

May Hill Arbuthnot Honor Lecture

“Love Is a Dangerous Angel: Thoughts on Queerness and Family in Children’s Books”

Brian Selznick



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Brian Selznick is the Caldecott Award-winning author of *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*. Born and raised in New Jersey, Selznick graduated from Rhode Island School of Design. In addition to children’s book illustration, he designs theater sets and is a professional puppeteer. Among his award-winning work are illustrations for two Sibert Honor Books and a Caldecott Honor Book. He is currently on tour to promote his new book *The Marvels*.

The following lecture was delivered May 8, 2015, at the Martin Luther King Junior Memorial Library in Washington, DC.

I’m so honored to be here tonight at the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Public Library. Thank you, Sue McCleaf Nespeca, and to everyone on the Arbuthnot committee, Marybeth Kozikowski, Daniel Meyer, Bina Williams, and Gail Zachariah, who gave me this award about twenty years too soon I think, but I’m incredibly humbled by it and have taken its meaning very seriously.

Thank you to Richard Reyes-Gavilan and Ellen Riordan, thank you to the DC Public Library Foundation Executive Director Linnea Hegarty. Thank you, Scholastic, for your ongoing support, especially Ellie Berger, president of Trade Publishing, who is here today, and I’d like to send a special thank you and hello to our beloved retired director of library and educational marketing at Scholastic John Mason who is here as well.

Hello to Dick Jackson, a former Arbuthnot honoree. I don’t know how you got through this. Thank you to our fantastic *current* director of library and educational marketing Lizette Serrano, my editor Tracy Mack, Executive Director of Publicity Charisse Meloto, my friend, writer, and editor David Levithan, and my husband David Serlin for their help in putting this talk together.

Thank you to our sign language interpreters today, Sandra McClure and Jandi Arboleda. And of course, a very special thank you to Wendy Lukehart (youth collections coordinator), who had the crazy idea to bring me here to DC and then spearheaded the wonderful exhibition behind you and all the events this weekend. You’ve been a wonderful friend and host and I hope I don’t disappoint you after all this!

PART 1

These are the opening words of Maurice Sendak’s 2003 Arbuthnot Lecture, which many of you may have attended: “*May Hill Arbuthnot’s pioneering textbook Children and Books was published in*

1947, and although I never read the book or met the lady, since the early days of my career, I have always associated her name with a higher standard, a bright enlightenment, and a passionate newly sophisticated view of childhood. So I am very very grateful after fifty-six years for the entwining of our names.”

Maurice Sendak, as many of you may know, has long been my great hero, and he was a dear friend and mentor. For me, one of the most meaningful parts of winning the Caldecott Medal in 2008 was that it meant my name would forever be connected historically to *his* name. He’s always been *my* higher standard, *my* bright enlightenment, and now I am deeply honored that my name is once again entwined with his, and with May Hill Arbuthnot’s.

With help from the staff at the New York Public Library, I was able to read May Hill Arbuthnot’s first foray into Dick and Jane’s world, *Fun with Dick and Jane*. The first story she wrote about them, called “Guess,” ended with the following lines:

“Oh, look,” said Mother.
“My family is here.
My funny, funny family.”

I was happy to discover this because I will *also* be talking about families today. *Funny, funny families!*

I then managed to track down and purchase a copy of *Children and Books*, Arbuthnot’s “pioneering textbook,” which Sendak mentioned. Chapter One of the Introduction to *Children and Books* is broken down into these sections:

- The need for security: material, emotional and spiritual
- The need to belong: to be a part of a group
- The need to love and to be loved
- The need to achieve: to do or be something worthy
- The need to know: intellectual security

- Play: the need for change
- The need for aesthetic satisfaction.

I'll be touching on some of these topics today as well. Let's start with the first one . . .

The need for security: material, emotional, and spiritual.

"One of man's basic drives is to make himself safe, to hang on and endure," writes Arbuthnot in her introduction. "To be snug and comfortable as life permits. The child's sense of security begins in his mother's and father's arms and extends gradually to include his regular routines, his family, everything that gives him a sense of comfort and well-being."

I grew up in East Brunswick, New Jersey, the oldest of three kids. My dad was an accountant who'd dreamed of being an archeologist, but his mother forced him into steadier work to support his young family. He promised himself that his own children would be able to do whatever they wanted, and my parents succeeded at keeping that promise.

I wanted to be an artist from the time I was a kid, my sister wanted to teach kindergarten since she was *in* kindergarten, and my brother always wanted to be a brain surgeon from the time he was very small, for some reason. We all became what we'd wanted to be with the support of our parents. We were very lucky. I discovered my interest in art early, and I was particularly lucky because the public schools in East Brunswick had a fantastic art program. I copied pictures by my favorite artist, Leonardo da Vinci, from art books.

What were my other interests at the time? I liked reading and had a few favorite books, including *Fortunately and Arm in Arm* by Remy Charlip, and when I was a little older I fell in love with Mary Norton's *The Borrowers*, about the tiny people who lived secretly beneath the floorboards of a boy's house. I basically thought this was a true story, and

I made little furniture for them and left the items around my room as gifts, so they wouldn't be afraid of me. I loved the magician Harry Houdini; I loved *The Wizard of Oz*. In fifth grade I was in my first show, *Joseph and the Amazing*

I wanted to be an artist from the time I was a kid, my sister wanted to teach kindergarten since she was in kindergarten, and my brother always wanted to be a brain surgeon from the time he was very small, for some reason. We all became what we'd wanted to be with the support of our parents. We were very lucky.

Technicolor Dreamcoat, and soon I'd discovered soundtrack albums and Broadway and found myself sitting up late at night crying as Betty Buckley hit that high note in "Memory" from *Cats*. I loved Boy George and Culture Club.

