

On Making Innovators

Keynote address delivered at the 2016 Workshop of the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of the National Council of Teachers of English, Atlanta, GA

Last week my work was called “unapologetically strange” by the *New York Times*. It was, to me, one of the biggest compliments anyone could give. I already knew I was strange, but I’m fucking thrilled to find out I’ve stopped apologizing for it.

Today, before you (in my new flannel), I give no apology for being who I am, who I’ve been for nearly half a century. Being asked to speak to my ALAN brothers and sisters and being given the opportunity to talk about this theme is one of my proudest moments. I thank you all for coming to my favorite conference of the year, and I thank Jennifer [Buehler, ALAN President, 2016] for asking me to open today’s workshop.

I will warn you in advance: I am difficult to live tweet accurately.

How do we make innovators? As parents and teachers and members of this society—how do we make rebels and revolutionaries?

The start lies in our own minds, I think. I write a lot about boxes and how human beings are conditioned to label other human beings and how rare it is for us to accept changes within those pre-labeled boxes. I often say that teenagers are more open-minded—I say this because so many adults I know just can’t change their minds. Doing so is often interpreted as some sort of weakness. We fear it. We hear our whole lives this clear idea that to be adult is to be right. We fight change. We light ourselves on fire if we make a mistake. All the while, the children are watching.

So what do I mean when I say the start to making

innovators lies in our minds? It’s that moment we take before we judge kids or fear how they will fare; we skip the warnings of how hard life will be and instead smile, hug them, and tell them that we will gladly kick the world’s ass alongside them. It’s that moment when we hear the pain and anger in students’ voices, but rather than telling them our opinion about their situation, we sit quietly and let them express it in any way they can because as human beings, we don’t grow or heal unless we express. And we believe what they say is their truth. We *believe* them, and we believe *in* them.

My moment was when my ninth-grade English teacher allowed me to write my first-person point of view assignment from the point of view of a can of succotash rather than rolling her eyes and telling me to be more normal. I’d been told before ninth grade to be more normal, but this teacher opened her mind for me, and I am forever grateful. Little did either of us know that one day I would also write from the point of view of our hometown pagoda and win an award for it.

Think back to David Bowie in 1972. Think about how many people thought he was a freak just for being alive and wearing skintight bodysuits. Think back to Prince in the early 80s and how the Parents Music Resource Center came after him for daring to write sexually free (or explicit—you choose) lyrics. It’s now 2016. We have already accepted these two people as genius—as innovators who took risks that paid off.

Arthur Schopenhauer (1818) said: “All truth

passes through three stages. First, it is ridiculed. Second, it is violently opposed. Third, it is accepted as being self-evident.” When I was writing this speech, I thought of the year we’ve had. On one hand, I think about the innovators we’ve lost, and on the other hand, I think about what’s to come now that a threat exists to silence future innovators based on whose voices will be allowed to be the loudest.

Here’s what I say to students all over the country. I say: I didn’t want to write a 200-word essay from the first-person point of view any more than you did. I decided to make it interesting. I wrote it from the point of view of a can of succotash. A specific can. This particular can was the last can on the supermarket shelf during a blizzard. It felt lonely because nobody likes succotash. Or at least I didn’t.

Let’s deconstruct.

Why did Amy write about succotash? What was Amy really doing? She was transferring her ninth-grade emotions onto a can of succotash. How did Amy feel about Amy when she wrote that essay? She felt lonely, cold, alone, unwanted. She hated Amy because she felt like everyone hated Amy because Amy was annoyingly strange. Just like succotash.

This is an accurate description of my ninth-grade reality. I’d been making my own weeknight dinners since I was 10 years old, and I spent most of my time sneaking cigarettes in the cornfield around my house or reading books and writing things down in my louver-doored bedroom closet. I knew if I needed help, I had only myself to count on. From the outside, I couldn’t have looked as at-risk as I was, so no teachers knew anything about my reality. When I acted out, they probably thought I was being dramatic because it’s the first thing we think and say about teenagers in this society, isn’t it? Especially teenage girls. But I wasn’t being dramatic. I spent most of my nights alone in my house eating whatever I could make and watching M*A*S*H. Hawkeye Pierce was my mother. Some of you may have read that somewhere before.

