



Laurie Halse Anderson | 2009 Margaret A. Edwards Speech



We had planned for my husband to be here, but his father is quite ill. Instead, my special guest is my daughter Meredith, who was nine years old when I wrote . She just graduated from college and starts her career as a middle school science teacher in the fall. Thank you for graduating, sweetheart, and for landing that awesome job, and thanks even more for joining me here.

After your lovely announcement was made in Denver, a librarian friend wrote to congratulate me about this gracious award. She told me, however, that her daughter was not happy about the MAE. She thought that giving me a lifetime achievement award now meant that I would stop writing

I'd like to state something for the record: I'm just getting started.

I live outside a small town in Northern New York state. It's a rural community; very poor, filled with folk who know hardship and appreciate joy. When you meet someone new in town, the first question is usually, "You from around here?" Then you and your new friend each explain who your people are – parents, grandparents, cousins, in laws – and pick apart the web of connections that tie you to each other. Because there are always connections.

So if I may have your indulgence, I'd like to tell you about my people, my stories, and the threads that connect us together.





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picked up lessons about pacing, the correct level of detail, and ruthless editing that I use every day.

When I was in first grade, my father, who had been a village preacher, became a chaplain at Syracuse University. This meant a move south to the big city for us, and a new neighborhood and school for me.

My elementary school years in Syracuse were idyllic. We lived in a neighborhood bursting with kids who were loved by their parents. I was shy, except when it came to games of pretend or putting on plays. Then I turned into Miss Bossy Pants, which was tolerated, barely, because I was good at making things up.

One of my favorite places as a child was the library of Edward Smith Elementary School. On the days the librarians stayed late, I was right there with them, usually on my belly between the stacks, deep, deep in a book like







came to town to watch Syracuse football games park in our driveways. My best friend, Margot, and I were creative entrepreneurs. We charged a little bit more than our competitors, but we gave bouquets of marigolds as an incentive.

“Burnt orange” was all the rage back then, often partnered with the slimy “avocado green.” The combination was atrocious. Stepping into my mother’s kitchen where those two colors battled on every surface guaranteed you’d lose your appetite.

The Russian artist Wassily Kandinsky was not forced to live through the horror of 1970’s interior decorating and so was fond of orange. He described it as “...red brought nearer to humanity by yellow.” It is an in between color, liminal.

Orange presents a great color metaphor for teenagers. Orange is bold, vibrant, intrusive, creative, energetic, and loud. It is everything that can be both frustrating and endearing about teens.

My orange years were muddy. As I drifted from childhood into adolescence, my world disintegrated. My father had a wrenching falling out with the church administration and he left the ministry. This meant we had to leave our wonderful house, for it was a parsonage owned by the church. Daddy fell into a crippling depression and Mom had to find a way to support us and find us a new home and schools. In their confusion and pain, they kept family and friends at a distance.



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All of a sudden we had moved into a cheap apartment in a town where I knew no one. My father spent most of his time in bed. My mother worked every hour under the sun. I was 13. I was lost.

If it hadn't been for the trauma of those years, I think I would only be known as a writer of historical fiction. I write historical fiction because I love our country, I am proud to be American, and I want the next generation to have stories that will help them understand who our people are and how we are connected.

I write YA fiction because after a wonderful childhood, my nuclear family had a nuclear meltdown. The fallout poisoned us for decades.

Orange is that sliver of a moment when the traffic light takes a breath between yellow Caution and red Stop. Orange is the flash of detonation before the impact of the shock wave.

I'd rather not drone on about the breakdown of my family or my painful teenage years. For one thing, any certified therapists or counselors in the room will present me with a bill when I walk out of here. More importantly, it doesn't matter.

This is something I repeat over and over to my readers; we have little control over the bad things that happen to us in life. That's one of the ugly truths of growing up.





But that ugliness can be balanced by grace, for

If you choose to focus only on the fact that Life knocked you down, you will never figure out how to stand up, brush yourself off, and try again. If you stay on the ground and wallow in the dirt, you'll miss everything

We are all scarred. Physical scar tissue is interesting; it is often stronger than surrounding tissue, but too much of it reduces flexibility. Scars don't stretch well.

The emotional scars I accumulated as a teenager did not bind me or turn my heart rigid. Why not? I was saved by Story.

The stories I heard around the campfire and when I was hiding on the stairs showed me where I came from. The books in my high school and public libraries showed me where I could go. Margaret A. Edwards wrote in her book,

, "books are literary atom bombs capable of destroying stupidity, cant, insularity, and prejudice – if they are read."

I read them. I drew strength from science fiction, from fantasy, from historical fiction. I read obsessively... Everything except the books that were assigned in English class. Those stayed closed.





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HIV/AIDS and were treating the victims of the disease with more compassion. This led to yet another revision (there were countless revisions for that book). It was for the best. The story stands on its own.

Mattie faces choices under pressure and often if caught between two bad choices, with no way of predicting the outcomes. She stumbles, unready, into the adult world. She emerges from the fires reborn and in control.

Most of the fan mail I get about is from readers who enjoy the historical setting of the gory medical details, or who want to know if Mattie is going to wind up loving Nathaneal. My favorite letter came from a sixth grade girl in New Jersey. Her father was working in the Twin Towers on 9/11. He survived, but it was hours and hours before he could contact his family. This girl found comfort in Mattie's story because Mattie was the only person she knew who had lived through such an intense experience and come out OK.

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the notions of faith and myth, which is an ever running conversation in the back of my skull.

My challenge to myself in writing was to see if I could get inside a character whose skill sets and interests were as far removed as possible from what had been mine in high school. I passed Algebra with a 68. I passed Geometry, Trigonometry, and Chemistry each with a 66.

(Of all of the characters in all of my books, Teri Litch is the one I'd like to write about again. Shhhhh...)

started it all.

It's really interesting for me to talk to new writers who know oodles about the publishing world and have an MFA and a blog and a fifty year plan. I imagine it will work, for some of them I stumbled into my writing career and into the writing of with no plan at all. I suspect if I had developed a career plan before I wrote the book, I'd be back milking cows by now.

I wrote twenty years after high school. That's how long it took me to find my voice. I was quite sure it would never be published. Who would want to read a strange little book about a girl who won't say anything?



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I was wrong. It turns out that the fears and demons that tormented me as



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If you swear to do your part, I swear to do mine. I will dig down deep, set aside my personal cares and shut up the monkey mind that is ever trying to distract me. I will stop thinking and start writing. I will ask the spirits to move through me and let the words drip out covered with honey and fire.

Do we have a deal?

Thank you for raising up my dreams and honoring my stories.