

1992 Margaret A. Edwards Award Acceptance Speech

by Lois Duncan

When Richard Peck Learned he was the recipient of the Margaret A. Edwards Award, he was cruising the waters of the Canal Zone. When the call came to Robert Cromier, he was sitting in his living room reading a book.

My heart goes out to my unfortunate colleagues who had the news piped into their ears through pieces of plastic. In my own case, I was just the right spot at the right time.

By purse coincidence my husband and I were in San Antonio, celebrating the birth of our first grandson, at exactly the time of the ALA Midwinter Meeting. Also by coincidence, we were at the Convention Center, cruising the exhibit hall, when the selection committee came racing out of their chambers in search of a telephone so they could call me at my home in New Mexico.



Lois Duncan

I was standing in their path, and they almost ran over me. My husband and one of my editors were right there with me, and we all received the wonderful news together. It was one of the most incredible experiences in my life.

If the Fairy Godmother of Young Adult Story Writers had come to me with her magic wand and offered me my choice of literary achievement awards, The Margaret A. Edwards is the one I would have wished for. The reason for this particular award is so meaningful is that it's given for a *body* of work. It's exciting, of course, to be honored for a single title, but you're always aware that such an award may be a fluke—that the title, the theme, or even the picture on the jacket may have appealed to a particular judge for personal reasons that had little to do with the quality of the book. The flip side of that coin is even more disturbing possibility that the award-winning book is a once-in-a-lifetime of effort. Despite the fact that some books were better than others, and that certain books—let's face it—were total disasters, the message you have given me today is that it has all balanced out and that the overall quality of my work is deserving of recognition.

I can't think of any messages that could be more gratifying.

My life as a writer goes back a very long way. Our family moved around a lot, and by the time I entered junior high school I had attended nine grammar schools. A painfully shy little girl with braces and glasses, I didn't have what it took to establish instant friendships, and to compensate for the fact that nobody notice me, I created fantasy worlds which I was popular.

This tendency toward escapism may actually be hereditary, because I later discovered that my mother did this too. After her death, in 1968, I stumbled upon a notebook of poems Mother wrote in her teens, one of which started like this:

*I used to have a dream when I was little
Of moon and mist and ocean and a lovely fairy rock
And a shining prince who loved me. He was waiting every evening
When I slipped in on the moonbeam in a blue and sliver frock.
(And it didn't really matter that by day I was a chubby,
Freckled, lonely little girl. You see, I changed at eight o'clock..)*

When I read that verse I felt close to my mother.

Although Mother and I were both frequent inhabitants of fantasy worlds, we differed in one important way. While Mother was content to internalize her fantasies, I was determined to have mine recognized. At the age of ten, I was submitting stories to magazines, and by the age of thirteen I was selling them to youth publications. While other, better adjusted youngsters were skipping rope and going to slumber parties, I was cross-referencing my rejection slips and flipping through youth publications in search of my byline.

I was a very strange child.

At the age of eighteen, I turned fantasy into reality by attaining the ultimate goal for girls of that era—I earned my M. R. S. degree. Floating down the aisle like a princess in a fairy tale, I expected, like all fair princesses, to live “happily ever after.”

That didn't happen. My too-young, too-hasty marriage was a miserable failure, and fled back to Fantasy Land to write my first novel, *Debutante Hill*. I was able, at least on paper, to erase the mistake I had made by assuming the inevitable identity of lovely “Lynn Chambers, the most popular girl in Riverdale High School.”

I sent the book to a publisher, and it was accepted. It wasn't particularly successful, but it brought me my first fan letter.

Dear Lois Duncan,

I just finished reading your book and this will probably sound stupid to you since I am just a nobody, but could you possibly add onto the end of it? Say, for instance, make Paul and Lynn get married, and tell something about the way the debuts turned out, and what happens to Dirk, and make Ernie and Nancy get married too? I can't stand for this story to be over. I must see another part of it. Just on type paper, please!! You won't have to send it to the publisher, just to me. Please! I will be so grateful!!!

A faithful reader,

Barbara Scott

I will never forget my feeling when I read that letter. I was standing in front of the sink in my usual outfit, a stained maternity smock, with a baby balanced on one hip and a toddler clinging to my knees, and I read those words and felt as if I had been anointed. To Barbara Scott, the characters that I have invented—Lynn and Pal and Dirk and Ernie and Nancy—were flesh-and-blooded people who existed in a very real world. She cared about those people and was concerned for their welfare.

For the first time in my life, I was filled with a sense of power. I was not just a drag little doormat, I was a *World Maker!*

I walked away from the sink and filed for a divorce.

For the next four years I ground out everything I could sell from confession stories to greeting-card verse to advertising copy. I also continued to write young adult novels. By the time I remarried (I did the job right the second time), I was not only earning a pretty good living for my children and myself. I was writing books that were beginning to gain recognition.

The responsibility that accompanies world making is formidable, for when an author creates a world and invites readers into it, they never walk out the same as when they walked in. This is especially true for those of us who write for young people. We must constantly aware that the personalities our readers encounter and the events in which they participates in the world of the mind may have as strong an effect on them as the people and events they experience in everyday life.

