

“Our Babies Are Screaming—Lessons from Three Novels” by A.S. King  
2022 Margaret A. Edwards Award Speech

Good Afternoon. What a beautiful gathering of subversives this is!

I am so grateful to be here today and I am humbled and honored to be receiving an award for not lying to children. This may not be how you define the Margaret A. Edwards Award but it's how I define what I do, and also what you do as youth services librarians and other positions related to the publication and distribution of these handbooks for life that we cleverly call “fiction.”

Before we dig in, a sincere thank you to the Edwards committee, who gave me quite a January surprise, and to my agent, and to my editors and publishers of not only the chosen books but all my books. I never in my life thought I'd win an award like this. I have every plan to use the inspiration it has given me to seed the stacks with more weird little handbooks for life.

I am here today to talk to you about teenagers and how we treat them. I am here to talk about the world we live in and the world we deserve to live in. I'm here to talk about hate. And love. I'm here to talk about how literature for young adults is a transcript for the future. A balm for the past. It's a movement. We're the movement.

And so.

My career started in my bedroom closet.

My career started with a book.

My career started with a kiss.

My career started with a punch, and a frenzy of survival.

My career started with the one million times I was told to shut up.

My career started with the one million and one times I kept talking.

My career started when I realized that cruel people were cruel because they were hurting inside.

Here began my quest to become Hawkeye Pierce. At age nine, I decided I would be a heart surgeon.

I was born with a piece of crucial knowledge: human beings are cured by the truth. Shocking, I know. But my whole birth was a shock.

Incidentally, I was born sitting breech, butt first and doubled in half—a birth any moderately humane doctor would have prevented in favor of a cesarean, but instead, the man in charge of the ward that night, a ward my mother trained on and worked on for years, decided that she must be wrong about my position, in *her* body, and she was forced to deliver me *his* way.

My career started in a slimy, hot vat of sexism.

So did yours.

So let's start there.

When I was in first grade, I invented a world for myself. It is the world I live in, still. Inside that world, girls can do, think, and feel whatever they want and not get shit for it. In that world, I could be Amy Sarig and not worry about the boys who would make fun of my body, my ability, or the fact that I have opinions. And while the boys were certainly problematic throughout my school years and beyond, no one had warned me about the girls.

The patriarchy is alive and well, and women are often its willing caretakers. Our field is not immune. I can only tell you—it's hard to hear the same story over and over again.

Children's and young adult literature is where everything starts. It's the most progressive, honest, and badass sector of literature. So as pushers of it, we must remain mindful of how we dress our hearts and minds for the job. When we have the power to make superstars, we must consider backing women.

Hating women was the original hate. And getting women to hate other women as competition was a very clever trick indeed. Easy, too. Girls learn it before kindergarten. Misogyny is sewn into everything, even us. Let's rip the seams out. Slice every stitch. Let's invent a new code—a resistance. Let's be babies born butt first together. Let's drink bat dust and beer. Let's draw a map for our descendants . . . in the ink of our own mistakes.

In the spring of 2005, I stood in a bed of summer lilies and held in my hands a perfectly intact, looked-totally-alive mummified bat. It was light as a ghost—a memory and a prophecy. It made me ask myself if, like it, I was just pretending to be alive when I was actually slowly dying.

I had been slowly dying. That's why I was writing novels—to figure out how to stop slowly dying. I've been tied to a balloon called hope my whole life. For three decades, as I wrote book after book, I was swimming through liquid lead held up by that balloon. My therapist says I'm probably the most positive person she's ever met. She adds, "It hasn't always served you, Amy." And so, there was this bat. And it told me the truth. So I decided the bat must be God.

In *Glory O'Brien's History of the Future*, I was telling the truth about misogyny. I wrote of a forced-birth society passing fast laws, where women and children hide from violence, and dullards on TV brag about how great it is to control them. I also wrote of a resistance. An army. Good-hearted rebel scum. Glory asks, "Did all outcasts come to this realization . . . that being outcast from a bogus and pornographic society was actually a good thing?"

In *Glory O'Brien's History of the Future*, I was telling the truth about depression and the truth about grief. Though when I wrote it I hadn't experienced loss the way I walk with it now. If tragically losing a child taught me anything, it is that the bat was absolutely God, and so are the roaches in the kitchen of your hotel and so are the birds that shit on your car and so is your third grade teacher. Treasure and respect things that have survived to crawl into your shoe or serve you dessert at the diner. My god, worship at the altar of a smile.

