

CLA AWARD SPEECH, Victoria, 2014

Like most people in this room, stories helped me through childhood.

My mother fled my father when I was a baby. We lived with my grandparents on a farm and then in the small town of Kincardine. Mom and my grandparents read to me all the time, and took me to Stratford from age five. I also listened to stories from the CBS Record Club on my little 78 rpm turntable, and make up stories of my own with a set of china elves and a collection of hand puppets.

Life was very confusing, often overwhelming, but when I was with my stories things made sense, my problems seemed more manageable. And when I made up my own stories I felt secure; I had control.

Before I could spell, I was sounding out words and writing down letters. Mom kept them. Reading them today, I have no idea what I was trying to say, but I know I was trying to say *something*: to put shape to chaos. Writing has been like that for me since childhood. A need as basic and necessary as breathing.

Curse of the Dream Witch comes from that need; an understanding that imagination can make sense of the world. Today we live in culture of fear -- a real world Great Dread -- so terrified that we're prepared to hand over our privacy and our freedom. We have gone full fetal: built gated communities and bubble-wrapped our children.

That truth is the kernel behind *Curse of the Dream Witch*: the idea of a child trapped indoors because her parents are afraid for her life.

Ideas lead to questions like Who? What? When? Where? Why? I saw a fairy-tale princess locked in a medieval turret, her life threatened by a witch who has turned the power of imagination against itself. A dream witch.

For each character I always ask: What do I want? Why do I want it? What will I do to get it? I ask these questions because, under the skin, we're all alike. We've been better than our best selves and worse than we'd like to believe possible. We've loved and hated, we've been kind and cruel, generous and mean. Understanding the full range of our own potential for good and evil is what makes stories real, and what helps us make sense of events that are otherwise unimaginable.

So I asked myself, if I was the Dream Witch, why would I want the princess's heart? Easy. A heart has immeasurable value, and the heart of a princess is unique, what better for a spell? But Olivia is protected by pysanky. What can I do to overcome this obstacle? Again easy. Bribe and blackmail anyone with access to the eggs so I can get and destroy them.

Even better, I know that people will do anything to protect their kids, so I'd say to the people, "I'll steal *your* children, until I have what I want." They may hate me but I don't care: I don't want their love, I want Olivia's heart. Their fear for their kids will help me get it. "Without your daughter, the witch wouldn't be coming after us," they'll say to Olivia's parents. And with the public cowed to the point of revolt, my job will be that much easier. Although working on a fairy tale, I realized I'd entered the mindset of terrorists, whose tactics, however brutal, have a perverted human logic.

Next, I imagined that I was Olivia. I know the Dream Witch is the one responsible for the suffering around me. But in my heart, I feel responsible. Innocent people are suffering because I'm kept safe. If it weren't for me, they'd be fine. How can I live with that? I can't. I have to do whatever I can to destroy the witch, even if it means my death.

In every scene, I put myself into the head of each character. What would I do if I was them? It's why I call my characters and books my "brain babies," they're all a part of me.

It's also why I refuse to answer the question, "Which is more important, character or plot?" To me, they're inseparable. In real life, we judge people's character based on what they do. And what people do in fiction is called plot.

It's also why I temper the standard dictum "write what you know." Yes indeed, write what you know -- but not in a literal sense. Write what you know *emotionally*. Because unless we're reading and writing autobiography, we're always connecting with the imagined. (As an aside, even in autobiography. For none of us have personal knowledge of what it's like to be our parents, siblings and colleagues.)

When we are honest, our imaginations cut to the bone. In *Chanda's Secrets*, for instance, I fictionalized the deaths of some of my dearest friends, and Mrs. Tafa's final confession was the pain so many of us felt in the eighties. Likewise, when I wrote Chanda's love for her mother, I was thinking: What would I do for Mom? And, if I was Mom, what would I do for Allan?

The same was true in writing *Curse of the Dream Witch*. Mom was in a care home with Alzheimers while I was writing the book. She always remembered me, but I

lived in constant dread of the day when she wouldn't. The scene when Milo takes Olivia to his parents is rooted in that fear. Milo loves his parents beyond anything, but they don't recognize him. It was a hard scene to write.

That real-life connection to the most fanciful of tales is why books can move us in ways we can't explain. It's why I call reading and writing the truest magic in the world. We read abstract squiggles of ink on paper, of pixels on a monitor, and form scenes in our head. We see and hear imaginary people, and what they say and do make us laugh and cry real emotions in real time.

That magic is what helped us through childhood, helps us now, and will continue to help us to the end of our days.

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In the acknowledgements to my last novel, *The Grave Robber's Apprentice*, I wrote, "Above all, I want to thank my mother, the most courageous, inspiring person I know, who introduced me to the magic and power of words and the way in which Story can give shape and meaning to life's chaos."

I didn't have the opportunity to publicly say this for that book. But thanks to the CLA, I can say it now: "Mom, this award, and everything I have ever accomplished, is for you."