I also had a secret, which from the list of interests I just provided probably isn't that hard to guess. In sixth grade, I had an autograph book with a page where you were supposed to fill in the names of the best looking boys and girls. I don't remember who the girls might have been but I do remember, to this day, the names Matthew Goodman and Ricky Popolo.

By middle school, it had developed into a strange, formless...secret. I tried my hardest to change my own mind. To convince myself that I liked girls. I thought I was alone. I didn't know that all the things I was interested in, the show tunes, the movies, the music, I didn't know they were often *signifiers*. I didn't even know Boy George was gay! I didn't know ANYONE was gay! I didn't know that Michelangelo or Walt Whitman or Oscar Wilde or my favorite artist, Leonardo da Vinci, was gay. I didn't know Maurice Sendak and Remy Charlip were both gay.

One of my few memories of any representations of homosexuality in the

culture when I was a kid, involved a story on the TV news program "60 Minutes." The story ended with a silhouetted image of two men walking hand in hand into the sunset. The TV was always on in our house, and in my memory my mother turned around from the dinner table, saw the image of the two men, and went "Uch." My heart sank.

I've always remembered this as something that made me feel very bad about myself, so I asked my mom about it recently, and she was shocked. To say that she's always been supportive of me and understanding would be an understatement. She's the most non-judgmental person I know, so this memory from my childhood always stood out as an aberration. I was sure she'd have no memory of this, and she didn't. But she was especially shocked because she said she'd always been very accepting of gay people. "Even in the seventies?" I asked. "My two closest friends in *high school* in the fifties were lesbians!" she said. I'd never heard this before.

"Oh yeah," she said. "Sue and LaVerne." They met in high school, went to college together, and were together their entire lives, until LaVerne died about ten years ago. My mom said that everyone whispered about them in school (this was the fifties after all) but my mom said she stood up for them and told people they were her friends.

So my mom and I agreed that she must have said "Uch" to something my father was doing at the table at the time, which must have been much of a surprise, and I'd only interpreted it as being related to the gay men on TV because I'd felt my own shame. Even as a senior in high school, I had trouble identifying with or truly understanding my desires. My private art teacher, Eileen Sutton, was coincidentally moving away at the same time I was leaving for college, and she invited me to her studio. She said I could have any painting as a gift. She was a watercolorist in the tradition of Georgia O'Keeffe, and I soon found a lovely flower painting I wanted. She hesitated then asked me to

pick something else. But no matter what else I looked at, I kept coming back to this flower painting.

Mrs. Sutton kept balking, discouraging me from this picture as much as possible, but finally she relented and let me take it. It wasn't until years later when I found the painting in the back of the closet on a return trip to my mother's home, that I finally saw what had made Mrs. Sutton so squeamish. The painting was actually a giant penis, enveloped in flower petals, but really quite unmistakable. Well, unmistakable to everyone but me, it seems. What I found so interesting about my attraction to the painting back in Mrs. Sutton's studio, was that I really truly only saw the flower, yet there was *something* that led me to that painting. Something I couldn't quite identify.

PART 2

The need to achieve: to do or be something worthy.

Arbutnot writes, "*Human beings must also have a sense of achievement, of being able to do or be something for which they are respected and loved.*" As I said, with my parents' encouragement, I was able to become a professional artist. My first book, *The Houdini Box*, was published in 1991 while I was still working at Eeyore's Books for Children on the Upper West Side.

My boss, Steve Geck, now an editor at Sourcebooks, took me under his wing and really taught me what children's books could be. He and his then-girlfriend/now-wife Diana Blough helped me get my first book published and have been great friends ever since.

That book ended up doing very well for a first book, and soon I left Eeyore's to work full time as a writer and illustrator. My career chugged along slowly for several years, until there was a major turnaround in my work, most significantly marked by Pam Munoz Ryan's *Amelia and Eleanor Go for a Ride*. My editor, Tracy, told me she'd been thinking the book should look like a 1930s movie musical. After a brilliant idea like that, the rest

was easy. Around this time, I was hanging out with my friend Michael Mayer. He's a Broadway director (*Hedwig, Spring Awakening*), and we got into a conversation about queerness and our work. Not all of his shows have gay themes or issues, but he very clearly identifies himself as a gay director with a queer sensibility.

He asked me if I thought my work was "queer." I should define my terms here. "Gay" refers to homosexuality itself. Being "gay" is being someone attracted to people of the same sex. "Queer" began its life in this context as a slur, used against gay people, a pejorative name to label someone as different and would be used interchangeably with other slurs. But over time "queer" was appropriated by the very people it was used against, to simultaneously take away the word's sting, while also embracing its ideas of otherness and being an outsider. These qualifications are seen as positive by many people, and over time the use of the word "queer" came to mean any kind of questioning of mainstream society's received rules and wisdom. I'll be using the term in both of its senses: a word to describe a gay person, and a word to describe a sense of otherness.

You can think of it like this: You don't have to be gay to be queer, but it doesn't hurt. So, as I was saying, at the point Michael asked me about the queerness of my books, I still associated the word more with the idea of same-sex attraction and none of my books had any explicitly (or implicitly) gay characters. *Riding Freedom* was about a cross-dressing woman, but she did it out of necessity, not *identity*, as far as we can tell from the historical record. No one in her life seemed to know she was a woman, though after she died, evidence was discovered indicating she may at some point have given birth to a stillborn baby, which means, of course, that *someone* knew she was a woman.

I said *no* to Michael. None of my books were queer in any fashion. Michael nearly laughed in my face. "Your very first book, *The Houdini Box*," he said, "is about a lonely boy with no father whose one desire in the world is to escape from things he's locked inside of. Like closets.

