



## Rules of the Game

### 2010 Edwards Award Acceptance Speech

Jim Murphy

Thank you very much for that generous welcome. And thank you for such a wonderful introduction. I am very happy to be here to accept the Margaret A. Edwards award, and humbled that I'm the first nonfiction writer to be recognized! So let me begin by thanking the Edwards' committee members and the Young Adult Library Services Association and

I have to confess something. When I received the phone call telling me I'd won the award, I was, of course, very excited. But then I thought: it's a "lifetime" achievement award for a "body" of work. And I immediately felt for my pulse.

But receiving the award did make me reflect on my *gulp* 40 years (good God can it really be that long!) 40 long years of, first, editing books for young readers, and then writing them. Exactly how did I end up here?



Well, I guess the easiest explanation is that I was and in many ways still am a visual learner. If I can picture it in my mind, it will pretty much stick in there. And I think a lot of kids — maybe even most kids start out learning in the same way.

It's why stories and characters and scenes had such a powerful impact on me. And why the fact-laden, dates-laden, laden-down texts of the nonfiction books I had to read when I was young never registered at all. The only thing I recall of the many, many biographies, history books and informational books I read is a single scene from a biography about a football (American style football, that is) player named Red Grange. It was a short, simple scene where a very young Red Grange is playing on a horse-drawn ice wagon as it's slowly moving down a street. The wagon hits a bump, Red tumbles off and has his legs crushed flat under the wheels. Now that stuck with me!

story lines, use primary sources that allow readers to hear the voices of the people involved, and — when I can find them — show that young people were more than mere observers of history. That they were actively involved in shaping the history of our country. I want readers to



experience history to see it as if they were eye-witnesses at the events.

When did I start writing like this? I'd have to say it was in a book that very few of you have heard about and even fewer have read. It was called \_\_\_\_\_ and was published in 1984. Yes, I wrote a history about tractors.

I remember finishing the text for \_\_\_\_\_ and being so happy and proud and relieved. (It takes me forever to research and write a book so I'm always relieved at this moment.) So I finished the text and captions, had all the pictures safely bundled up, and there I was telling my father about these gigantic machines with ten feet tall iron wheels and ear-oversized farm machinery.

When I finished talking, my Dad leaned back in his chair, got a little smile on his face (he had a very wry sense of humor), and said: "Jimmy, that's going to be a big hit in Russia."

Now I thought that line was very funny; it made me laugh out



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voluntarily pick up a book about tractors? Would a kid in Russia even want to read it?

Which led me to discover







in Morristown, N.J., just a half hour from where I lived. That drive was the beginning of a journey that eventually produced .

Rule #2 suggests that persistent, hard work will eventually pay off. And that's true a great deal of the time. But I've also discovered that

### Rule #3

My wife and I were on vacation in New Hampshire and we stopped at an ancient barn with a sign out front saying there were over 10,000 old books inside. And there were. Books everywhere lines of shelves stuffed with books, piles of books on the floor between the shelves and on the stairs to the hay loft, which was also crammed with books. It was one giant fire trap ready to go up in flames, and I loved it.

We were there for almost two hours gathering up armfuls of books and I was wandering up in the loft when dumb luck struck. I happened to spot two identical books side by side. I've often wondered if I would have noticed the book if there had only been one of them. But I did notice, so I pulled one down and found myself holding

published just a month or two after the Chicago Fire of 1871.



I had no immediate inspiration to write a book about the fire. But I liked the book I was holding. It was full of before and after drawings of buildings and it had this great map in the front that showed the spread of the fire in blood red. It was as if someone had shot Chicago through the heart, it was that vivid. So I bought the cheaper one of the books it was slightly damaged and took it home with a mound of other books.

And there it sat in my office untouched for months and months. During this time I was submitting ideas to Dianne Hess at Scholastic and she was rejecting them one after the other. Seven ideas shot down.





hidden really, were two short chapters of personal recollections. And those were amazing eye-witness accounts, including one by a newspaper reporter who arrived at the O'Leary house about ten minutes after their barn caught fire.

I began wondering if it might be possible to tell the story of the fire, start to finish, from the perspective of a few individuals. I imagined the book would be like an opera, with the burning city as backdrop to the adventures and near-escapes of the characters.

Which was when I remembered something else. When I was doing research ten years before on the Civil War, I'd come across the firsthand account of Claire Innis, who was 14 when she became lost in the Chicago fire. I had jotted down her recollection in a notebook, mostly because her writing was direct and vivid and active. I guess if you literally had to run for your life, your recollections would be pretty animated too! And luckily mostly because I'm too lazy to clean up my office I was able to locate that notebook and Claire's account. It was her story that became the centerpiece of and keeps the text moving forward.



