

Acceptance Speech Upon Receiving The Margaret Edwards Award (American Library Association Lifetime Achievement Award For Writing In The Field Of Young Adult Literature)

June 27, 1998

What an honor it is for me to be here with you today. I am grateful indeed that you have accepted my books, especially the Murry and Austin books for the Margaret Edwards Award. I want to give you the particular thanks of Poly O'Keefe and Vicky Austin.

A few months ago I was at a Master's Tea at Yale University, sitting in a comfortable chair surrounded by a gathering of students, most of whom knew my books and characters as well as if not more than I do. We talked about future plans for some of the characters, and I was able to tell them that Polly O'Keefe is in medical school.

A few days later I received a letter from one of the students saying that she was a first year medical student at Yale, and that she and her friends would love to have Polly O'Keefe in their class.

I wrote back that Polly would be delighted to be part of their class.

The next letter I received told me that they had gone to the office and registered Polly, so now she is an official member of the student body at Yale Medical School.

Yes, it's as real as that, and the characters are as real as that, at least to me and some of my readers. Thus we expand our worlds, no matter how big and busy they are. I was thrilled one day to walk by a group of women at a conference and to hear them speculating about some of the characters as they might talk about some of their friends.

"Would you have let your daughter go off to the Antarctic like that?"

"Well, they trusted Cook to take care of her."

"Still pretty risky for a sixteen year old."

Yes, they are real.

Sometimes they know more than I do, and sometimes they know before I do.

I think of Adam Eddington, the protagonist of *THE ARM OF THE STARFISH*. Adam flies to Lisbon, in Portugal, to work with an American marine biologist, who happens to be Dr. O'Keefe, though I don't mention that his first name is Calvin. If you want to recognize that he's Calvin O'Keefe, that's okay; and if you don't know, that's okay, too.

Anyhow, Adam is swept into a web of International intrigue, and goes three nights without sleep. He is exhausted, and finally he is allowed to go to bed in the Ritz Hotel in Lisbon, and falls into a deep, long sleep. When he wakes up, there, sitting on a small chair and looking at him, is a young man called Joshua. Adam is very surprised to see Joshua. There was no Joshua in my plot. I could either say, "Go away, Joshua, you're not in my plot," or I could go back to page one and let him in--which is what I did. I can't imagine the book without Joshua, but I have no idea how he got into the Ritz. My husband and I spent one night at the Ritz in Lisbon--I can't write about a place I haven't been to, and I can highly recommend the Ritz, which is elegant indeed. Adam did not have to pay for his room, or he wouldn't have been there. I did guess that the name Joshua, which is an alter name for Jesus, might mean that something was going to happen to Joshua, and it did.

When I finished the final draft I read it out loud to my mother and my then ten year old son. When I got to the scene where Joshua is shot and killed, my son said, "Change it."

"I can't change it," I said. "That's what happened."

He said, "You're the writer. You can change it."

"I can't change it. That's what happened."

I didn't want Joshua to die, either. But that's what happened. If I tried to change it, I'd be deviating from the truth of the story.

"What is truth?" asked jesting Pilate.

Truth is what is true, and it's not necessarily factual. Truth and fact are not the same thing. Truth does not contradict or deny facts, but it goes through and beyond facts. This is something that it is very difficult for some people to understand. Truth can be dangerous. If you go beyond the facts, things can happen, like Joshua's being shot. But wonderful things can happen, too.

In Kenneth Grahame's beautiful book, *THE WIND IN THE WILLOWS*, Mole and Rat go to the holy island of the great god, Pan. It is a superb piece of religious writing, but because it has gone beyond fact, it is deeply upsetting and untruthful to some people. If a story is not specified as being Christian, it is not Christian. But that is not so.

I think that this scene is upsetting because it calls us beyond fact into the vast world of imagination, and imagination is a word of many dimensions.

A while ago there was an article in the New York Times about some women in Tennessee who wanted the middle grade text books removed from the school curriculum, not because they were inadequate educationally, but because these women were afraid that they might stimulate the childrens' imaginations.

What!?!

It was a good while later that I realized that the word, imagination, is always a bad word in the King James translation of the Bible. I checked it out in my concordance, and it is always bad.

Put them down in the imagination of their hearts.

Their imagination is only to do evil.

Language changes. What meant one thing three hundred years ago means something quite different now. So the people who are afraid of the word imagination are thinking about it as it was defined three centuries ago, and not as it is understood today, a wonderful word denoting creativity and wideness of vision.

Another example of our changing language is the word, prevent. Take it apart into its Latin origin, and it is prevenire. Go before. So in the language of the King James translation if we read, "May God prevent us," we should understand the meaning to be, "God go before us," or "God lead us."

And the verb, to let, used to mean, stop. Do not let me, meant do not stop me. And now it is completely reversed into a positive, permissive word.

Language is often changed by writers. We speak English today because Chaucer chose to write in the language of the common people, rather than the Latin or French used by those who were educated. James Joyce had an almost equally profound effect on language when he wrote about the inner self, rather than the outer self.

