



Printz Honor Speech Lucy Christopher

"The sunlight hit me immediately. Everything was bright, painfully so.
And hot."

These are Gemma's first impressions of the Great Sandy Desert in Western Australia where my novel, *Stolen*, is set. These could also be my first impressions standing up here tonight in the bright lights of the Printz Awards dinner in stiflingly hot New Orleans.

Standing up here is a delight, a privilege, a terror, and an honour. I never would have believed that my first book could take me from the bright sun of the Australian desert to the glimmering heat-haze of the American South. So thank you, very much, for this precise moment.

I drove through the Great Sandy Desert for about three weeks in order to research *Stolen*. I wrote many passages in my journal, often talking about the endless desert sand. One short passage goes like this:

Day 13: Middle of Nowhere

"The scenery has changed. Maybe. Less rocks, certainly. More orange sand, if that's possible. Wildflowers, sand, spinifex, sand, the occasional loping camel, sand, and yes, more sand. In other news, we blew another tire."

As you can imagine, The Great Sandy Desert is aptly named. There are zillions of grains of sand that make it up. In just the same way, there are so many individuals who helped create this story of mine. Without their help, *Stolen* would still be just a dust storm of scattered thoughts, blowing around in the back of my brain somewhere, with the tumbleweed. Writing a book is a collaborative process. After all, I'm just someone who thinks a lot about strange things like sand and camels and kidnapping - I need other people to help me put this into a book, get that book into the hands of my audience, and to read my fictional world into life.

Tonight I'm going to thank about 512 individuals who have helped (don't worry, it's not as bad as it seems, I'll stick to the time limit). I'm also going to explain why *Stolen* is special to me. And while you probably already know that librarians are the most important people in the world, I want to share why that's particularly true in terms of my own writing career.

My first thank-you is going out to you - all 500 or so of you here tonight (see - that's 500 thank-yous done already), including the amazing Printz Judging committee. Thank you all of you who have read, or are going to read, or who are even mildly interested in, *Stolen*. Because, after all, it is the reader who brings my words to life, and elevates them into an entire world of thoughts, images, emotions, and experiences. Thank you for making my characters breathe. Thank you also for bringing the orange desert sand to New Orleans. And thank you for giving me a life as a writer. Because you really have, by recognizing me with this honor for my first published book.



Stolen is based on many things I've felt and experienced - which is part of the reason why it's so special to me. Though let's clear this little thing up from the start - I've never been kidnapped. Not even once! Which is a question I get asked often by fans. So no - this book is not a true story. Or even based on a true story. And no, Ty hasn't actually written back to me ...yet.

But in a different way, this book is entirely a true story. And I've been preparing to write it all my life. Beginning *Stolen* was easy: I had a deep urge to untangle the story. The idea of kidnapping a British teenager to the middle of the Australian outback and changing her perception of it felt to me like it had *force*; like it had too much momentum behind it to have come from nowhere. Like the desert I wrote about, I have since discovered that *Stolen* had layers of sedimentary thought and exploratory roots beneath its surface.

The first seeds of *Stolen* were sown when I was nine and a half years old and when I lived - coincidentally - in the same tiny town in South Wales that I do now. My family decided to move to Australia, and I really didn't want to go. In some small way, maybe it did feel like a kidnapping. I can remember vividly my sense of awkwardness when I got there; feeling disjointed and peculiar and hot in my heavy British cardigans. To fit in with a different school system, I'd been put ahead a grade and had to take 'special education' classes to catch up, I was shorter than everyone, with an accent too rounded, and I'd never been to a pool party. There are photographs from my early days at my

Australian school where I am standing hunched over and uncomfortable in front of the landscape behind me.

