

The Postman's Dog

Lisa Shanahan's acceptance speech

It's a great privilege to be here with you tonight. I'd really like to thank Speech Pathology Australia for this truly delightful award for my book 'The Postman's Dog.' I am especially grateful firstly because when I look over the shortlist, I am awed to be in such amazingly good company.

A picture book is so much the collaboration of two people that I'd also like to acknowledge the great debt I owe Wayne Harris, the illustrator of 'The Postman's Dog.' His extremely tender realisation of the characters and his magnificent design gave the story so much more depth and a lot of the power of the book rests in the quiet subtlety of his work.

I have to say that I feel especially grateful to be here receiving this award alongside the Hall of Fame award recognising the illustrious career of Colin Thiele because he was such an inspiration to me as a child. I recited his poetry throughout my childhood and into my teens in various speech and drama eisteddfods. He instilled rhythms and word pictures that linger in my memory still,

“Over the brow of the hill the mushroomer, walking,
Felt the wind playing with arrows of hidden frost,
Felt the air in his face like a steep cold river,
Felt the crying of lost
Lambs in his ears, and the airy ripple of wings.
Small wonder that that he quite forgot his art
And, leaving his bucket empty, sat collecting these things
Instead, in his heart.”

Well, it's too wonderful for words.

This award is especially meaningful because it's being given by an association of people who have an intimate understanding of language and how it works, who care for a whole variety of people but particularly for children with such dedication, an association of people that recognises and honours the importance of books to our ability to both understand and be understood.

As a child, although I didn't have an obvious speech disability, I think I had a communication disability all the same – because I had a whole heap of unsaid things on my heart. Fears about dying. Fears about my parents dying. Anxieties that I wouldn't be special to anyone.

It's a unique disability to be able to speak fluently but be unable to say the things that matter most. I think it's a disability that is more common than we think and especially so for children.

Books therefore were very important to me as a child because they gave voice to those unsaid things. Like Colin Thiele's Mushroomer, I was a collector. As I read books, I was collecting other worlds, collecting other people – and strangely and

without my even knowing it, I was learning how to understand others and eventually how to make myself understood – learning to give words to those things that mattered most, those things that needed to be said.

Thank you for honouring ‘The Postman’s Dog’ with this award. I count it an incredible privilege that you will recommend my book to children and that ‘The Postman’s Dog’ might in some small way, be a means of helping children to grow in their ability to communicate. It’s a very great honour indeed. Thank you.

© L. Shanahan July 2006