



2010 Printz Honor Speech

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This is dream-come-true time. It really is. I've had an incredible ride with *Charles and Emma* and to get a Printz Honor was something I barely allowed myself to fantasize about. (I did once or twice, I must admit.) So being up here now, in this esteemed group of authors, in front of all of you amazing librarians, well, what I really want to do is scream. Loudly. And jump up and down. BUT—I see my husband cringing—I will control myself. I will. I have been known to scream in public places—more on that later—but for now I'm going to very calmly and maturely say:

Thank you. Thank you, **thank you**, thank you.

My husband is shaking his head in disbelief and also sighing in relief because he knows me well enough to know that I really almost just screamed and embarrassed the hell—heck—out of myself and him. Yes, he knows me and he still loves me, and that, my friends is why I wrote *Charles and Emma*.

Not just for the reasons you already probably know: Jon was a young science writer when I met him, I was fresh out of college as a religious studies major. We started talking about science and religion and we haven't stopped talking since!

Charles and Emma was a book from my heart, my soul, my life and I will be forever grateful that I wrote it.

But it was only a few months ago that I realized why I really wrote this book, and what the title—or subtitle could have been.



First, a moment on titles. When we sent around the proposal for this book, the title was *A Leap of Faith: The Story of Charles and Emma Darwin and the Struggle for a New Science*. I wanted “love story” in the subtitle: *A Leap of Faith: the Love Story of Charles and Emma Darwin*

It was my amazing agent Ken Wright who not only made me write the book—THANK YOU, KEN!—but who also took out love story (we’ll lose the boys, he said). He put in the struggle for a new science, which made it sound important with a capital I.

Laura Godwin, brilliant editor and publisher of Henry Holt Books for Young Readers, bought it because of—or in spite of?—“the struggle for a new science.” Thank you, Laura, for buying the book on proposal, and having faith in me for all those months as I wrote you panicked emails and was generally a total pain in the ass (I can say ass, can’t I, Cheryl? This is YA).

Thank you, Laura.

Anyway, when it came time to give the book its real title, we—Laura, Ken, Noa Wheeler, the associate editor on the project, and I spent a day fast and furiously emailing ideas back and forth. The only title idea I miss is Noa’s: *Charles, Emma, and God, the Darwins at Home*. But of course it’s *Charles and Emma: The Darwins’ Leap of Faith*. What else could it be?

This title turned out to be brilliant for a reason we did not predict (or I sure didn’t). When the book got on lists, all these amazingly great lists, it was often the first one. And I’d get emails from friends and family saying, “Wow, I saw your book



on that list and it was right there at the top—!” Um. Yeah, I’d say, “It’s alphabetical.” After a while I stopped saying that.

So for all the writers in the room—your next book? “Aaron’s Aardvarks.” Right? Clearly.

So walking down the street a few months ago, I realized what the subtitle could have been, or at least what the one-liner of the book is. It’s often this way—an author doesn’t know what her book is about until long after she’s written it—and sometimes not until someone tells her! But in this case it hit me hard, my one liner for Charles and Emma: It really matters who you marry.

It really matters who you marry. And when I say marry, by the way, I mean choose to spend your life with, whether it’s recognized by the government or not. It REALLY matters who you marry.

I worried about this — a lot—as a teenager. Because I knew, somehow, that this was an intrinsic part of the question: who am I? Who do I want to be? Who will I become?

Who you marry influences everything—especially how and *if* you grow into the person you are meant to be.

If Charles had not married Emma and settled in the country surrounded by a houseful of boisterous children running in and out of his study, if he had not suffered, with Emma, deaths of three of those children, if he had not had in Emma a challenging AND devoted partner—what would he have become? Who would he have become? How would he have written his great books? Would he have written



them? We'll never know. But I do know that Marrying Emma was the most important decision he made. It shaped the man, the scientist, and the writer he became. His marriage to Emma changed history.

And if Emma had not married Charles, my guess — from the research I did — is that she would not have gotten married at all. Single, she would not have suffered all the sorrows she did, but she would also not have experienced the joys. And she would not have challenged her husband or been challenged by him. She would not have grown to be the person she became.

I am, of course not speaking only about Emma. Or about Charles. I'm speaking about myself.