And his mentor is an older man whom he idolizes. Sounds pretty queer to me."

I remember bristling at this idea. I said, "The reason Houdini still haunts our collective memory is because *everyone* has something they want to escape from... poverty, loneliness, abuse, *something*. Houdini isn't an idol only to gay people. He's an idol to everyone." I think Michael shrugged his shoulders and said something like "OK, but why were YOU obsessed with him? Why is Victor, the boy in the story, obsessed?"

I couldn't get this conversation out of my mind afterward. Was there something about my own queerness that unconsciously influenced my stories, my interests? These ideas floated around in the back of my mind for a long time, all the while I was working on other books. I made four picturebook biographies, culminating in a book about the poet Walt Whitman. The text, by Barbara Kerley, didn't acknowledge Whitman's homosexuality any more than books about Whitman did from my own childhood.

Rather, her focus was on his work as a nurse during the Civil War. I tried to "queer" the book as much as possible, by emphasizing in the pictures Whitman's otherness, and his desire for men was evoked subtly, but there was a tension for me between the text and the art. I'm proud of the book we made, but it was probably the most difficult book I'd worked on to that point, and when I was done, I needed a rest. I ended up not working for nearly six months. I had come to a wall. I didn't want to do any more picturebook biographies, yet I found myself mostly being offered books in a similar vein. I didn't know what else to do.

It was during this time that I first met Maurice Sendak. He was even coincidentally reading Whitman for the first time when we met. Maurice and I spoke often on the phone, and I'd visit him in Connecticut. I told him of being stuck. He encouraged me to make the book I wanted to make. I worked on that book, the one that would become *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*, for about two and a half years, but it wasn't until after

the book was published that I found out what the story actually had been *about*.

A reader came up to me after a presentation in Pennsylvania and said they loved that the book was about how we create our own families. Hugo, as an orphan, had made a new family for himself, and this reader found that very moving. When I was writing the story, I had known I wanted Hugo to be safe and happy at the end of the book, but it hadn't occurred to me that this was what the entire thing was actually *about*.

I began work on the next book, *Wonderstruck*, and I knew two things to start: that I'd try to tell two different stories with the words and pictures instead of one, like *Hugo*, and that somehow it would also be about creating our own families. This theme suddenly felt deeply central to who I was and how I imagined my own life. It's one of the centerpieces of a gay identity, as I came to understand, but it's something straight people do too...we grow up, we leave our parents' house, and we gather around us a new family of like-minded people, friends, and lovers with whom we move into the future.

Much of the plot of *Wonderstruck* grew out of a documentary my husband, David, and I caught on TV one night. It was called "Through Deaf Eyes," and it was about the history of deaf culture. In the documentary, there was a fascinating interview with a young deaf man. He, like most deaf people, had been born into a hearing family. His family tried to be helpful, but it wasn't until he got to college that he discovered other deaf people and found out that he was part of a long history of deafness, a *history* he didn't inherit from his parents.

I thought to myself that this sounded strikingly like growing up gay in a straight family. Like the deaf young man, it was college—and then when I first moved to New York—where I finally found people like myself, and I discovered my history. That's when I learned about Michelangelo and Whitman and Wilde and DaVinci. I was part of an *astounding* history. One that has changed the world again and again.

But it wasn't an easy road, made even more complicated for me by the fact that the AIDS crisis began in the early eighties, just as I was beginning to understand my sexuality. As for the creation of *Wonderstruck*, I had never thought about the *queerness* of being deaf before. It informed the creation of that book, about two deaf children, fifty years apart, searching for a place in the world.

Later, after my book had been published, I found out the author Andrew Solomon had reached similar conclusions about growing up gay and growing up deaf, which he explored in depth in his astounding non-fiction title *Far from the Tree*. He coined the phrase "*horizontal identities*" to talk about children who are profoundly different from their parents in some fashion.

Most children follow their parents' footsteps. Orthodox Jews raise their children to be Orthodox Jews. Married heterosexuals usually expect their children to grow up and be the same. But people with *horizontal identities* find their personal histories linked to others *outside* of their immediate genetic line or cultural heritage. Of course, gay people don't *have* to tell anyone they're gay. It can be kept a secret and the more time that passes the harder it can become to tell.

My own coming out to my parents was very difficult. I finally found the courage to come out to them when I was in my mid-twenties. As expected, my mom was great from the beginning, telling me she'd always suspected I was gay but she loved me no matter what. My dad was slightly tougher to get through to. He was silent for a long time and then he said, "I guess you want me to say something. Well, I love you, but I want you to promise me three things."

Uh oh. "What?"

"One. I don't want you to flaunt it."

"What does that even mean?"

"I don't want you *acting* gay."

"Have I been acting gay?"

"Two, I don't want anyone else to know."

"Um, that sort of goes against the point of what I'm doing here. I'm going to tell the rest of the family, and our friends will know, too."

"I don't want anyone from work to know."

"Why not? What are you ashamed of?"

"Three. I don't want you bringing anyone home."

This wasn't difficult at the time, as I wasn't seeing anyone, but my sister was on the verge of getting engaged so I said, "If Holly and Ed get married and I'm dating someone, then I can't bring them to the wedding?"

"Absolutely not."

"I don't know if that will really be your choice."

"Then I won't go."

I was still single when Holly and Ed did get married, so it wasn't much of an issue, but within the next few years, my brother had met the girl he was going to marry, and I'd met David, the guy I knew I'd be with for the rest of my life (we got married last September after eighteen years together, but that's another story!).

My dad liked David right away, and we knew that David was going to come to my brother's wedding without my dad causing a fuss. But a few weeks before the event, my dad relayed a message for us. David and I were not allowed to touch each other at my brother's wedding, and if we didn't agree to this, *then* he wasn't going to go. Seems he was having a small case of gay panic when he thought about his partners from work seeing me and David dancing together.

