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“O ur Babies Are Screaming

—Lessons from Three Novels

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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 w ould 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 !"#$

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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 w ell, 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 '()#*$+,-#%".,&$/%&0)#*$)1$0!"$2303# ", 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 '()#*$+,-#%".,&$/%&0)#*$)1$0!"$2303# ", I was telling the truth about depression and the truth

about grief. Though w hen 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 craw l 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

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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 goin g 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 s o 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 sens e? 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 becaus e 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.

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I have loved puzzles since I w as 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. 4("5&"$67.)#"$8"# 5$9%"0:$w as

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 is n’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 w hen 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.

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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 interes t 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 hous e I pass, because I’ve read

the statistics

—haven’t you? Which of these hous es hold the wife beaters? The child abusers? The

rapis

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When I wrote ;&<$0!"$45&&".7"#&, 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 succotas h 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 11th grade, someone scrawled the word DYKE on my locker. I wore it like a badge

because it w asn’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 e are

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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 lonelines s, 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 cheris h 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