

Acceptance Speech

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I would like to offer my sincere thanks to the committee who chose *The Keeper of the Isis Light* as the winning book in this most imaginatively named second-chance award. When I looked at the titles of previous books on this list, I was amazed that they had not been originally greeted with fireworks and fanfares; many of the winners and honor books have been among my top favorites for years, and it is an overwhelming honor to be considered among this illustrious company.

It is also a great privilege to be the first Canadian to receive the Phoenix Award, and I'm sure I won't be the last. We are a country not far removed from the struggles of pioneer days, but our literature—particularly children's literature—is beginning to have an international impact. Finally, I would like to thank the Canada Council for giving me the travel grant that has enabled me to come to Virginia and be with you today, and John Vance Snow of Calgary for cushioning our arrival by meeting us at the airport at 1:00 a.m. and then giving up his room because I'd mixed up our arrival date.

The questions most children's writers are asked, in schools and fan mail, are: Where do your ideas come from? And: How long does it take to write a book—a day? A week? A month? Don't I wish! My short answers are: Ideas are everywhere, and it takes about six months to write a book, once I know what I'm doing—which, of course, is the catch.

I tell the students that it's like planting seeds. You plant radishes and almost before you've turned around, they're up. I once attempted to grow cactuses from seeds, and this was an exercise in patience and faith for my children as well as myself—months went by before the scrawny little knobs appeared. Most of my science fiction novels are of the radish variety. I begin with a question that intrigues me and triggers the story: What would it be like to live under the sea? On the moon? In a country devastated by drought? And so on.

These are stories that of their essence are plot-directed or setting-directed; and once I am clear about the question I'm asking, I head off to the public library to do the necessary research, out of which the actual story evolves. The very facts themselves often trigger useful plot twists and developments, so that by the time I have finished with the background research, I also have a fairly solid plot outline. If I am dealing with real places, I also have maps and charts to fall back on, which help to solidify the setting.

But *The Keeper of the Isis Light* had a very different genesis, in an article that appeared in the *Edmonton Journal*, October 1, 1974: "David is a three-year-old who has never known a mother's kiss or the touch of a bare human hand. He lives in a plastic bubble, and doctors say there is no medical certainty he will ever live elsewhere." I found the poignancy of David's situation overwhelming, and I cut out the article and put it in my "Ideas" file, into which goes anything of either emotional or intellectual content that catches my attention.

David haunted me. Between every book I wrote in the next five years, I would take this cutting out, reread it, and wonder: Is my next story hiding in here somewhere? But nothing appeared, and it went back into the file. Then someone made a TV movie called *The Boy in the Glass Bubble*, a fictionalized, lightly disguised story of David himself, and I remember thinking, “Bother, there goes an idea—unborn.” I took the cutting out of my file, prepared to discard it, read it through one last time, and suddenly realized that the TV movie had not engaged any of the emotions that had made *me* focus on this cutting in the first place—*my* story about David had not yet been written.

I scotch-taped the yellowed cutting to my mirror and looked at it every time I brushed my hair or put on a lipstick, until I finally realized that what I wanted was, as in all my previous books, the answer to a question. Only this time it wasn’t a question the answer to which I would find in my local library or in a science journal. It was simply this, “David, are you lonely?”

Thoughts drifted through my head. Comparisons: Would a person born color-blind miss the sunset? What you never have you don’t miss—or do you? I remembered an experiment in which baby monkeys were raised with surrogate mothers: a wire frame covered with fur, and another frame with a feeding bottle attached. The monkeys spent their days clinging to the fur surrogate, and only made quick sorties to the bare frame for food when they absolutely had to. Are touch and warmth, as physical manifestations of affection, essential? Or not? My triggering question became: Is companionship an innate human need? Can a person be alone and not lonely? Forever?

How am I going to answer this? I realize that, to begin with, I must take a character and place him or her in a completely isolated situation. Where on Earth might that be? I think about distant lighthouses and reject the idea. I need something far more isolated. Perhaps my protagonist lives not on Earth but on some distant planet. For the first time in my writing life, I realize that science fiction has a power beyond mere entertainment and instruction, that it can be a parable. I decide to isolate my protagonist, Olwen, on a planet far from Earth, with no human companions.

How do I get Olwen onto a planet by herself? Logically. Using the discarded idea of “lighthouses,” I imagine a couple being sent as a research team to live on an alien planet for perhaps five years, sending data home to Earth on the viability of this unknown world for human colonization. Their child, Olwen, is born there. In order to get the initial situation I need for my story, I must kill off the parents and leave Olwen alone. Immediately I begin to run into problems. If Olwen is isolated as a youngster, she will remember her past life with her parents and mourn their absence. She will be lonely and unhappy. I must separate her from her family as an infant or a very young child. But if I do that, how will she survive alone? Even if she were somehow able to find food and drink, she would grow up as a feral child, unable to relate to humans. Above all, she will not acquire language if she has no one to talk to her and teach her, and without language she won’t be able to communicate with me, the writer, who is planning to chronicle her life.