To make a long story short, we agreed, but I told my father that one day he was going to apologize to me and David for asking us to do this reprehensible thing. And within a few weeks after the wedding, after what I can only describe as an *intervention* on the part of the rest of my family, he'd apologized, and it was clear

that by the time he died eleven years ago, he'd come a very long way to fully accepting David and I as a couple who were just as legitimate as Holly and Ed, and Lee and his wife, Sue.

PART 3

The need to belong: to be a part of a group.

May Hill Arbutnot wrote, “*With our growing consciences of the true functioning of democracy and our new sense of “One World,” stories of minority groups or of individual members of such groups becoming loved and respected are increasingly prominent. The plight of loyal Japanese families suddenly transported to wartime camps during World War II is described in The Moved-Outers by Florence Crannell. Their problems of readjustment were very hard, and the reader suffers with them. Several books have presented sympathetic pictures of Negro children making their adjustments today. Children reading these stories are bound to have their insight into group problems increased.*”

You'll notice this seems to keep the identity of the *reader* Arbutnot has in mind firmly *outside of* these minority groups. I think the subtext here is that *white* children reading about non-white children will be helped to understand these minorities better. It's sort of like Arbutnot is imagining that her dear young friends Dick and Jane, those paragons of heterosexual, blonde, white normalcy who my father probably grew up with, will learn *empathy* for those different from themselves—which is a fine goal, but it's also important for the minority children to see *themselves* represented. To be reflected back in a positive manner from the culture they also are a part of.

Because there were no books I knew of with gay people when I was young, there was no chance for me to see myself reflected back, as I've said, to learn that I was not alone. Children tend to accept the world around them as *the way it is*. The world we grow up inside of seems to be the only possible one. For instance,

my dad was a Republican, and I grew up unaware that there were actually *other* political parties. I usually don't like to admit this, but the first time I voted, I voted for Ronald Reagan, in 1984. Of course, I don't think I was aware anyone else was running.

My political awakening happened in college, when I fell in with a group of friends who'd all been raised very liberal in New York City. By the time I'd graduated college and was living in New York myself, I was marching in ACT-UP protests holding pictures of Ronald Reagan with blood coming out of his eyes. So that made up for the vote, I thought.

I can't claim to have been an *activist* in the nineties, despite those protest marches and the few ACT-UP meetings I attended. But I was there and I remember what it was like to see dying young men walking slowly down the street and knowing that the government was letting people die and that those most affected had to fight the hardest for recognition and help.

AIDS isn't gone, but the world is dramatically different now. Some young people are coming out in middle school or even earlier. My own high school, a place I couldn't have imagined coming out, now has a Gay Straight Alliance, as do so many other schools across the country. Thinking now about the books I've made, and Michael's question about their queerness, I can see that so many of them have queerness, or otherness, as a theme, like *Hugo*, *Wonderstruck*, and *Riding Freedom*. Some actually touch on homosexuality without addressing it directly, like *Walt Whitman: Words for America* and even *Amelia and Eleanor Go for a Ride* (Eleanor had a girlfriend named Lorena Hickok whose picture I placed on the dresser as she prepares for the evening, but again, it's not discussed).

But now, for the first time, I've written a book without gay characters. That book, *The Marvels*, will be published in the fall by Scholastic. When I finished writing the book, I realized that being gay was not one of the *problems* the characters faced in the story. Being gay is just a natural part of their lives. There are no

long coming-out narratives or tortured descriptions of unhappy closeted childhoods. There are plenty of *other* problems they're dealing with, but being gay isn't one of them. The structure of *The Marvels* is different from *Wonderstruck*, but like that book, it also tells two stories, one in words and one in pictures.

The word story takes place in the winter of 1990. Again, not wanting to give too much away, since the book is not published yet, I'll just say that the shadow of the AIDS crisis is cast across a part of the story. And again, the book is not *about* the AIDS crisis, yet the crisis is there, embedded in the time and the place.

One of my struggles during the writing of the book was whether or not I should use the word AIDS in the story, because the word is so *loaded*, so *powerful*. Using it felt like setting off a stick of dynamite. What was important for the plot, the real concern for my main character, was that someone was *dying*. Plot-wise, it didn't really matter what he was dying *from*. But I realized that it would be *dishonest* to not say AIDS, because without the word, young people today would have no way of knowing what it was.

Gay history is almost never taught in school. There are young gay men in their twenties who have never heard of ACT-UP, which I mentioned earlier. And for any of *you* who might find yourselves unsure what ACT-UP is, it's the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power. It was founded by the playwright Larry Kramer and others in 1987 and was instrumental in demanding that the government better handle the vast health crisis facing the gay community and getting drugs developed quickly to fight AIDS. My husband was a member so feel free to ask him about it. And please do further research.

PART 4

“The reason Weetzie Bat hated high school was because no one understood. They didn't even realize where they were living. They didn't care that Marilyn's prints were practically in their backyard at Graumann's; that you could buy

tomahawks and plastic palm tree waffles at Farmer's Market, and the wildest, cheapest cheese and bean and hot dog and pastrami burritos at Oki Dogs; that the waitresses wore skates at the Jetson-style Tiny Naylor's; that there was a fountain that turned tropical soda-pop colors, and a canyon where Jim Morrison and Houdini used to live, and all-night potato knishes at Canter's, and not too far away was Venice, with columns, and canals, even, like the real Venice but maybe cooler because of the surfers. There was no one who cared. Until Dirk."