Infighting is a sign of a chemical fire inside of us. In this world, we were taught to hate ourselves but not all of us have the combination to the off-switch. When people come at you, load your

weapons with grace. Be careful. Remember that you are shooting into a mirror—its reflection a ricochet. Revisit this image any time you want to label a woman in your business “difficult.” In fact, aren’t we all difficult while walking against the current? Just because they tell you that you’re not walking against a current doesn’t mean it’s true.

My career started walking upstream / with pen and paper.

My career started locked in my bathroom / with pen and paper.

My career started when my kid came home from first grade and told me they’d played “hide in the bathroom” at school that day.

My career opened in the key of fear.

In this society, where corporations are people and our leaders refuse to recognize gun-addiction while parades, concerts, and *going to school* are now high-risk events, every one of us was taught that when we find ourselves in danger, it is our responsibility to get out of there safely. Every one of us was taught to feel that it is our fault for finding ourselves there in the first place. Even if those people attend kindergarten. In this society, in high school, students are given buckets of everyday weaponry—from rocks to cans of cat food—to throw at a murderer who is shooting them in their classrooms. We are all tied to a balloon called hope. Of course we are; the reason you’re so tired every day is because you are swimming through liquid lead and you’re not allowed to talk about it. This is why I write weird stories. What else makes sense? We are sinking and the orchestra is playing . . . we are freezing cold people in lifeboats, and apologizing for it . . . even though we paid good money for the voyage. Nothing is fair.

I write adversity well because I’ve lived it. I write the unspoken expectation of “polite” silence well because I’ve obeyed it. I’m still scared every time I tell the truth because the trick of people who want to control you is: they call you a liar until you almost believe it yourself. People ask me how I write teenagers so well; it’s because we expect the same polite silence from them—they’re called liars, attention-seekers, and lazy—when really, our babies are screaming.

I guess that’s how this speech starts.

Slimy vat of sexism, a featherweight god, screaming babies armed with cans of cat food. Mocked by their own president. Coaxed back into formation by capitalism.

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People ask me why I’m so serious all the time.

I tell them it’s a side effect of being a surrealist. I find joy in the truth—even if it’s ugly.

When I was fourteen, a kid I knew walked up to me and my boyfriend at a football game and said, “My brother is burning a cross on the mountain tonight and we should be able to see it from here.” When I was nineteen, I delivered pizzas to the grand dragon of the Ku Klux Klan and drove by fully-robed recruiting rallies on Saturday afternoons. When I was 22, I borrowed a snow shovel from my neighbor only to find out in early summer that he had a ‘100% White Power’ tattoo on his arm. All of these moments brought me discomfort, mostly because no one would talk about the fact that this was a normalized thing where I grew up, but because of that, those moments also brought me a special kind of joy.

I have loved puzzles since I was handed my first one. And hate, to me, is a puzzle. I will never solve the puzzle fully, but I have spent my life writing out its truth. *Please Ignore Vera Dietz* was born as I drove by that old pizza place in Reading, PA, and thought of all the people I'd delivered to over the four years I worked there. There is a lot to be said for working in the service sector—as you well know. You get to see who your neighbors are. You get to learn how much they tip and how well they train their dogs. You get to meet perverts and shysters and sweet little old ladies.

The puzzle of my hometown stuck with me as I traveled the world. I've met haters of all kinds. I used to think hate was specific, but as I grew older I found that hate is vague, and not special at all. Don't tell members of hate groups this. It really bothers them. I tell you—hate is about as boring as pocket lint and about as common as spring allergies. There isn't one of us who is immune, either, no matter how much we deny it—all you have to do is dig deep enough to find out what a person is afraid of.

These days, a lot of people seem to be afraid of children's books.

Distraction is the mother of gaslighting. The restrictions on intellectual freedom coming from untrained lawmakers and citizens who keep harping on about “parents' rights” (by which they mean “white parents' rights”) are just that—distractions. It's a ruse. It's not about books. It's a movement by the privileged to dismantle public education because the white supremacy told them to. It's just bigots being bigots.

In the last ten years, children's literature has led the charge into what looks like a new space. This space has a lot of truth in it about our country's history and present day reality. In this space, we can say, “Black Lives Matter.” In this space, we can say “Love is Love.” We have more children's book creators of different backgrounds than ever before. Is it any surprise that the reaction to this is a call for destruction?