I’m trying to tell you something. I’m trying to tell you that I make a living out of the same thing I was doing in ninth grade. This year, I released a book about a tornado. It’s not just any tornado. It’s my tornado. My life on paper. That’s what my books are. Little pieces of me. I tell students: “If I was doing this in ninth grade, some of you are, too.” If I just wrote down my life story, it would be depressing. But

if I write it from the POV of a can of random freaky vegetables, it becomes both easier to write about and more interesting.

This is my process. Pure emotion. I plan nothing. Never know what’s coming on the next page. Never know the end until I get there. My process is based solely on trust in a very untrustworthy world.

I trust my characters to tell their stories, and they trust me to do it with the same lack of fucks I had in ninth grade. Their voices come into my brain and then out of my fingers as I type.

The minute I overthink, plan, or plot, the characters abandon me and shut up. It happened this year. I took too long, overthought; the kid shut up and stopped telling me what to write. I wrote 54 pages total of that book, and it was dead on page 20.

So it goes.

I commandeered a school bus when I was nine years old. Third grade. It was gifted class day. We were bused to gifted class once a week, and that morning my teacher told us that gifted class had been cancelled for the day. And I wasn’t having it. *Fuck that. I want out of this place. I already know how to multiply, I have shit to express, and I can express it in gifted class.*

So when I saw the usual gifted bus pull up outside the school building, and I saw my friends from gifted looking confused, I lined them up like any other week, and I figured why not? I remember standing in front of my classmates talking to the bus driver through the bus’s doorway. I remember how high up he was in the bus and how little I was on the road’s tarmac. He told us that class had been cancelled, and I told him, “No! It’s not. We’re going.” And for some messed up reason, he believed me—which, in my life at that age was a miracle because no one ever believes nine-year-old girls—and he got us on the bus, and we drove to the school where our gifted class . . . wasn’t happening that day. The other school’s principal turned the bus around, and we drove back.

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This is an innovator.

Picture me at age five standing in front of a 1970s TV, the kind with legs and clunky channel-changing dials. I was remote control. I was remote. I stood barely as tall as the top of the console right in front of Walter Cronkite. The most important half hour of our day—the news. Real news. You remember the kind.

I knew what my mother had told me was true: no matter what I do in life, I will be doing it as a woman, and people will expect me to act accordingly. And so, I have made it my business to act any damn way I want. And no, I'm not sorry.

I stood there, and I told my parents how I felt. And they didn't care how I felt. They yelled at me to move. They threatened. But little Amy knew they were too exhausted to physically move her. I'd talk louder as they complained and then, once I'd said all I needed to say, I'd finally go. They ignored me, but I wouldn't be ignored. I was a freak from day one. In my own house.

We are an army now—freaks since birth. Children who needed love and understanding and not just a new pair of sneakers. A hug would have

been nice. One time it would have been calming to cry when I felt sad and not be told that crying made me look ugly. One time it would have felt lovely to have someone ask me how I really was. I was anxious. I was defiant. I was tired before I hit fourth grade.

I was the youngest in a family of risk takers, so part of this comes naturally to me, because as much as my parents messed me up, they taught me the beauty of self-sufficiency. It's always a balance in my therapist's office. On one hand, I lived in a tunnel of emotional abandonment, and on the other, I knew how to make my own dinner at age 10. I saw self-employment as normal. I saw my mother as the first woman in her boardroom in 1978. And I heard her stories. And I knew every day was hard, surrounded by men who didn't take her knowledge seriously and at the same time required her to wear a girdle. She prepared me for life as a woman by telling me the truth—which was: no matter what I do in life, I will

be doing it as a woman, and that will really piss some people off.

As a Surrealist writer, being female isn't always a picnic. I'm mislabeled a lot. I end up in the fantasy section where my work is bound to piss off some trusting reader who expected werewolves or dragons. I'm often misunderstood, and I land on those awful "authors you never heard of but should have" lists. Shit wouldn't be this hard to shelve if I thought more like women are supposed to think—or if I had a different undercarriage, as if the marriage of my brain and my hands is somehow rerouted through my glands.