The choices involved in creating these worlds are personal ones, and each author makes decisions according to his or her own sense of values. Some create Dick-and-Jane worlds in which the sun always shines and evil is nonexistent. Those worlds can be fun to romp in and can be as entertaining as watching sitcoms on television. Other authors create dark worlds filled with pain and injustice. Those books also have value, for children who dwell in similar words in real life (and, sadly, they are many such children) can draw strength from the knowledge that they are not alone with their problems.

One prominent message that runs through most of my own book is the importance of taking responsibility for one's actions. I like to think of the worlds I created as places in which my readers learn to make moral judgements. I try to create sympathetic viewpoint of characters, so my readers will be able to relate to them, but those characters are young and inexperienced, and they often make mistakes. They learn those mistakes, and I hope my readers will also.

Although it has been over thirty years since I received the letter from Barbara Scott that gave me

enough self-confidence to make control of my life, I still am tremendously affected by reader reaction. These are the kind of letters that make me glad to be a writer:

I just finished reading Summer of Fear, and you do not know how shook up I was. Your book really made me appreciate my mother. After I stopped shaking, I went over and hugged, which is something, I had not done in a long time.

Amy

Our class just finished reading Killing Mr. Griffin. Our teacher asked us, "Do you think Susan was guilty?" A lot of the kids said, "No, because she wasn't even there when they tied up the guy," but my answer was, "I think Susan was just as guilty as the others because she knew what her friends were going to do, and she didn't do anything about it."

Todd

I just read Stranger With My Face and I'm so excited! It would be so wonderful to have the power of astral projection! Don't get me wrong, I'm not discontented with my life as it is. I'm just absorbed by the ideas in this books. I've been trying to find out everything I can about the subject, and it's amazing all the research that's done that nobody knows about! There's so much more to life than I ever thought there was!

*Your, hopefully, respectfully,
and other things,
Jamie*

So where does one obtain the material to create world of the mind? If I had been asked that question three years ago I would have responded, "For experience and imagination."

Today I can't answer so easily. Events have occurred—tragic, bizarre, yet indisputable—that have challenged my former beliefs about sources of creativity.

In Jun 1989, my teenager suspense novel *Don't Look Behind You* was published. I based the heroine, April, on the personality of my eighteen-year-old daughter, Kait. In the book, a murder contract was put on April's family to stop them from blowing the whistle on an interstate drug ring. April was chased by a hit man in a Camaro.

One month later, Kait was chased down and shot twice in the head while driving home from a girlfriend's house. A man who witnessed the chase told the police that the killers were driving a Camaro.

Events from my fiction suddenly became hideous reality. In *Don't Look Behind You*, April's family was forced into hiding. Two men were indicted for Kait's murder, and since the arrests

were made as the result of our family's reward flyers, relatives of the suspected triggerman threaten to kill the rest of us.

Our family went into hiding.

An investigative reporter, Mike Gallagher, wrote a front-page article for our Sunday paper. Under the headline "Kait Arquette's Murder Case Snarled in Contradictions," it pinpointed numerous flaws in the police investigation. In *Summer of Fear*, my heroine's boyfriend was named Mike Gallagher.

The man indicted for killing Kait was also named Mike. The police report quoted an acquaintance of his as saying, "His nickname is Vampire or something. They always call him 'Vamp'" The hit man in *Don't Look Behind You* was named Mike Vamp.

A coincidence piled upon coincidence, I began to fear that grief had driven me mad. In an attempt to salvage my sanity, I wrote Dr. William Roll, director of the Physical Research Foundation, to ask if he could make any sense out of what was happening.

HE responded with a reassuring phone call.

"You're not crazy," he told me. "Precognition of this sort is well established, and creative people seem to have more of that ability than others. This is particularly true of violence of loved ones. There are many documented cases when glimpses of traumatic future events have turned up in fiction.

One of those instances he cited was about a book Titan ship ramming an iceberg. The book was published before the sinking of *Titanic* and contained many detailed details duplicated in the actual event including tonnage, the lack of lifeboats, and the number of passengers and fatalities.

Some of my most popular novels have been about psychic phenomena. I wrote about this subject because it was good story material, not because I believed in it. I never been exposed to such things as psychometry, telepathy, and precognition, and I considered them fantasy. I now consider them a natural extension of who we are. In the course of investigating our daughter's murder, my husband and I worked closely with internationally recognized psychic detectives who provided us with more information than the police did. We both now believe in that we never before thought possible.

Don't Look Behind You was my last published young adult novel. Since Kait's death, I have written only one book, our family's true-life horror story. We hope that reading *Who Killed My Daughter?* will motivate informants to give us the answer to that question.

With our real-life murder still unsolved, I'm finding it impossible to invest myself emotionally in a make-believe murder, so the next two books I have contracted to write are non-fiction. If *Who*

Killed My Daughter? provides us with the closure we hope for, I may once again be able to go back to suspense novels.

Like Scarlet O'Hara, "I'll think about that tomorrow." For the present it's enough to be here at ALA, celebrating a momentous event in my life, an world that is populated by my favorite kind of people.

I want to express my thanks to the *School Library Journal* and to the Young Adult Library Services Association for honoring me with the wonder Margaret A. Edwards Award.

Lois Duncan is the recipient of the 1992 Margaret A. Edwards Award, the presented on June 27, 1992 in San Francisco during the Annual Conference of the American Library Association. This award was created to honor an author whose work has been taken to heart by young adults over a period of years, and provides and "authentic voice that continues to illuminate their experiences and emotions, giving insight to their lives."

Credits:

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