Here's the thing about haters. They already know the truth. That's why they're haters. Their trick is, then, to get others to agree with them in any way they can. Make it a zero sum game, call a librarian a pedophile, make up fables about picture books with sex instructions. They will say anything. Whatever it takes. Distraction is the mother of gaslighting because hating moves so fast, we can't keep up with it. By the time the sun rises tomorrow, we will doubt ourselves because it can't be as bad as it seems.

But it is—as bad as it seems.

Removing relatable contemporary books from school libraries in these times of standardized school violence, a teen mental health epidemic, and a national rise in hate is akin to hiding all the fire extinguishers when you know the school building is about to catch fire. And the haters know it.

Vera Dietz said, “I'm sorry, but I don't get it. If we're supposed to ignore everything that's wrong with our lives, then I can't see how we'll ever make things right.”

Look.

I'm tired of watching billionaires feed children into their money machine and never lift a finger to serve them. America is presently facing its worst EVER youth homelessness problem at the same time as we have a rise in special interest groups that claim to want to "protect children." We have people screaming at school board meetings about how books in the library are profane while they fly a flag on their house a block from the school that literally says FUCK BIDEN. This is what happens when you lie to children. This is what happens when we're distracted.

Vera Dietz walks out of her house one night to go to work. She can hear her neighbor screaming at his wife, which was a well-known occurrence in the neighborhood. The book is about how our society refuses to look at domestic violence and its effects and finally do something about it. Vera explains, "As I drive to work, though, I wonder about every house I pass, because I've read the statistics—haven't you? Which of these houses hold the wife beaters? The child abusers? The rapists? . . . Which of these houses hold the parents who hurt their own kids? Where are the signs? Wouldn't it be nice if there were big flashing signs to warn us about these people?"

I believe we have managed to arrange what Vera wanted. We have signs, now, right in people's yards that point out who's okay with leaders who disrespect and assault women, push racist policies, and want to deny young queer people their lives. And while this may sound political, it's not. It's just true. Because the trick of people who don't want to look at a *real* problem and solve it, is telling you that pointing it out is political.

My career started in isolation.

My career started in a flat so damp I watched the wall surface peel right off one time. A surrealist's dream! A human being's nightmare. This is what writers are made of. Black mold and metaphor. Breakfast of champions.

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The reason I'm standing up here today, aside from my epic parents, a slew of encouraging teachers and friends, and stacks of inspiring books, is the writer who received this award twenty years ago in 2002. Paul Zindel shaped me with his humor, his authenticity, and his unflinching honesty. From the minute I read my first Zindel, I felt seen. I was a weird kid with inexplicable discomfort in the world. It would take me many decades to figure out why. But if I read back through my Zindel collection, each volume carefully and lovingly stolen from my Jr. High school's library stacks, I find this.

“. . . the day your childhood dies is probably the first day you really know what guilt is.”  
—Paul Zindel

I can't tell you when my childhood died because if Zindel is right, I didn't have one. Exteriorly, I certainly did. I had summer vacations and cello lessons and basketball practice and sleepaway camp and birthday parties and building snowmen and riding my bike through miles of cornfield. But interiorly, I carried the guilt of the whole world. I thought that literally everything bad that happened was my fault. I can only tell you that I was either born with this, or it was given to me. Not all the players in my childhood were healthy. Least of all the society I was born into.

If Zindel was right, and I think he certainly was, then the teenage years are not advertised honestly. They aren't the best or most fun years of our lives! They're actually filled with emotional chores no one has prepared us for. On top of the cultural bullying, the eye-rolling, the mockery, and the pressure to choose what to do with their lives while also juggling cans of cat food and first love, teenagers have to figure out how to handle their trauma. This isn't new. Every one of us had to either face truth, file it away for future snacking, or burn it and decide we'd take it to our graves. The trick of people who want to control us is denying our trauma. The trick of denying our trauma is: it makes us easier liars. The cure is: talking openly about trauma. Anyone who tells you that's self-indulgent is trying to shut you up. Keep talking.

This war on facts is exhausting. We need time to stop. We need to reorient. We need some quiet. A sort of ethereal spa year in which we can recalibrate ourselves to the truth.

When people ask me why I write books for young people, I tell them that I prefer to write for the segment of the population that knows how to do algebra. But really, I've worked with a great many survivors of a great many things and most of those things were survived prior to age eighteen. I want to help people heal—because that is the solution to hate. I want to help people understand—because that is the solution to hate. I want to help people ask questions—because that is the solution to hate. I am building a compassionate army. An army of adults who treasure teenagers. Who value them. Appreciate them. Worship at the altar of their smiles.