When I was a teenager and had trouble falling asleep at night, I told myself a story. As I had trouble many nights, the story got more and more developed and intricate. As the years went by and I grew up, the story changed to reflect that. But it always had the same elements. It was a romance, of course. It had high drama, danger, secrets, misunderstandings, great sex (even though, believe me, I hadn't had any yet)—you get the picture. My husband wants me to write this up as a romance novel so we can get that villa in Tuscany. Uh oh, I see my agent nodding his head vigorously, too. O.K., we'll see.

But when I think back on that story I realize that it really was about two people finding each other and making it work—even though they had misunderstandings and disagreements. The happy ending is that they support each other in growing in the way that each one of them is supposed to grow. And, by the



way, in that story the main character, the girl, is a poet, and the boy is, you can guess this, right? No, not a science writer. A prince. Heir to the throne! O.K., I was a kid. But as cheesy as it sounds, the story was a reflection of the big questions that teenagers ask themselves and I was asking myself over and over again: who am I? what do I believe? How much do I have to compromise? Do I have to compromise at all? What is the meaning of life? What is the meaning of my life? What is my place in the world?

Well, I married my honorable prince and I got my Printz honor! (that pun courtesy of my son Benjamin), and my prince has helped me achieve my dreams. I'd just like to say very publicly and very strongly: I married the right guy!

And I am forever grateful for that and to him. Thank you, Jonathan. Always.

O.K. Before I tell you the last thing I want to tell you—the screaming in public story—I want to thank everyone at Henry Holt Books for Young Readers and at Macmillan Children's Books. But I especially want to mention someone who I believe made this great moment possible for me. Tim Jones, is the man who, if he likes a book—and I'm quoting a librarian I met a Midwinter now, "If Tim likes a book, he makes sure all the big-mouth librarians know about it." So Tim, thanks for getting C & E out to the big mouths, and thank you to the big mouths for reading my book and getting what I was trying to do with it and for giving me this great honor!!

O.K., speaking of big mouths. I have to tell you the story of The Call. It was Midwinter weekend, Saturday. I was sitting in a New York City restaurant with friends from out of town, when my cell phone rang. It was an unfamiliar number and



by rights I shouldn't have picked it up because I was with friends in a restaurant, but I did, not thinking about ALA at all. Then the voice at the other end of the phone said, "This is Cheryl Karp Ward, the chair of the Printz Committee. Can I put you on speakerphone?" I wish I could describe to you what that felt like to me. I mean, I figured she wasn't calling to ask me for a friend's phone number or something, but seriously, aside from the birth of my sons, I have not felt that pure joy and happiness and rightness with the world—ever. My heart started pounding, my hands shaking, and I must have had the hugest smile on my face. Everyone at the table was talking, but I whispered to my husband, as Cheryl was putting me on speaker phone, "Oh my God, it's the Printz Committee." Jon, as I mentioned, knows me very well, and he did not say Oh My God. He did not say, Oh Sweetie. He did not say, Congratulations. He said, "Don't scream, you're in a restaurant."

After a few minutes I realized I should leave the table and so I got up and finished the phone call down in the basement of the restaurant, which was empty. When Cheryl and the Printz committee, now my favorite people in the universe, hung up, I clicked my phone shut and—yes, without thinking—let out what I thought was a victory whoop.

According to my husband, what it sounded like upstairs in the restaurant was less like a victory whoop and more like a blood-curdling scream as if someone had just been murdered or had discovered a dead body. The restaurant fell completely silent and all the staff people—many of them in white coats—when charging to the top of the steps—as I, oblivious to all of this—went charging up the steps, on my



victory march, only to see about eight people, many of them, as I said, with white coats on, staring down at me horrified!

“Oh no, I said, don’t worry, it’s good news!”

The chef turned around to the restaurant, and said, “It’s good news everyone, enjoy your lunch!”

And then with Cheryl’s stern admonishment ringing in my ear, “Don’t tell anyone,” I just sat quietly down at my table, even though I was dying to tell everyone in the restaurant and yes, all of New York.

By the way, when the YALSA Excellence in Nonfiction call came an hour so later, I almost knocked down a huge wall of jellies and jams... but that’s another story.

For now I’d just like to say—no, you know what, no more words:

Whooooooop!!!!