This is the beginning of *Weetzie Bat*, the ground-breaking young adult novel by Francesca Lia Block. It was published in 1989, at the height of the AIDS crisis, and it became a touchstone for generations of young readers and writers. I loved the gay characters, who existed very matter of factly. . . .

"What were you going to tell me?" Weetzie asked.

"I'm gay," Dirk said.

"Who, what, when, where, how—well, not how," Weetzie said. "It doesn't matter one bit, honey-honey," she said giving him a hug.

Dirk took a swig of his drink. "But you know I'll always love you the best and think you are a beautiful, sexy girl," he said.

"Now we can Duck hunt together," Weetzie said, taking his hand.

A few months ago, after I finished writing and illustrating *The Marvels* and had begun to think about writing this lecture, I decided to reread *Weetzie Bat* for the first time since 1990.

The book really is a little wonder. A punk explosion of joy and sadness, a fairy tale quest for love in a landscape filled with dreams, bubbling and dying, all at the same time. It's fluorescent and romantic and fun and scary.

She met a toothy blonde Surf Duck, who, she learned later, was sleeping with everyone.

She met an Alcoholic Art Duck with a ponytail who talked constantly about his girlfriend who had died. Dirk saw him at an all-boy party kissing all the boys.

Dirk didn't do much better at the parties or bars.

"I just want My Secret Agent Lover Man," Weetzie said to Dirk.

"Love is a dangerous angel," Dirk said.

But what struck me most in rereading it was how clearly the book was about love in the time of AIDS. The specter of the epidemic was everywhere in the book, casting its deadly shadows across the landscape, yet AIDS is never named. Friends die, and love can kill, but the word AIDS itself is never spoken.

This was especially intriguing to me in light of the struggle I had deciding to say the word in *The Marvels*. But AIDS didn't need to be named here because it was everywhere at the time the book was written. Every person reading the book, of any age, would have understood what was going on, what the fear the characters felt was caused by.

Dirk, while hunting for ducks, their term for looking for boyfriends, finds a duck actually named Duck. Dirk and Duck, two beautiful boys, fall in love and soon one of Duck's friends dies. Duck panics. He runs away, but Dirk tracks him down.

"How did you find me?" Duck asked as Dirk led him out of the Stud.

"I don't know," Dirk said.

"I've been so afraid. I've been to all the bars just watching and getting wasted. And I know people are dying everywhere. How can anyone love anyone?"

I wondered what today's teens would make of this. I wonder if, cut off from the context of its time period, these discussions of love and death would read as "merely" symbolic, the natural fear that comes with the idea of falling in love for a teenager (or anyone!). And this made me wonder even more if any of the early reviews talked about the fact that AIDS is

never mentioned so I started doing some research.

The only review I could find that even referenced the epidemic was the *Kirkus* review from 1989 that says a character's friend dies of what "must be AIDS." The celebratory *New York Times* review by Betsy Hearne doesn't mention anything about diseases. But I found, archived online, along with the review, a single letter to the editor.

Is Weetzie Bat a Good Role Model?

To the Editor:

Betsy Hearne, in her review of Weetzie Bat, Francesca Lia Block's "punk, young adult fairy tale," glosses over some very inappropriate scenes, referring to "an ingeniously lyrical narrative" and "a story with sensual characters." The book is recommended for ages 12 and up . . .

. . . Is Weetzie Bat a good role model? Scarcely, since in many respects friendship and sexuality are quite distorted. In Ms. Hearne's review, the inappropriateness of the story for 12-year-olds isn't even hinted at. Instead, we are led to believe we will be purchasing a whimsical romp. This book is not a lyrical fantasy, but a glorification of pathological neurotics . . ."

The author, a librarian named Barbara Nosanchuk from Ithaca, New York, goes on to say a few more rather unkind things about the book, making it clear that she thinks there are other more suitable books for young children.

I began to notice that Ms. Nosanchuk's letter was quoted very often in articles and essays about *Weetzie Bat*. She seemed to have become the voice of everyone who was against the book, and that, by extension, seemed to indicate she was the voice of everyone against progress, and queerness, and open-mindedness.

I eventually came across an essay written by Francesca Lia Block herself who stated, "*An irate New York librarian, Barbara Nosanchuk, responded to a positive review of Weetzie Bat in The New York Times with a letter condemning the*

book as a “glorification of pathological neurotics . . .”

Once I saw that even Francesca Lia Block was quoting the letter, I began thinking more and more about Barbara Nosanchuk. So I started Googling *her*. I quickly came across an article from 2014 talking about a lecture series she and her husband had underwritten for nearly thirty years in honor of their son who drowned when he was a senior in high school, in 1983.

The David Nosanchuk Lecture Series came to an end just last year, right here in Washington, DC, with a final trip sponsored by Barbara and her husband, Jerry. This seemed like a remarkable coincidence, that she sponsored a lecture series that ended in DC, which I discovered while writing a lecture for an ongoing series, that this year would take place in DC.

The article said, “Lecture topics have included AIDS, Russia, civil liberties, freedom of the press, Islam, Iraq, inequality in America, genetic engineering and gender roles, among many others.”

What? Half of these were topics from *Weetzie Bat* that Barbara Nosanchuk seemed to be railing *against* in her letter to the editor! There was obviously a more complicated story here. So I tracked her down. Barbara expressed a certain amount of surprise when she got my email. As a retired librarian she knew my name, though she retired long before *Hugo* was published and hadn’t read any of my books.

She seemed guarded at first as I told her about the Arbuthnot lecture and the fact that I planned to talk about *Weetzie Bat* and how I’d come across her letter and the way it’s been used over the years. I asked her to answer a few questions via email, and then we had a long follow-up phone conversation.