David Bowie said about your children, "Don't kid yourself, they belong to you—they're the start of the coming race." My career started by trying to make way for the Homosuperior.

I believe, like everything else in my life, I got to this career by doing the opposite of what I was told. In fact, I did not go to medical school, and yet, I did become a heart surgeon. I cut into my heart over and over to see if somewhere in there, I could find a space reserved for love.

A location. A ballpark. A game of colder / warmer.

My career started on a snipe hunt at a summer camp.

My career started on a basketball court.

My career started in the backseat of an Audi with a point guard I loved so deep.

When I cut into my heart, what I found was teenage me. What she told me was: your feelings matter and since you were little, society told you that your feelings did not matter. You were told that every boy who pulled your pigtails liked you. You were told to forgive your abusers because it makes you the better person. You were told that a truly good life is uncomplicated and without villains—as if *anyone* can control when the villains show up.

My story is crowded with villains and heroes, like anyone else's.

I was duped in love. Betrayed. I nearly drowned.

Only when I escaped the damp did I receive further instructions.

The instructions read: Love yourself more.

I found—like many of us here today—I did not know how to do this.

No one had taught me.

When I wrote *Ask the Passengers*, I had a few goals, but one of them was: I wanted to write about love so relatable, that I wouldn't get one piece of hate mail for writing a book about a lesbian awakening. The book turned ten years old last month. I have yet to get one piece of hate mail for it. Astrid Jones is impossibly me. Her ritual of sending love to passengers in airplanes flying overhead is mine since I can remember. It was—not praying, but bigger energy—Reiki dialed to high. I had no idea how cosmic it was because I was, like, six years old. I just had a good imagination. I wanted to send love out. I wanted people to receive it.

Hawkeye Pierce once said, “Without love, what are we worth? Eighty-nine cents! Eighty-nine cents worth of chemicals walking around lonely.”

When I was in ninth grade, I wrote the piece that would define my career. It was from the point of view of a lonely can of succotash. It was lonely because I hate succotash. It was a metaphor. The succotash was me. The succotash was every kid in my class. The succotash is every kid in your library. Probably a lot of the adults, too.

When I was in 11<sup>th</sup> grade, someone scrawled the word DYKE on my locker. I wore it like a badge because it wasn't wholly inaccurate. Not all queer kids can turn that into a badge, though. Not when they're getting bullied. Not when they can't come out at home. Not when state after state, we are making queer kids illegal again. It is 2022. This is late stage capitalism; the part where we eat our young.

Without love what are we worth? Apparently a lot of money. There is profit in shaming queer children. There are millions of investors. Yet the APA reports that 50% of Generation Z identifies as LGBTQ+. This is not an emergency, it's a relief. This is a sign of a generation so mighty they will stop time. Reorient. Recalibrate to the truth after fifteen generations of intentional lying. Our job is to help them in every way I've listed today. It's a lot. But they deserve a lot. We all do.

Love is far more accessible than hate. It's just that some people have never been shown a map. Be the map.

Astrid Jones said, “How many things do I have to invent in my head to survive this?”  
 My career started when I invented a world for myself in first grade.  
 My career started when I walked out of the locked bathroom, sat down at a typewriter, and started weaving metaphors out of trauma. It's not indulgent; I'm a whistleblower.

Every day I slice open my heart to write a love song.  
 The problem is, love doesn't always mean romance, best friends, Norman Rockwell, and June Cleaver's after school cookies. It never did.

Love is the truth. No matter how ugly it is.  
 Love is a conversation. No matter how hard it is.  
 Love is protecting kids who aren't even yours. Love is holding screaming babies until the ringing never leaves our ears. Love is child-proofing our world with books that represent every possible

type of human, so that every single reader can find themselves on a page. Because that's how we show them they matter.

Love is what you do every day.

You give young people access to the maps that will cure their loneliness, you deal in weird little handbooks for life, and you help teenagers imagine the world they deserve—where their trauma is acknowledged and their journey, respected. My career started when you allowed me to help them by handing them my books. I can't thank you enough for that.

Being part of this movement—the movement to cherish and love teenagers—is the movement I was born for. My invitation came in the form of a book. Let us fight hard to keep that tradition strong. Let us fight hate and mind control in all its forms. Let us remember to love ourselves so well that the skill becomes muscle memory. Let us swaddle our screaming babies with word after word of truth and the space to talk about it.

Let us be good-hearted rebel scum.

Let us never shut up.

Thank you.

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