To avoid the uncomfortableness of being a new immigrant, or perhaps just to avoid the heat, every lunch time I would take myself off to the only place in the school where I could find air-conditioning:...The library. And there I would sit and be cool and be quiet. My school librarian I can remember vividly. She was named Mrs. Adamson, and was *American*, as it happens. She said I could sit under the air conditioner as much as I wanted, BUT...while I was there, I had to read. And because I liked Mrs. Adamson so much — and perhaps more so because I didn't want to leave the air conditioning! — for the first time in my life, I read. I raced through the Silver Brumby series, Seven Little Australians, Ivan Southall's books, and I absolutely adored every word that John Marsden ever wrote. It's only later that I realised these books were very much concerned with the Australian landscape — kids getting lost in the bush, having adventures in the snowy mountains, and hiding out from war in a deep forest hollow. Australia in these stories was always a source of fear or excitement, and usually both.

Australia as a beautiful and terrifying land was something I also experienced first-hand. We moved to the edge of a bush nature reserve, and the land beyond our garden fence was overgrown and covered in brambles; a kingdom for spiders and snakes. I was terrified of it, but fascinated too. It was the first time I had lived so close to something so wild. It was also the first time I felt simultaneously scared and in love with a land. This feeling lasted all the way through growing up in Australia, all the way though



returning to my country town in Wales, and all the way to when I was first thinking about writing a book.

I wanted to write about this land I loved and also hated. About the feeling of belonging and simultaneously being an outsider.

So *Stolen* sprung from a place of fear and excitement, as I think all the best things, or certainly the most interesting things, do. Adolescence, love, even standing up here in front of you all tonight — all of this is entwined with fear and excitement.

And fear and excitement, love and hate, are emotions teenagers understand particularly well. From smoking your first cigarette, having sex, learning to drive, having a crush on the bad boy at school - it's all thrilling, terrifying stuff. In *Stolen*, Gemma is petrified of the desert at first, and then in love with it; she's also terrified of her captor, though she comes to love him, in a way, too. Navigating her way through fear and excitement is part of her growing-up process, realising who she is and who she wants to be — even under these extreme circumstances.

Fear and excitement are very much entwined with my writing process, too. When I'm in the middle of writing anything, I hate it ... I want to give up and throw myself from a ten-storey building on a daily basis... I'm terrified that the time and effort I'm spending will be useless and I'll be left with only a pile of letters on a page. David Almond — a previous Printz winner, and an author I hugely admire — also gets scared by the

process of writing. He also feels the fear when he is in the middle of the dark tangled forest of a novel. I heard him talk once about two words he has written on a Post-it note in his office:

Be Brave.

And it is these two words that keep me going as well. 'Be Brave' kept me going when I was a teenage immigrant in a strange land, even if I couldn't articulate it then. 'Be Brave' keeps me going now, as a different kind of immigrant, because all writers really are immigrants. We jump in on other people's lives. We never really belong. And we write about strange, fictional lands.

'Be Brave' are words that help navigate the forest of adolescence too. And this is what I hope all the teenage characters in my books learn, in one way or another. In *Stolen*, Gemma learns to be brave under the most terrifying and isolated circumstances — as the victim of a kidnapping in the Australian Outback. In my second novel, *Flyaway*, my character Isla learns to be brave in the face of illness — both her father's and the first boy she loves. And in the novel I'm working on now — as yet untitled! — Emily learns to be brave in the chaos of war.

Books help young people be brave. They help them find the courage to make decisions, and to know what's right and what's wrong, what's real and what's make-believe. As an author, that's what I hope anyway.



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My final thank yous go to my wonderful teams at Scholastic US and Chicken House UK - who were also brave in publishing this book. Imogen Cooper, Barry Cunningham and Siobhan McGowan in particular. My agent Linda Davis, and all my family and friends, plus all the people I talked with to get the details of the desert right. You've made up the grains of this book.

Lastly I thank the desert itself, and am grateful for the experience of moving to a strange new world at a strange young age. My journey as an author started with a very hot summer's day, a very cold air conditioner, and a very understanding and encouraging school librarian. So thank you, all of you, for doing what you're doing, for putting books into the hands of vulnerable, curious and confused young people...people like me then. And thank you also for letting me do what I do now.