In my first 15 years of writing, I got a lot of rejection letters. About 400 or so. Through these letters, I learned two important things:

1. Women are not meant to be weird. In one letter, I was told that writing was "hard work," and in another, I was told, "This is too strange for your audience." Up until then, I thought my audience was anyone who wanted to read a book, but apparently I was wrong.
2. There isn't enough romance in my books to prove that I am, in fact, a woman. The explanation was, "Readers of female fiction expect certain things." I remember thinking "Wow. Female fiction. I had no idea vaginas could write books." I did a lot of kegels after that just in case I could teach mine to work a keyboard. So far, no luck.

I knew what my mother had told me was true: no matter what I do in life, I will be doing it as a woman, and people will expect me to act accordingly. And so, I have made it my business to act any damn way I want. And no, I'm not sorry.

Still not sorry about the bus thing, either.

Since I'm listing the things I'm not sorry about, I'd like to go on record saying I love young adult fiction and I'm not sorry about it. Every year, I am asked too many times by adults if I might one day write a "real book." I've been told by heads of English departments that they will not include this sort of writing on their reading lists. I ask them which young adult books they've read, and they look at me blankly. When I moved back to America in 2004, I'd never heard of YA fiction, and when one of my books was sold as a young adult novel, I was warned—almost scared off—by sentiments like these. Then I read

M. T. Anderson's (2006) *The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing, Vol. 1*, and I went from being iffy about YA to knowing I'd found my place. Why? Because I want to find that kid who's writing from the point of view of a can of succotash.

Where will I find her now? Will she be busy prepping for her Keystone standardized test so she can be assessed and graduate by regurgitating some bullshit about what some dead white author was thinking when he wrote a book? Will she be so busy prepping, the way you are all so busy prepping, for a test that undermines not only her ability to think critically but undermines everything you are as teachers?

Dammit, you know how to assess. You are in a constant state of assessment. You're teachers.

The people who make the tests aren't even educators. It's a cartoon looney world of kids-for-cash, and respect for teaching has come to an all-time low in my lifetime—a criminal act—moving backward, upside down, and inside out. And still, you get your asses out of bed in the dark and stay up late grading because every one of those kids has potential.

Your jobs have grown more challenging for many reasons, but the most noble that I see is that you've somehow found a way into the cracks of the Common Core, and you still look for cans of succotash. For that, I thank you.

My husband spends more than eight weeks per year on test prep in a school where a student and his brother just last week landed in juvenile detention for robbery because their mom couldn't afford rent. *What does a standardized test score show us about that?* It shows us there are kids out there who give fewer shits about what some dead guy thought while he wrote a book than they do about helping their family eat or staying alive in their neighborhoods. Eyed by every person they pass, eyed by cops in every car, they wonder if every day could be their last. How the *fuck* do we standardize *that*?

And yet, every one of us will connect with one book if we are allowed to. If only the people in charge could stop for a minute and remember that relevant, contemporary books are not dangerous—not as dangerous as the message that we should all learn the same thing in the same way at the same time in the same class with the same teacher. All while those same people in charge take money from poorer districts and make sure *those* kids will never hit the right

percentile. . . so they can buy their schools private and standardize *those* kids in a different way.

Prince's classroom was wherever his piano was. Hendrix's was wherever his guitar was. Steve Jobs didn't graduate college. Aretha Franklin dropped out at 15 to care for her first child . . . and she later became the first woman inducted into the Rock 'n Roll Hall of Fame in 1987. Which says a lot about the Rock 'n Roll Hall of Fame, but I digress.

These people commandeered the bus. Their own bus. And as a former bus-commandeering remote control, I want to tell

you something you likely already know. Many of us don't give a shit about school or grades. Two English teachers in particular are to blame for why I'm standing in front of you today. I thank them every time I see them. I wish there had been more of them, but as the daughter and wife of teachers, I know that teachers have too much to do to help some kid who has no giveashit. We know you see us. We are smart, and you know it. We are wasting your time, and you know it.

I ask you: Trust us the way I trust my characters. Trust us to find our way even if it takes 15 years of rejection and failure. Even if it never comes. Many innovators never get heard in the big-risk game of what we call "the arts." But if I wasn't standing here—if I was still writing and failing—I'd die happy trying.