“Our son David died in a swimming accident shortly before his high school graduation,” she wrote me in response to my question about him. “He was senior class president, planning to go to France on a Rotary Scholarship for a year and

then attend Middlebury College. He was interested in ideas and social activism. He loved skiing and cross country running.

“The lecture series was established to create something good and positive out of such a terrible loss to so many of us. It was a way to honor his memory.” Barbara also wrote, “About ten years ago, I Googled my name and was surprised to see my letter to the editor of the New York Times Book Review along with other reviews that referenced my review. There may be no book that receives even 90 percent approval, so I thought that the characterization of me (by Francesca Lia Block) as irate was excessive. . . . As a librarian, choosing books for a collection is fun. One needs to complement the curriculum as well as find books for leisure reading.”

But here is where she seemed to get to the heart of the matter. “When I read *Weetzie Bat* in 1989, I was struck mostly by Weetzie’s immaturity and lack of responsible sex. I am a strong believer in the goals of Planned Parenthood and safe sex. In 1989 and now too, teen pregnancy is an important societal problem.”

In our follow-up conversation, Barbara talked about how ironic it is to be a liberal who has been identified as conservative because of that letter. She spoke admiringly of Dirk and Duck and their positive portrayal of a gay couple. She was not gay bashing when she used the phrase “pathological neurotics.”

She said she was mostly referencing the *adults* in the book, like Weetzie’s parents who obviously still love each other yet can’t stand to be near one another. “It is fine for 14 and up,” she said, “but the review talked about it for sixth graders.” That’s what she had the real problem with.

The essay where Francesca Lia Block mentions Barbara Nosanchuk is called “Punk Pixies in the Canyon.” It was written in 1992 for *The Los Angeles Times*.

“Maybe my form of pop-magic realism—where there are genies and witches as well as real-life love and loss—makes my books especially appealing to teen-agers or to those of us who still identify with

that time of life. In the effort to conquer our fear, we may thrust ourselves alone into a smaller version of that world—a violent concert, a threatening sexual encounter, a riot—and feel that having survived we are more in control of our destiny. Or we may choose to make a family with our friends and face fear together through communication and art.”

How could you not love this person? So now, of course, I had to call Francesca Lia Block. She and I had a beautiful conversation on the phone, which was followed up via email, and I was thrilled to tell her how much her books meant to me (I’ve since read almost all the books in the Weetzie cycle). I told her what I was hoping to discuss about *Weetzie Bat* in my lecture. I asked her about the choice to not use the word AIDS, and this is what she had to say:

“I chose not to use the word AIDS (or heroin or rape, etc.) to maintain the light, timeless fairytale tone of the book. The sense of it being a fairy tale softened it which worked out well when it became a book for young people. But the darkness is still there. I think children and adults in our culture are hungry for the mix of darkness and magic in fairy tales. We have to acknowledge the darkness in order to fully appreciate the magic and we have to believe in the magic in order to manage the darkness.”

I don’t think I even noticed she hadn’t used the word “rape” or “heroin,” and her instinct was, of course, correct. We know what is going on in the story, we feel it, and somehow it is more powerful, more . . . mythic . . . because it’s not named. It just *is*. I told her the story of Barbara Nosanchuk as well. Francesca was fascinated to learn more about Barbara’s life, her son, the lecture series, and the deeper reasoning behind her letter to the editor.

“I didn’t write this book for kids or adults or gay people or straight people *per se*,” Francesca told me. “I wrote it out of love for my friends and family and the world. I wrote it to comfort myself and feel less alone, and to hopefully help my readers feel that way. I feel very lucky when it finds readers who understand it, or who

feel understood when they see reflections of themselves within the pages . . . I'm glad Charlotte Zolotow had the vision to publish them . . . for the young reader who needed them" she said, "like, for example, a 12-year-old boy who is gay and feels validated and supported by reading about the gay characters."

For obvious reasons, I was struck by her image of the 12-year-old gay boy finding himself validated in the pages of her book and thinking once again about how important it is to know our history, to see that we are not alone. I recently found myself in a very long and strange conversation with two young men which made me think about the importance of knowing, and accepting, one's history. I'll call them John and Tom. They were both around 26 years old. John told me that he'd been raised in a religious family and his mother had very nearly rejected him when he first came out. But over time she came to understand that homosexuality wasn't just a "lifestyle choice," that it was part of who her son was. She looked on this as an education, and ultimately she thanked John for helping her.

I then asked John's friend Tom if he was out to *his* parents, and he bristled. "I don't believe in labels like "out" or "gay."

"Oh, OK, cool," I said, "I just mean do your parents know you're gay?"

"But why are you even asking me that? Why is that even a thing?"

"Because we live in a world where it *is* a thing," I said. "People are afraid of telling the truth about who they are." Coming out is important, I said to him, especially in the places where homosexuality is less accepted. Look how it helped John's mom.

I told him that when I was on tour for my book *Wonderstruck*, I made a conscious decision to come out in every presentation in every school that I spoke at. So, in my presentation, when a photograph of (my then boyfriend) David and me during a research trip for the book came up on the screen, I simply said, "This is

my boyfriend David and me in Gunflint Lake, Minnesota."

I treated it as if it were perfectly natural. Because it is. Sometimes when I said this, there would be an audible reaction from the kids. I remember a physical ripple moving through the boys at a Catholic school as they all turned to each other to check with their friends to see if they'd heard me right, but I kept talking and because everyone liked me and they liked my books and they wanted to know what else I was saying, I quickly got everyone's attention again.

The talks always continued without a hitch. But no matter how nervous this made me, I knew that each time I talked about David there would be kids in the audience who might be questioning their own sexuality, who had perhaps been told by the adults in their lives and their community that their feelings are sinful and negative and they should fight it or reject it. That's why I was doing what I was doing, for *those* kids, and hopefully, in some small way, to maybe change the minds of others, as well.