Eventually, I find a compromise. Olwen’s parents will be killed off in a dust storm when she is three years old, and she will be brought up by an advanced robot whom the mother, before

her death, programs to be parent and guardian to the orphaned child. Olwen is the only human on this planet, so I can still work out the answer to my original question.

The dust storm that kills the parents suggests to me that the planet has a somewhat inimical climate (and, incidentally, I must remember to introduce dust storms into the story at some point. The parents cannot die in a convenient catastrophe that never occurs again). So Isis is not a perfect Earth-type planet. As I plan this new solar system (with the help of a wonderful book I lucked onto in the library, designed for science fiction writers who have totally forgotten their first-year physics), I realize that anyone coming from Earth will be limited in his/her access to much of the planet by the low oxygen and high solar-radiation levels. Future colonists will be confined to life in the valleys.

But Olwen must be free; for her Isis must be a perfect place—that is Guardian’s mandate, handed down by the dying mother. Since he cannot change Isis, he must change Olwen, so that she will be safe anywhere on the planet, and the first plot complication occurs when he changes Olwen’s body to fit the planet’s demands, and in so doing changes her physical appearance. She no longer looks completely human, which is a surprise to me—but a happy one. It’s always delightful in the preliminary planning of a story to stumble across this kind of event, one that will cause any manner of complications and conflict later.

As I visualize the beautiful forbidding landscape of Isis, the story begins to stir and awaken, and I can see Olwen in the midst of this landscape, happily rejoicing in it. Why the name “Isis”? There is no deep significance. I wanted to design a non-existent planet in a non-existent solar system. If I chose a real star in the known Galaxy, I might find that some time in the future someone would find out that it was a double star with no chance of sustaining livable planets. I noticed that the atlas in *The Flammarion Book of Astronomy* gave all the constellations and stars named from Greek or Roman mythology, so I simply chose names from Egyptian mythology to be different. Ra as sun was obvious, and Isis is my favorite goddess, so I named my planet after her.

Talking of names, why “Olwen”? It’s amusing that in today’s schools, where many of the students have interesting invented names, far removed from the Maureens and Katherines and Elizabeths of my day, they should question “Olwen.” “Did I make it up?” they ask. No, I didn’t. It’s a real name—Welsh. I chose it deliberately to be a little out of the ordinary, but still to imply the Earth origins of her parents. It’s the name of my paternal aunt, but is otherwise not significant.

At last I have a setting, vibrant, colorful though dangerous; I have two characters, Olwen and Guardian. I want to answer the specific question: Olwen, are you lonely? Thanks to the kindness of Guardian, she is perfectly happy. This is unfortunate; though I set up this premise, it means that I do not yet have a story. But writers can be horribly destructive. I have killed off the parents in order to isolate Olwen on Isis. Now I must throw a wrench into the works and perhaps destroy her happiness by introducing a shipload of colonists who are about to land and make her Isis their own. Included in their number are twenty teenagers—all about Olwen’s age. As they land and begin to take over, I can ask the question again: Olwen, are you lonely now?

As I've mentioned, I am in a situation where library research is not going to be any help. I have to ask *Olwen* this question, and only *she* can answer it. My character must be fully alive, able to work out her own destiny, and report to me how she feels. I don't have a plot outline beyond the initial landing of the ship from Earth. I have a vague idea that there might be a love affair and that it might not be happy, but that is all.

It requires a character of great strength to stand alone, and, as I meditate about *Olwen*, I recall my sad early attempts at writing, when I thought that to name and give physical characteristics to my protagonists was enough—with predictable results—wooden protagonists. I found in the hit-and-miss technique of self-taught writers, that the writer must research the “back history” of her characters as thoroughly as the background of the story, until that magic moment when they become alive and start speaking inside one's head. Where does one find these important characters and how do they come alive? Students often ask me if they are modeled after my own children. The answer is most definitely not! I didn't *know* my children as I would need to know a character. They were a mystery to me, leading secret lives into which I had no entry. In fact, it wasn't until they were quite grown up and beyond parental displeasure that I began to hear about their more hair-raising escapades when they were young.

No, the only person I know reasonably well, though even that is sometimes doubtful, is myself. It's not easy, hauling a character out of the depths of one's being. It requires courage and humility, I think, to look honestly into oneself; to dissect one's motives and emotions; to transfer these to one's characters; and then to find the patience and the belief that it will work. But it's also a very healthy exercise, an economical alternative to a high-priced analyst. I always feel at my best when I'm in the process of writing.