I nearly didn't graduate high school. About a week before last senior day, I was slapped from my stoner reality by my hippy geometry teacher from tenth grade who told me to pay attention in American Political Systems, the class I had to pass to get

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my diploma. Do you know what I had to do to pass the class (ironic in political times like these)? I had to memorize the Constitution. Do you know how I did it? With a full-time job every day after school delivering pizzas? I put it on a cassette tape. I made a poem out of it. I rapped it like Chuck D, and I did manage to graduate . . . in the bottom quarter of my class. My

college advising guidance counselor, who'd listened to me talk about my home life but didn't believe it because *our family looked so damn good*, told me I had no chance of any career. I may as well just keep delivering pizzas.

You know what? I was thrilled. *Thrilled*. I needed no more shrill drills of memorizing more bullshit; tips and customers who said thank you seemed more civilized, and it en-

ergized me. But I went to college because my parents said I had to. Some rebel I was. Then I got kicked out for something I didn't do, and girls in my dorm knew what to say to make me cry myself to sleep at night, and never once did my parents or my 99th percentile scores come and knock on my door. Not weak enough for sympathy, not preened enough for dean's pet. Let her fail.

And I did.

Failure is spectacular for risk takers. Failure is the trophy no one wants but us. Give your trophies to the ones who can memorize what the dead author was thinking when he wrote his book. Let me alone so I can find out what I was thinking when I wrote the book I wrote. You'll never know. You can't test me. I'm test-proof.

What did David Bowie mean when he wrote "Space Oddity?" Was he even talking about space? I don't care because the song is beautiful. And that's the rub. We teach this analytical thinking in the arts, and we get analytical thinkers in the arts, but we don't get flow—we know too much; we sow seeds of what we think are flowers, but we grow weeds. Lament those kids, and you are blind to what they have to offer.

The first sentence of the essay I wrote in ninth grade was: *Succotash is the loneliest item on the shelf*. Loneliness has not gone away. Not in teenagers' lives, not in our adult lives. Social media hasn't filled the gap. Nothing fills the gap. Part of the human experience is to be lonely. I ask you to challenge yourselves today—I ask you to look at teenagers, no matter how many trips to Europe they may take per year, no matter how many priors they have on their record, and recognize that they have something to say about isolation that you and I may have never read before. We all know that when you give a student a book, it is part of the cure to loneliness. But there is an even more powerful escape—and that is to *write it down*.

I had some mediocre teachers in my life—we all have. And while some of them really messed me up and made me retreat to the dark side of being an at-risk kid, in the end they are a huge part of why I ended up who I am. Because of their closed minds and their repeat lesson grinds, I zoned out and reached in and into myself, and I found the one thing worth living for, and it was me.

My life on paper. Humble servant to my lifelong questions about what we're all doing here.

There's a quote carved on my mentor's gravestone: *Never be swayed by anything but by your own work and vision*.

And here I am in an industry of truth that prefers its truth *lighthearted, romantic, and fun!* And here you are in school systems swayed wildly by things that have very little to do with education. But we all have our own work and vision, and it's time to remind ourselves that we are not the level of respect others give us, but rather the level of respect we give our own ideas.

We all do magic here. You have the most important job in the world. You educate and you boost and you love and you nurture and you teach kids how to commandeer a bus. And you protect the kids in the skintight bodysuits singing "Ziggy played guitar," and you keep a safe space for every teenager—a safe space that is more relevant and necessary every single day in modern America.

Me? I just write books. I share pieces of my life with you and your students because maybe we share the same tornado. Maybe by me talking about my tornado, I can help one person—just one—avoid a tornado. This wasn't some bright new idea for me. I've

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written about domestic violence since that very first “weird” book. I’m tired of people blowing it off. I’m tired of the oversimplification of things. Oversimplification leads to normalization. And again, in modern America, this is the last thing we need: normalizing hate, normalizing violence, normalizing the ever-present eye-rolling our culture sends to those who don’t fit their box—especially teenagers. Normalizing leads to apathy. Apathy leads to cynicism. In the end, victims skip the middle man and simply blame themselves.

