

## Letting a Character Lead the Way

Acceptance Speech for the Phoenix Award, Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, June 15, 2002\*

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I am honored and delighted to accept The Phoenix Award for *A Formal Feeling* (1982). And, because I have seen the list of books you have honored in the past, I am humbled as well. It is a distinguished company that my book joins. I am grateful to you for finding it worthy.

It is wonderful to know that a book published twenty years ago is still being read and thought about. It is wonderful that you have chosen it for this award, and I thank you with all my heart.

*A Formal Feeling* is the second of my three young adult novels, and in many ways it is my favorite. It wasn't an easy book to write, but, paradoxically, that may be why I am especially fond of it. Perhaps a writer feels closest to the book over which she has struggled most.

As is true of my other young adult novels, *A Formal Feeling* concerns a family and a young person's relationships with members of that family. In this case it is a family in which a death has occurred fairly recently. As the book begins, Anne Cameron is returning home from boarding school for the Christmas holidays, but the house to which she returns no longer feels like a home to her. Her mother has been dead for a little over a year. Her father has remarried. To Anne, the household seems changed beyond recognition but, rather than adjusting to these changes, rather than accepting the new situation, she rejects it entirely. She chooses, instead, to cling to memories of an earlier time, to memories of a mother whom she very nearly idolizes.

This is the way the book, itself, begins. For me it began one November afternoon when I was flat on my back with the flu. As I lay there, staring at the ceiling, the image of a girl appeared in my mind. She was sitting motionless on the edge of a bed in an empty room while, from somewhere below, came the sounds of a party. That was all. There was no story accompanying the image, no idea that I could articulate. There was only the girl in the empty room and the sounds of a party going on in some downstairs room.

For several weeks I thought about this girl, sitting so still and frozen. She seemed like a figure carved in ice there on the edge of the bed. Of course, I wondered who she was and why she was sitting so cold and unmoving. I wondered what sort of party was going on below her. And, perhaps most of all, I wondered why this image had such power to haunt me.

I had no answers to any of these questions, and so I waited, hoping that answers would appear. What came to mind while I was waiting was a poem by Emily Dickinson

that begins “After great pain, a formal feeling comes—” It is a poem about loss and mourning, filled with images of cold and immobility. To me, it was like a gift arriving. It seemed to point me toward answers to some of the questions I had been asking.

The party, for instance. I began to think that perhaps the party was no party at all, but, rather, the sort of gathering that often follows a funeral. From there it seemed only a small step to imagining the death of Anne’s mother, a small step to understanding that Anne was still and frozen because she was in mourning.

This seemed enough to make a start. For a time the writing went almost easily. Anne’s coldness, her resentment and withdrawal made sense to me. She had adored her mother, after all, and now, in her mother’s place, was a new wife who could in no way equal the woman Anne remembered. Yet her father had chosen this new wife and, to Anne’s way of thinking, he had chosen her very quickly. Of course she was resentful, then. Of course she was cold and withdrawn, finding herself in a situation that was barely tolerable. All of this seemed logical to me, and I thought I was well on my way with the book. But then the trouble began.

Anne, herself, was the problem. Suddenly, she was determined to head off in a direction of her own—one that was certainly not part of what I had planned for her. I had thought that the chief object of her resentment was her father’s new wife. Now she was showing me something else. She was beginning to suggest another focus for these feelings.

When I speak of a character leading the way, this is the sort of experience I have in mind—the moment when a character breaks free from all my best-laid plans and sets off in a direction *she* chooses. I suppose there are other ways to describe this experience. I could speak about the promptings of the intuition or of the unconscious and that might sound less fantastical. But if I am to describe how it felt to me, then I must insist that Anne simply headed off on her own despite my best efforts to dissuade her.

Had I been wise at this point, I would not have tried to dissuade her, but I was more than a little reluctant to go where she was taking me. For my own reasons I wanted to put on the brakes, and so I decided to assert my authority as author, ignore Anne, and take charge. I should have known better. Once you have brought a character into being, complete with a mind and emotions and a history of her own, you are no longer free to push her in any direction you choose. Who she is will determine where she goes as surely as if she were a living being, and there is nothing a writer can do to alter this without resorting to a kind of dishonesty.

Anne had to go where she was going whether I liked it or not, but it took me time to accept this. For quite a while I struggled with her, trying to make her into someone she was not. Because I didn’t want to hear what she was telling me, I didn’t listen, and the book very nearly foundered. It survived only because at last I gave up, gave in to Anne, and let her lead me to the real source of her considerable anger. Then I began to rewrite the book.

Almost as soon as I began doing that, the image of the perfect mother crumbled. This mother, I saw now, was far from perfect. She had been demanding, perfectionistic, and in many ways frightening to a daughter unable to meet her expectations. I saw that Anne's idealizing of this woman was really a means to deny some very painful memories and the anger that accompanied them. For Anne, it was better to idealize, to freeze and forget the pain.

As I followed Anne, I began to see some of what had been so painful for her—the period of months years earlier when her mother had abandoned the family, the confusion and guilt Anne had felt as an eight-year-old dealing with this abandonment. I listened to Anne ask herself why, if her mother had loved her, she'd been willing to leave her, and I thought we had reached to the bottom of Anne's pain then. I was wrong.

There was another question that had to be asked. It was one that Anne had been approaching from the beginning. It lay at the bottom of all she remembered and had chosen to forget. It was the question she had to ask before the book could come to a close, but somehow I managed to avoid it, skirt around it, remain blind to the fact it was there. And then one day Anne simply plunged down deep inside me and, when she surfaced, she was asking whether she had ever loved her mother at all.

I had a hard time letting her ask that question, but once it was there before me, I realized that it was the only one that could set Anne free to feel again. In asking it, she could both acknowledge her anger towards her mother and know that, indeed, she loved her as well—not as the idealized figure born of denial, but as the mother she had really been, only another human being with problems and needs of her own.

There are risks when characters lead the way. They may head for murky places that seem suddenly painfully familiar. They may insist on remaining there to rummage among half-forgotten shadows. This can be difficult for a writer. Surely it was difficult for me. But if I had continued refusing to hear what Anne was telling me, I could never have finished this book. I needed to let her show me the story I needed to tell—a story that had been lodged in some obscure corner of my heart for many years.

What I have wanted to describe to you is process—the rocky path that led to the book you have chosen for this award. When I was writing *A Formal Feeling*, I could not have imagined the great happiness I am feeling at this moment. You have given me a gift I will treasure and, once again, I thank the Award Committee and all the members of the Children's Literature Association for honoring a book I care so much about.

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