2010



I had two books published last year, one about the Battle of Antietam, the other about the Christmas truce during WWI. I thought both books were pretty good and they both received some very nice reviews. Early on in the year my wife, Alison, suggested that I might want to read some children's literature blogs to see what folk were saying about my books and other nonfiction. So I did. I made it a point to read various blogs just about every day for months.

And what a dizzying blizzard of comments I found. One person touted a number of titles as fine examples of the "New Nonfiction for children." But not my books! Boy did I suddenly feel a little older.

Another blogger championed examples of "POV Nonfiction," while still another urged that their "Dramatic Nonfiction" was what young readers wanted and needed. Guess who's books weren't mentioned.

Someone said that history books shouldn't be about stories (What! Hey, wait a second pal!); History, this blogger insisted, should be about ideas, and not little ideas either. Big ones. I guess the Civil War, the Emancipation Proclamation, World War I and peace weren't quite big enough to make that list.





I am now the proud possessor of my own little blog (though I still can't say that word without giggling; the word reminds me of the stains on a garage floor from dripping car fluids) which is on my own little website ([www.jimmurphybooks.com](http://www.jimmurphybooks.com)).

I am member of a newly launched video-conferencing company which can be found on the INK (Interesting Nonfiction for Kids) Think Tank site ([www.inkthinktank.com/index.html](http://www.inkthinktank.com/index.html)). So you can now arrange to see my mug from 12 inches away. I even participated in a publicity slam, which didn't really hurt as much as it sounds, but had me doing over 40 radio interviews in December. And surviving to tell about it.

And, yes, I did listen to what all of those bloggers were saying and I read most of the books they were getting behind, too. To see what worked and didn't work; to see if they really were that much different from what I do and what other people like Russell Freedman, Susan Campbell Bartoletti, Jim Griblin, and Candace Fleming have done. Was it a revolution, an evolution or just insistent self-advertisement? I came away thinking it was a little of the first, some of the second, and a good deal of the third! But it did show me that 2009 was an absolutely



amazing year for nonfiction for young readers and a good sign regarding the future of nonfiction.

And reading these blogs and books did help me remember the most important rule of all: Rule #4: . Every one of those books I really liked were written by people who were driven to write them, who were fully involved in them emotionally and intellectually.

I remember when I first learned about the Yellow Fever Epidemic in Philadelphia in 1793 and being completely surprised and fascinated by the story the collapse of every level of government, the squabbling in public by the doctors, the way the mayor of the city cobbled together an illegal government to keep the city running (and was later made to pay the tab), the way the African-American community stepped forward to nurse and in other ways help their white neighbors only to be criticized unfairly.

The epidemic had numerous levels and a giant cast of odd, interesting characters. Take Dr. Duffield, who insisted that the best way to ward off the fever was to put two inches of dirt in every room of your house every day!



And I remember telling an editor (no one in this room, in case you wondered) about the idea and having it rejected. Pleasantly enough, but rejected nonetheless. I went home feeling empty and bewildered. I was so sure this was a good idea, but clearly that editor didn't think so. Maybe there was a flaw in it that I couldn't see. I said something to my family at dinner, which was when our oldest son, Mike, chimed in. Dad, he informed me in a very serious voice, your mistake was to tell that editor about a gooey, gory disease called the Black Vomit !

So I decided to trust my heart, what my instincts were telling me to do. I decided to write the book without a contract or a publisher lined up in advance. If the manuscript was good enough, I told myself, someone would buy it. The result I'm happy to say was

and it3c



They want me to tackle strong subjects and they are wonderfully ruthless in getting me to work on a text until it's the best it can be. (Someday I'll tell you how Dianne got me to cut a 270 page manuscript down to 70 pages.) My editors want me to produce books that will be different from what I've done in the past, but will still connect and speak to readers. I want to thank them both for holding on firmly to their beliefs and holding my feet and non-typing fingers to the fire.

And it's comforting to know that you librarians are out there evaluating our books and weighing their worth with only one agenda in mind and sometimes not so eager to please a young reader. A simple enough sounding chore but one that requires a deep knowledge of thousands of books and an intuitive understanding of hundreds of readers. That makes my job of writing one book at a time seem easy.

I don't know what the future holds for books in general or for me as a writer. After all, I write nonfiction, not science fiction. But I have a feeling that if we put aside iron-clad rules and all trust our hearts we'll create books (in whatever form) that touch young readers in ways they'll remember for years.





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Thank you again for this amazing award and have a great ALA and a great summer.