The first time I was chased into my parked car in a panic, manically reaching for all four door locks on hands and knees from the back seat, is something I do not remember. I was about 27 years old. I remember it happening; I see my hand slapping the plastic grey and waiting for the click and looking behind me to see if I’d made it in time. But I don’t remember why this happened. The episode. The argument. The road to here—inside a tornado that some days stays in other states, but other days comes right into my body and twists me into knots.

Remembering can be awful business.

I can’t count the number of times it happened, but I know it was more than twice. This is the brain at work—the normalizing of a life that one is forced to live. This is how psychology keeps us safe when we are not safe. Our brains forget. To see it from the outside is to ask: Why didn’t you? How could you? You should have—or why wouldn’t you? To see it from the outside is to back away slowly from the conversation because it makes most people uncomfortable.

This may seem random but . . .

Do you know what makes me uncomfortable? The school to prison pipeline—a reality rarely talked about and often given an eye-roll because a certain segment of our society thinks that those kids somehow deserve what they get. From September to December of 2015, three students in a “credit recovery” for-profit charter school in the small city of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, died from gang violence. During the same time, in the classroom, students were asked to free write. And when a 15-year-old boy shared his piece, he told of watching his brother die on the sidewalk after a drive-by back when he was eight years old. Told from this perspective, it’s a story. But from inside that young man’s tornado, this is real life.

There is a huge difference between my tornado and his. Mine is handpicked—a half-rotten apple that

may still be of use, at least in its seeds. His tornado is unavoidable poverty—it’s everywhere and nowhere depending on who you ask, and we mask it with statistics and gas-lighting calls of thugs and drugs, and it dissolves away from us as we buy our steakhouse dinners, organic quinoa, and ice cream cones because we have the luxury to do so. But that boy—eight years old—in the fold of his formative years experienced something that none of us is really willing to discuss beyond the fuss of a Facebook repost. Talking about poverty and the millions of kids at risk inside its sinkhole is too often an act of the short attention span. We need to use our voices to fast-track this truth to self-evident.

Then, we ask students to *write things down*.

Because he did, this young man. *He wrote it down*.

Once on paper, his tornado is our tornado. That’s the magic of shooting the truth of our lives out of a pen. It’s never easy. But the science behind this boy’s resilience is simple. The more times you write it down, the more times a story is told, the longer it holds on, and the stronger the boy gets.

None of it will bring back his dead brother.

And eventually I had to get out of the back seat of my car.

People have told me that I’m too serious—but I never minded that because I’ve been serious since single digits. I’m that family member who brings up child trafficking at the holiday party while dipping my cookies into eggnog. I don’t like when my books are referred to as “too serious,” but I’ve never had a teenager say that to me. Only adults.

But then, for the last couple of weeks [since the election], I’ve gotten a lot of adult correspondence concerning my novel *Glory O’Brien’s History of the Future* (2014); people said, *It’s happening! It’s happening now! A.S. King, can you write us out of this mess?*

Oh. So now y’all are feeling serious, huh?

It’s like being a Prince fan since *Dirty Mind* when *Purple Rain* came out.

Innovation is the child of necessity. We realize things when we need to. And if we write it down, we invent a new space in which to live. We broaden our square footage.

It's like growing up in Ziggy's stardust, then watching girls with big hair doing the floppy 80s dance to "China Girl."

I want to scream "*You are late to the game!*" but then I realize that everyone, including me, is late to some game, somewhere. Innovation is the child of necessity. We realize things when we need to. And if we *write it down*, we invent a new space in which to live. We broaden our square footage. We increase

how comfortable we are in our unavoidable tornadoes. And we increase the number of people who bear witness to our prickly existence until they can't deny us our own realities any longer.

During the time of my life when I was in the back of that car, I didn't know

what to think. No one knows what to think when nasty weather touches down. So I wrote novels about spacewomen who were ten feet tall. This is the psychology of need. Of innovation. Of a victim-blaming culture that doesn't like to get too serious because maybe its mascara might run.

