



William C. Morris Award Acceptance Speech Elizabeth C. Bunce

Good morning! I am amazed and honored to be here. Quite honestly, this is somewhere I *never* expected to be: standing up here, giving an ALA awards speech. Incredible! When you write for kids, sure, everybody fantasizes about it. But I had somehow convinced myself that what I wrote would never really be in the running. And then, it turns out, they make a new award, just for you! How about that. Suspension of disbelief, indeed.

My enormous gratitude goes out to the wonderful members of the Morris Award committee, who I've finally gotten to meet and thank in person. Thank you to YALSA, my favorite species of librarian. And thank you, too, for organizing this lovely breakfast for us, although I do feel obligated to mention that we write for teenagers. We keep odd hours. I'm usually up writing until three am. For the benefit of Morris Award honorees to come, I have two words: *Afternoon tea*.

I also want to thank my agent, Erin Murphy, who took a chance on a brand-new author with a half-finished ghost story-slash-fairy-tale set in the Industrial Revolution. Thank you to my editor, the luminous Cheryl Klein, who went through this "first novel" process with me. And, always, thank you to my husband, Christopher. Without you—nothing. I am unmade.

There is something I have known about myself since I was very small. I have always had a need to make things—an almost physical urge to manipulate raw materials, and to make something where there was nothing before. I was the child who came home from day camp and begged my mother for popsicle sticks and yarn so I could make more god's eyes (this was 1979). This manifested itself primarily (and, fortunately, most skillfully) in writing—but not exclusively. Even today I get a bit twitchy if I don't have some craft or project in my hands.

I have always felt this, but it was of course from books that I first realized the significance of it—that it was neither unique to me nor universal. The late, amazing Robert Westall wrote about this in one of his last books, and I have never forgotten it. *Ghost Abbey* tells the story of a girl who helps her father restore historic buildings. When the building they are working on is vandalized, her reaction is perplexity, and her father explains: "There are Makers and Breakers in this world, and we will never understand each other."

A Maker. I make things. Westall gave a Name and a meaning to this, a justification that this is part of my role in the universe, like worker bees or drones. I am a Maker. We all know Makers: people like my father-in-law, who worked in a tire factory for thirty-five years, building intricate model ships and aircraft in his "spare" time, and in retirement became a skilled portrait artist. The word we normally use for people like this is "creative," and there's something really profound about that: creative, create, Creation. The universe, *made*.



I'm certainly not the first writer brazen enough to make this comparison. Orson Scott Card leveraged an entire series—the Tales of Alvin Maker—from the idea of creation bringing you closer to divinity, and Tolkien suggested that human beings come closest to understanding God when we are creating something.

But, as Westall and Card both noted, the flip side of this making is the breaking, the Unmaking.

When I was a kid, there were three things that really frightened me: fire, tornadoes, and entropy. We live in a constant state of “unmaking.” From the cells in our bodies, dying by the moment, to the very universe itself, gradually collapsing into oblivion, there's a certain audacious futility to the entire idea of making anything. Why bother? It's all only temporary, after all. I don't have an answer—I only have the twitchy fingers to say, “I just *have* to.” But I am fascinated by the urge to keep creating, even in the face of a universe determined to unmake us at every turn.

Some artistic traditions recognize and sanctify this sense of the temporary: sacred sand paintings willfully destroyed within hours of their creation. Or, in a more mundane example, sand castles, bravely built precisely where they will be washed away tomorrow. Winning this award has brought a lovely sense of security and permanence to *Curse*, though compared with utter atomic annihilation.... But thank you anyway.

I learned to read when I was very young, and I did so voraciously. My appetite for stories seemed to outpace the supply. Along with the need to make things, I had an inexhaustible need for more stories. These two facets of my nature became co-conspirators, hand-in-hand plotting my future. Because when the book, or the series, or the fairy tale didn't provide me with more of the stories I craved, I happily made up my own! These days, of course, there's a name for that: *fan fiction*. And had I known it would become A Trend, I'm sure I would never have engaged in it. Fortunately, I was ignorant, and went on creating more Xanth stories, more Trixie Belden, and the further adventures of fairy tale characters.

Now. Testimony of my nine-year-old self notwithstanding, it seems clear that the world doesn't actually need more books. If I never write another book—or, gods willing, fifteen, which, given my age and my current pace, is probably the maximum number I can be expected to produce (although I will gladly readdress this in another forty years!)... Anyway, if I never write another book, if James, and Kristen, and Jenny, and Christina never write another book, if *Neil Gaiman* never writes another book, we're still not going to run out of things to read. There are plenty of stories out there to keep all of us—even the voracious readers—occupied forever. The universe (which is breaking down anyway) doesn't need more stories... but what if it does? What if its own un-makingness cries out for repair, replenishment?

What if the only thing holding the universe together, is all this Making?

I try not to overstate the importance of the work that I do. But I think I'm speaking to a sympathetic audience here, and when I start thinking about the things that really mattered to me when I was a kid, it's hard to find something that meant more than books. I'm sure every librarian in here has a story about a child's life, changed by a



book. We know that books have the power to make the world make sense. And, really, don't we write our way there? We're creating the universe that makes sense to us, one word, one story at a time.

There's something amazing that happens when you make a book, in particular. Your creation is its own entity now—it's no longer just this thing that lives in your head, but something that belongs to everyone who's read it, it has a life of its own and it resonates in places you don't even know about, places you couldn't imagine when you started writing it.

So I want to say something to the people out there who are where I was three, four, five years ago: writing their first novels: Don't just write "a first novel." To me, that's kind of like saying, "Oh, this one's just my first child. I'll get that right on the next one." Right? That sort of thinking makes you timid—you're overwhelmed by everything you don't know, this enormous Thing you've never done before. So you hold back. You say you're learning, you're practicing, you're saving The Big Ideas for when you have a few under your belt. But what are you waiting for? Doesn't this book—these characters, their struggles, this *universe* you're making—doesn't it deserve everything you can give it, right now? So don't write a "first novel." Write as though They will never let you write anything else, ever again. Give it your whole self. You will learn as you go—you will figure out how to do things you have no idea how to do. You will fling yourself into the Abyss and start creating. Because the universe is counting on you. And maybe you'll only end up clinging to the next rock over by your fingernails. But maybe you'll find yourself perched atop a big gold seal—and let me tell you, the view from up here is pretty damn fine.

Thank you.