I don't want to dump on TV, but there's no doubt that our language has been changed by television, especially by the media, which tries to manipulate us into being consumers. Most of the time nowadays we human beings are referred to as consumers. What does the consumer think? What does the consumer want? How ugly. Forest fires consume. Cancer consumes. I want us to be nourishers. To be a librarian, particularly a librarian for young adults, is to be a nourisher, to share stories, offer books full of new ideas. We live in a world which has changed radically in the last half century, and story helps us to understand and live creatively with change.

The changes are not going to stop. They are going to continue and accelerate. Like it or not. The electronic world of the microchip is here, and how did it get here? It's arrival was unexpected and rapid, taking us almost by surprise.

One theory I read about last summer at the time of the fiftieth anniversary of Roswell, the place where an alien space ship allegedly crashed. We were reminded that at least two humanoid aliens were on that ship, but had not survived. And I remembered very clearly that at the 25th anniversary of Roswell the TV had shown pictures of the disabled space craft, and also of one of the aliens in a hospital, where doctors were trying to save his life, but failed. He looked human, but not quite, and there was something both so terrible and fascinating about this that I have never forgotten it. The theory, both then and now, was that these aliens were far ahead of us electronically, and we learned enough from them and the remains of the ship and its equipment to make the amazing electronic leaps of the fifties. If that space ship had not crashed we probably wouldn't have CT scans or MRIs, and we probably wouldn't have our personal computers and we might not even have colored TV.

Does all this sound like science fiction? Maybe it is, but many theories first postulated in science fiction stories have come to be. Most of Jules Verne's stories talked of things which didn't then exist, but which are commonplace now. If we can think of something, we can usually make it, though it may take many centuries. Didn't Leonardo da Vinci make a crude flying machine?

Whether or not Roswell taught us many new things about the outside world, it had little or nothing to do with the changes in the inner world. Things that were taboo at the time of Roswell are commonplace as we rush towards a new millennium. One day back in the fifties my father and I were watching a program on our black and white TV which included an interview with an elderly man who answered one question by remarking, "Just because there's snow on the roof doesn't mean the fire's gone out in the furnace."

The screen went black as the program went off the air, and we heard the announcer say, "There will be a brief interlude of organ music."

Certainly that mild quip of the elderly man wouldn't shock anybody today. We might laugh appreciatively at his wit, but that would be the extent of our reaction. The change in point of view has been equally radical in the world of books. Somehow or other I've never gotten around to reading *LADY CHATTERLY'S LOVER*, but I doubt if it would shock me.

I've always believed that there is no subject that is taboo for the writer. It is how it is written that makes a book acceptable, as a work of art, or unacceptable and pornographic. There are many books circulating today, for the teen-ager as well as the grown up, which would not have been printed in the fifties. It is still amazing to me that *A WRINKLE IN TIME* was considered too difficult for children. My children were seven, ten, and twelve while I was writing it, and they understood it. The problem is not that it's too difficult for children, but that it's too difficult for grown ups. Much of the world view of Einstein's thinking wasn't being taught when the grown ups were in school, but the children were comfortably familiar with it.

MEET THE AUSTINS (the book which preceded *WRINKLE*) took two years to find a publisher. Largely because it begins with a family's reaction to the death of a beloved uncle, and children were not supposed to know about death, largely, I suspect, because it upset their parents.

But again I was writing out of my own experience, and how my family accepted grief and loss and death. I think it made my children stronger than if we had gone placidly along with no traumas to work through.

In the fifties we didn't talk much about YA [Young Adult] novels because what we would consider a YA novel today was then being published as a straight trade novel. The YA genre was just being born. And basically YA novels are novels which have a young protagonist through whose eyes we see the story. Novels of science fiction were still being published by the sci fi presses, and it never occurred to me to send any of my manuscripts to anybody but a trade publisher. That may have been naive, but I think it was a good choice.

So *WRINKLE*, when it was finally published in 1962, after two years of rejections, broke several current taboos. The protagonist was female, and one of the unwritten rules of science fiction was that the protagonist should be male. I'm a female. Why would I give all the best ideas to a male?

Another assumption was that science and fantasy don't mix. Why not? We live in a fantastic universe, and subatomic particles and quantum mechanics are even more fantastic than the macrocosm. Often the only way to look clearly at this extraordinary universe is through fantasy, fairy tale, myth. During the fifties Erich Fromm published a book called THE FORGOTTEN LANGUAGE, in which he said that the only universal language which breaks across barriers of race, culture, time, is the language of fairy tale, fantasy, myth, parable, and that is why the same stories have been around in one form or another for hundreds of years.

Someone said, "It's all been done before."

Yes, I agreed, but we all have to say it in our own voice.

There are many distinct voices in the world of YA literature today, and the chief thing they have in common is their honoring of the human spirit. Their protagonists are always subjects, and never objects. One definition of pornography I was given is treating people as objects. In most YA novels we are able to enter into the subject, to feel empathy, to be willing to be part of the story.

I love being part of the story as I write and as I read. And I am grateful to you indeed for being part of the story, too. Thank you for affirming me because that is what makes it possible for me to write as I do.

You are very special lights in a frequently dark world, and we need you. Thank you, thank you.