographic who might possibly watch. In reality, teens are conspicuously the opposite of bland and blank: They are *incredibly* eccentric, deeply impassioned about their interests, fantastically – even exhaustingly – knowledgeable on the subject of topics like, say, drum and bugle corps, or horse-riding, or the United Nations, or submarine warfare. Their commitment to complexity of thought is, if anything, fiercer than an adult’s – because they have to fight so fiercely to defend it.



It sometimes strikes me that there is only one taboo left in young adult literature. By and large, no one complains any more when we write about drugs or sex. We can write about masturbation; terminal illness; the horrors of war; illegal organ transplants; matricide; the chilly delights of necrophilia; scenes of locker-room *bukkake* – none of this raises an eyebrow. No, the one thing which still causes people pause – the final hurdle – the last frontier – the one element which still gets *a few* adult readers up in arms about whether a book is appropriate for kids – is intelligence. Some adults still balk at the assumption that our readers, the teenagers of this country, are smart, and curious, and get a kick out of knowing things.

One of the great things about writing YA today is that this is changing. My fellow honorees are obviously great examples of this, and frankly, we five are just a few representatives out of what is a general groundswell in our field.

I have to admit that I don't really understand the final, fearful resistance to acknowledgement of teenage intelligence and curiosity. Why, for example, would a reviewer express discomfort that in Emily Lockhardt's book about a sassy prep school girl's machinations, the narrator mentions P. G. Wodehouse and Michel Foucault? Why should the inclusion of these names somehow seem unwholesome, elitist, while slick series fic in which sassy prep school girls throw around the names of Jimmy Choo, Stella McCartney, and Jovani – those books are described as deliciously delightful?

P. G. Wodehouse is not a particularly intimidating writer. In fact, many book-nerds in this room probably first came across him (with incredible delight) at sixteen or seventeen. He's not an intellectual heavy. He is, if anything, triumphantly moronic. We read his books and realize that "clever" and "vapid" are not necessarily antonyms. So why should a mention of Wodehouse seem like name-dropping to some, while shopping-lists of designer halter-tops are considered mere *reportage*?

It is because P.G. Wodehouse's books belong to the world of knowledge – knowledge of the past, knowledge of literary history, knowledge of a slightly alien and vanished foreign culture – and the world of non-commercial knowledge is suspect. But it is unbecoming for us to be fearful of teens who love to think.

Every culture has its own characteristic mode of anti-intellectualism – some stronger, some weaker. Our American brand, paradoxically, equates knowledge and complexity with boredom. Thought becomes shameful. Best if not talked about.

Our nation is in the difficult position we're in at the moment financially and militarily because we preferred simple myth over confrontations with complexity. Our leaders did not think it worth their while to investigate topics which sound comically abstruse, such as the history of relations between Shia and Sunni sects; the lineage of the Prophet Mohammed; the effects of elevated global levels of methane, CO₂, and tropospheric ozone; the Security and Exchange Commission's oversight of companies trading in Credit-Default Swaps; problems of foreign contracting for infrastructure provision –



wonk talk all. But jobs have been lost, and life savings have been lost, and lives have been lost because we did not want to talk wonk. Our children will inherit the legacy of our disdain for a complex understanding of the world.

No child naturally hates knowledge. No toddler comes into the world saying, “Don’t tell me how stuff works. I don’t give a shit. Learning about the world sucks ass.” Few Kindergarten classes are plagued by incuriousness. Few seven year olds can’t stand hearing about weird stuff that happens on the other side of the planet.

No, it takes an adult to make a child hate knowing things. The fact is, kids don’t believe that thinking *isn’t* fun until we tell them so.

We need to stop talking about how teens aren’t equal to challenges. Evidence suggests that kids respond strongly to our expectations, positive or negative. If enough of us have high expectations of their achievements, I believe that kids will rise to meet those expectations.

Children are filled with a breathless excitement at knowing how the world works. I wish I could recapture that myself, sometimes. We, as writers for young adults, can help shepherd that childish love of the whole complex world through to adulthood. We can say to kids, “Thinking about things, wondering about what it all means, confronting the unknown and the unknowable – that’s something adults do. It’s something we love to do. It’s not dull – it’s not embarrassing – it’s what makes life vivid and full.”

We think of America as a country of privilege. But what, finally, is the privilege we wish to confer upon our children: the gift of knowledge?

Or the luxury of ignorance?

Thank you.

* And though Foucault is not a lightweight, Emily explains his theory lucidly and succinctly. She invites the reader *in* to the world of knowledge ... Whereas the *Gossip Girl* novels, say, which do refer in passing to fashionable literary and critical luminaries, use those names as they do product brand-names: to add luster to the characters' impossible lives – and to suggest a world from which the reader is, in the end, excluded.