Unsurprisingly, Tom sneered and said he thought it was ridiculous I was making such a big deal out of it.

"No," I said, "The point is I *didn't* make a big deal out of it." But I was conscious I was doing it. I tried to make it clear to him that his strength and his pride in himself is very powerful and I really support it but he needs to understand that he is part of a *history*.

That really angered him and made him feel like I was trying to reduce his own experiences. He thought I was calling him ungrateful. I talked to him about my friend David Levithan's work. I told him about his groundbreaking novel *Boy Meets Boy*, which was written about twelve years ago. David had grown tired of the gay characters in books always having to "come out" and deal with their homosexuality as an *issue*. He wanted to read a romance between two boys where the only issue was how they fell in love, same as any two heterosexual teenagers. So he wrote it. He created a fantasy world, an alternative-universe Hoboken,

New Jersey, where acceptance of homosexuality is pretty much the norm, and the quarterback is also the homecoming queen, and kids are identified as gay in kindergarten.

There's still some religious intolerance here and there, and there's prejudice for the kids to deal with, but it rang true and yet felt completely liberating at the same time. Then, just last year, David published a book called *Two Boys Kissing*, which is based on the true story of the two gay high school boys who have the official longest kiss in the world in the *Guinness Book of World Records*. *Two Boys Kissing* is a *fictional* version of the story, but these boys exist, and their families and their communities exist, where they were able to fall in love and break up and find support and kiss for thirty-two hours. In a way, it's as if the fantasy world posited in *Boy Meets Boy* came true. But David's most genius move was the narration of the story in *Two Boys Kissing*.

It's narrated by a collective voice, a first person plural that is very rarely employed. In David's book, the collective voice that narrates the story is the generation of gay men who died of AIDS. To them, these two boys, with their love and their acceptance and their record-breaking kiss, are nothing short of miracles. It's a heartbreaking and radical conceit. And it works.

"And you," I said to Tom, "are those boys. You are what everyone's been fighting for." But he didn't listen. The conversation ran in circles for almost an hour and a half, and he seemed only to grow more frustrated.

Finally I told him I had to leave, but before I did I grabbed his hand. I said, "Listen. I like you very much. I think you should be very proud of your strength and your security in who you are." And then I transformed into Deborah Kerr in *Tea and Sympathy*.

"But in the future," I said, "when you think about this conversation—and you will, I hope that you realize I was trying to make you *stronger* by giving you a history. Having a history doesn't take *away* anything from you! It gives you scaffolding. It *builds you up*."

Tom stared at me out of the corner of his eye, as if he was dubious, but he said, “OK,” and we managed to say goodbye. It wasn’t until I’d taken a long subway ride all the way back to my house that I finally figured out what had been going on. Tom wasn’t out to his parents. They didn’t know he was gay.

That was the reason he bristled so deeply when I asked him if he was out, and it was why he felt like he had to reject any idea of queerness or labels. By refusing to see himself by a label, as something with an identifiable name and a history, then he had nothing to tell his parents about.

He said his parents supported him, but I think what was left unsaid was the implication that if he was out they might NOT support him. They had some connection to a religious background from what he’d told me, which might have explained it, and Tom said he was also religious too. I felt slightly more prepared to talk to him about religion because just a few weeks before I’d had this conversation, I’d finished reading the Bible.

PART 5

And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.

I read the entire Old and New Testament to prepare for this speech. I’d always wanted to read the Bible, but now I felt compelled, because this book seems to hold the roots to nearly all of the Western world’s homophobia. There are only six references to same-sex sex in the entire book, but I wanted to understand the full context.

If you’re interested in a fascinating unpacking of how these lines have been *misinterpreted* over the millennia, check out *God and the Gay Christian* by Matthew Vines. It’s very thoughtfully constructed by the author, himself a practicing Christian and gay man. There are so many people who have spent their lives reading the Bible, either as believers, or as academics, and I can claim to be neither. What follows are simply *my* thoughts based on my first foray into the book.

Reading the Bible was an amazing experience, overwhelming, maddening, and beautiful. The book was filled with revelations for me, and not just the revelations of Revelations, which were really intense! I could give a whole other lecture on my thoughts regarding the Bible. Do most people even know that there are three entirely different creation stories?

The one I read above comes first, then it’s followed *directly* by the one we’re more familiar with, where Adam is created to be the keeper of the Garden of Eden, then the animals are created to try to help him until finally God performs the world’s first operation and he puts Adam to sleep, takes his rib and makes Eve, his subordinate. Of course, just a few pages *earlier* man and woman had already been created (*after* the animals by the way), and they were equal in the part I read you. But then in the New Testament there’s yet another version, and in a way, this one is the most simple and the most beautiful of all. It’s John 1:1.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

It all starts with a word. So what is God now? God is how we tell *stories*, and stories are how we poor humans try to understand the world. The Bible is not just the origin story for mankind, whether you believe it is holy, or whether you believe it was written by men and collected over centuries, but it’s where stories themselves are rooted for us in the Western tradition. There are many people who say they take the Bible literally, but how do you make sense of the contradictory stories, the different creation myths, the world that begins (in the second version)

with two human beings, Adam and Eve, who’s only surviving child heads off into a world where he discovers a community of people to live with and marry into. Where did *they* come from?

Were there other Adams and Eves all over the world? I don’t hear anyone suggesting that might be the case. Anyway, I think it’s clear that no one today can actually live according to the Bible without making a large number of choices regarding what they will and will not do, and what they do and do not believe. It’s those choices that define who we are and what groups we identify with. But if we step back slightly, and read the Bible as a collection of stories about what it means to be *human*, about how we struggle to survive, then so much of it begins to really make sense. At least this was the experience I had.