Back to the germinating of a cactus seed. It wasn't until five years after reading the cutting about the little boy in Houston, Texas, that I felt that I knew *Olwen* as well as I knew myself, and that she was able and willing to talk to me; then, with some trepidation, I at last took up my pen and began to describe *Olwen* and her relationship to her beloved planet, and slowly the story began to unfold.

The main complication is, of course, *Guardian's* altering of *Olwen's* structure and physical appearance, and his decision to hide this from the settlers by constructing a body suit and mask, imitating Occidental ideals of beauty, and insisting that she wear it whenever she meets the colonists. It is the mask and not the person behind the mask that Mark falls in love with.

Olwen begins to feel the pain and self-doubt of loneliness, but through these she begins to grow, as she had never done before. Spoiled by *Guardian*, she might have remained a willful adolescent all her life. But under adversity, she is changing and growing. She begins to wonder about herself and asks *Guardian* to make her a mirror. When she sees herself for the first time, she is at first curious, and then comfortable with what she sees; she refuses to hide behind the false human mask any more. The settlers must see her as she is. When *Olwen* makes this decision—and she makes it on her own; I didn't force it on her—I was as elated and proud as any mother whose teenaged child has just made an adult choice. It was a wonderful moment—

one of those peaks that makes totally worthwhile the drudgery that is part of being a writer—the rewrites, the line edits, and so on.

It wasn't until much later, when the book was finished, that I realized the significance of Olwen's personal decision—how it resonated at the mythic level: In Jung and the fabricating and eventually peeling off of masks that is a part of the process of growing into adulthood. I was surprised and delighted. Which brings up a challenging question: How valid *are* reader insights into the subconscious or mythic levels of a writer's work, ideas that may be totally unknown to the writer? I find myself with two contrary reactions to this kind of insight: "I didn't do that!" Or, alternatively, "Hmm, maybe I did do that. How clever of me!"

During a symposium at Simmons College some years ago, a teacher asked Natalie Babbitt why the man wore a Yellow Suit in *Tuck Everlasting*. Babbitt paused for a second and then replied, "I needed a two-syllable color." It struck me as funny at the time, but I have since found myself asking, "All right, Natalie. Two syllables. But why not turquoise or purple? What is the *real* reason for yellow?"

Are writers fair game for those who read their books, dissecting them and reading between the lines? I think there is considerable validity in what they do—if it doesn't get out of hand. The subconscious is a subtle and veiled creature. Timid, too. Often the reasons for what appears on the page are not necessarily clear to the writer—or they seem to be there for purely pragmatic purposes, with no mythic implications. But would I have written the mask scene if I had not read the works of Jung? I honestly don't know.

The same situation appears with the emergence of the theme of a book. I am often asked by teachers and older students: "What made you decide to write a book about such and such. Did you start with the theme?" And the answer is a resounding "I didn't." Not ever. There is a question. A search for an answer. And a story. At some point in the story I realize what it is I am actually writing about.

In *The Keeper of the Isis Light* I was searching for an answer to questions of aloneness and loneliness. I found it, I thought, and crystallized it in the last few words of the book when Olwen realizes that after her death Guardian will be alone. He says, "You must not be distressed. After all, I am no human. DaCops do not have the capacity to be lonely." Olwen watches him leave the room and whispers, "Poor Guardian." For Guardian is not human. I felt I had made the necessary statement. I knew, by the last line, what the book was about. Pain, including the pain of loneliness, is an essential part of the human condition.

It was shortly after the book came out that I visited a school in Alberta. A very bright grade-three girl had been brought from another school to listen to my talk. While we waited in the staff room for her mother to pick her up afterwards, she told me how bad she felt about the attitude of the colonists to Olwen's physical appearance. She went on to tell me that in her class was a boy with cerebral palsy, and that some of the children made fun of him, too, and *that* was not right either.

It was only then—perhaps I am a particularly slow learner, or maybe it has to do with a certain tunnel vision of the writer—that I realized the blindingly obvious: That what I had been writing about all through the book was prejudice and the damage it can cause, not only to the recipient, but also to the instigator. In fact, once I had realized this, it was the damage to the agent—Mark—that became the main plot complication in the sequel, *The Guardian of Isis*. It was then that I also discovered another of the uses of science fiction as parable, in that sensitive material can be discussed in an abstract way without specifically pointing the finger or shaming the audience, and it can therefore become a fertile source of class discussion.

I learned a great deal both during the writing of *Keeper* and afterwards, in its effect on readers. It is a wonderful and humbling experience to stumble through a thicket of words and find one has succeeded in expressing some truth that miraculously communicates itself to the readers. That is reward enough. Now, twenty years later, I am amazed and delighted that *The Keeper of the Isis Light* should be recognized in the Phoenix Award. This week will always be a peak memory—for this wonderful conference, for this evening’s presentation, and for the news of the birth of our first great-grandchild, Jocelyn (9 lb. 1 oz.!) while we were on our way here.