The only way to scrape back the feeling in our numb lonely limbs is to *write it down*. This is an act of protest. It is an act of self-preservation. It is an act of kindness to ourselves—and an act of encouragement to others. When we give ourselves permission to say what's really happening in our world, we give others permission to look squarely at their world, too. Maybe then we will realize that we are lonely. Maybe then we will realize that making mistakes isn't weak, it's strong. Maybe then we will realize that we are all being chased by a tornado, and not one of us can run fast enough . . . and maybe it's time to let the funnel come and consume us so we can *feel*.

Victor Hugo (1877) said: "An invasion of armies can be resisted, but not an idea whose time has come."

Teachers, you have the right ideas. You know a can of succotash when you see it, and you know that education is being bought and sold while poverty is crushing the core of our children. At the same time, you're asked to prep students for big-cash companies' tests and use your own money to buy copy paper and

classroom supplies. You are living in a tornado that you can't avoid, but what you do daily to shield your students from it is what I admire most. They have their own tornadoes, and you have yours. But your classroom is shelter for all of us.

What a marvel . . . that your cynicism hasn't taken over. What a marvel . . . that you juggle a new ridiculous initiative your administration dreamed up last week with everything else you already have in the air. What a marvel . . . that you still wake up in the dark and greet our children at the door with a smile that assesses their every move, reads the screens on their chests. What a marvel . . . you are. You commandeer the bus every damn day.

Write it on a sticky note, and stick it to your mirror. You are marvels. You are marvels. You are marvels.

You are innovators, rebels, and risk takers because you choose to open young minds to serious ideas, and you ask so much when you often get so little. But you ask all the same because you know asking is everything. One time, in first grade, I asked my school librarian a question: "Did Max really get on the boat and sail over a year and in and out of weeks to the wild things or was it a dream?" And instead of spouting some analytical garbage, she answered the best way anyone ever could. She said, "I don't know. What do you think, Amy?"

And I have spent the rest of my life writing my answers down.

How do we make more innovators? Rebels? Visionaries? We lead by example like we always have. We make the path to self-evident shorter by trusting students, trusting ourselves, and never underestimating their individual genius. We ask them to *write things down*. In turn, they will learn to trust themselves that little bit more. They will stand up and seek—even if it's long after they leave your classroom. They will have our collective power behind them. An undercurrent of encouragement and empathy that never falters, no matter how weary we get with the world. We lead by example, and we fight a good fight, even if we die trying.

And we dance while we do it because being a rebel is fun.

And we talk about serious things because the world is a serious place, and your students already know that. It's about time we took their loneliness

**Write it on a sticky note,
and stick it to your mirror.**

**You are marvels. You are
marvels. You are marvels.**

seriously—especially considering that we live in a time when the second leading cause of death of those aged 15–19 is suicide. It’s about time we write our own Common Core of compassion and build it into every lesson.

Because in the end, this is their bus. And we can be their Bowie.

Because in the end, truth is nothing to fear.

Because in the end, there are too many voices struggling to be heard, and it’s our job to give those voices a chance to thrive.

In the end, we chose to dedicate our lives to teenagers, to help them, to urge them to tell us about their tornadoes while the rest of the adult world clicks its teeth and claims drama, as if *real* loneliness is a right reserved only for them. We grow succotash. We expand minds. We write and read and think and discuss, and we listen to that slice of society most adults ignore.

We don’t just believe teenagers, we learn from them.

We don’t just listen to teenagers, we’re inspired by them.

We don’t just endure teenagers, we celebrate them.

And I think I can speak for all of us in the room when I say: We’re not sorry.

Thank you.

A.S. King has been called “one of the best YA writers working today” by the New York Times Book Review. King is the author of several highly acclaimed novels, including *Still Life with Tornado*, *I Crawl through It*, *Glory O’Brien’s History of the Future*, *Reality Boy*, and *Everybody Sees the Ants*. She earned the 2012 Los Angeles Times Book Prize with *Ask the Passengers* and was included on the 2011 Michael L. Printz Honor Book list for *Please Ignore Vera Dietz*. She is a faculty member in the Writing for Children and Young Adults MFA program at Vermont College of Fine Arts and spends many months of the year traveling the country speaking to high school and university students. After more than a decade living self-sufficiently and teaching literacy to adults in Ireland, she now lives in Pennsylvania.

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