For me, the Bible turned out to be a ravishing book about *failure*. And by that I mean almost everyone in the Bible *fails* to live up to God’s demands. People try, and fail, to live according to the rules that have been set up. My friend James Lecesne, an actor, writer, director, and the founder of the Trevor Project (the leading national organization focused on suicide prevention efforts among lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, and other queer youth) talked to me about his feelings regarding the Bible (he was the one who recommended *God and the Gay Christian* to me). He grew up a Roman Catholic and now is a practicing Buddhist. He said that basically it breaks down like this: the God of the Old Testament is outside of us, and the God of the New Testament is inside of us. That is the foundational shift between the two books.

He says, “*I think that what is most striking to me is the fact that as a child I was never much interested in the old Bible stories, because they seemed to me so heteronormative. Nowhere did I find a reflection of a life (and love) I knew existed in my young heart. In those days, no one was talking about homosexuality or how the Bible was against it. But they didn’t need to. Exclusion said it all. For me, the Bible (especially the Old Testament) was*

all about the binary of man and woman, and I wasn't so much interested in that.

"I was however totally into Jesus (and the New Testament) because it was (is) essentially about Love, and THAT I understood to my core. I grabbed hold of its message and ran with it. I understood (even without being able to articulate it) that Love would deliver me into the life I knew was waiting for me. And in a miraculous way, it has delivered me. Because here I am."

The stories in the Bible and ideas of God have been used for many beautiful things and have helped many people, but they've also been used to justify an endless amount of hatred and violence. This is from the brief filed in the case of Loving v. Virginia:

"In June, 1958, two residents of Virginia, Mildred Jeter, a Negro woman, and Richard Loving, a white man, were married in the District of Columbia pursuant to its laws. Shortly after their marriage, the Lovings returned to Virginia and established their marital abode in Caroline County. At the October Term, 1958, of the Circuit Court of Caroline County, a grand jury issued an indictment charging the Lovings with violating Virginia's ban on interracial marriages. On January 6, 1959, the Lovings pleaded guilty to the charge and were sentenced to one year in jail; however, the trial judge suspended the sentence for a period of twenty-five years on the condition that the Lovings leave the State and not return to Virginia together for twenty-five years.

"He stated in an opinion that: 'Almighty God created the races white, black, yellow, malay and red, and he placed them on separate continents. And, but for the interference with his arrangement, there would be no cause for such marriage. The fact that he separated the races shows that he did not intend for the races to mix.'"

This law fell. And soon, it seems the laws against gay marriage will, too. As we speak tonight, the Supreme Court, just a few blocks from here, is arguing the case, and history stands to be made again. People

say they don't believe you can change the definition of marriage, but the definition of marriage has done nothing BUT change over the course of the millennia of human existence. From one man owning many wives, to one man owning *one* wife, to one man and one woman of the same race being seen as equal partners under the law, to one man and one woman of any race being equal partners to two *people* being equal partners.

Now the question is, who gets to decide what a family is? The answer is simple. Families will decide what families are. No family will get to tell another family that they are not a family. We're *all* "funny, funny families," as May Hill Arbuthnot wrote. I mentioned earlier that one of my favorite books as a kid was Mary Norton's *The Borrowers*, about the tiny people living under the floorboards of a boy's house. My friend James Lecesne, (he of the Trevor Project), it turns out, read the book as a child also. "*How essential those books were to me as a little gay,*" he said. "*I'd forgotten how deeply I was enmeshed in that fantasy way back when. And the fact that we were both living in that little sub rosa world must mean something in terms of gay family history.*"

I loved the idea that this book was a part of my *gay family history* with James. I loved that I *had* a gay family history. The great fear for the Borrowers is being "seen." They hide away in the shadows, secure in the knowledge that the bigger world is there to provide them with what they need to survive. The people in the big world barely even know Borrowers exist. No character in *The Borrowers* is *gay*, but it turns out that everything about the story is *queer*. And besides, do you remember what ultimately happens to the Borrowers? Do they stay hidden? No. They end up: Afield, Afloat, Aloft, and . . . Avenged!

Sure, God didn't make Adam and Steve. But he didn't need to. We came later, quite naturally, on our own. Homophobic people say that gay people recruit. We don't recruit. We don't need to. We come back, again and again, through heterosexuals

who are delivering to the world a great gift, one that was hidden for a long time, one that is targeted and often hated, one that is sometimes the victim of violence and discrimination, but one that can't be extinguished. And guess what we're doing now! We're raising families with kids! Lots of kids! But we're not raising them to be *gay*. We're raising them to be *themselves*. Yes, some of our children will grow up to be gay, but we are raising *a lot* of kids who will grow up to be straight. And we're teaching them all that no matter who they love, it's OK. It's a lesson some heterosexual parents have a harder time learning.

We look for ourselves in the world around us. Our role models are often our mothers and fathers, our siblings, our extended family of aunts, uncles, cousins, friends. But our role models are also the characters in the books we read, the people we see on TV, the stories we hear about in the newspapers.

The playwright and actress Dael Orlandersmith, in her new play "Forever," describes a trip to Paris's most famous cemetery to visit the idols of her life, where she sums it up this way: "All of us have come to be with the people here in Pere Lachaise, who, beyond our parents, helped us give birth to ourselves."

The need to love and to be loved. This was another one of the categories May Hill Arbuthnot identified in her textbook on children's literature. She understood the deep central role that love plays in a child's life, and in the life of the adult the child will grow up to be. This, after all, is what everything comes down to. We want to love, and to be loved. This is what makes sense of everything else.

In the beginning was the word.

The end is a mystery.

And in between, there's love.

Thank you very much. ☺