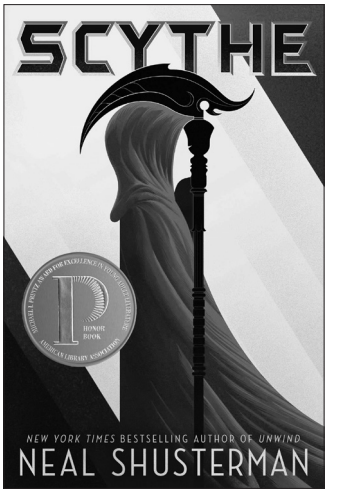
We Are the Sum of Our Experiences:

2017 ALAN Award Acceptance Speech

I am overwhelmed and deeply grateful to be receiving the ALAN Award, and I can't thank all of you enough for this amazing honor. To receive an award for one's contribution to literature—one's entire body of work—is the most meaningful kind of award. It's validation not just of something you've written, but of your entire professional life. For writers, it's sometimes hard to see the forest for the trees. We slave over our computers, agonizing over details and word choices, and by the time a book is published, we're already agonizing over the next one. Thank you for seeing the forest—and for raising me up high enough to see it, too.



I have been lucky enough to have worked with some of the best in the publishing industry. Stephanie Lurie, David Gale, Rosemary Brosnan, Julie Strauss-Gabel, Ginee Seo, Andrea Pinkney. I really have had the privilege of working with the best editors—as well as an amazing agent, Andrea Brown, and fantastic publishers. Just yesterday, Justin Chanda, my publisher at Simon & Schuster, took me aside and talked to me with such excitement about my new book, *Thunderhead* (2018). It was like he was suddenly a teenager having a fanboy moment, and I remember thinking how incredibly blessed I am to be working with people who love what they do, who have held on to their youthful exuberance, and who are genuinely excited about children's publishing. It can only be matched by the embrace my work has received from teachers and librarians. Thank you all for always making me feel that I am among friends. Among family.

I had prepared a speech for today, full of tried and true stories. Things that I know work for an audience. My "shticks." But I was increasingly frustrated by the speech—because on this unique and special occasion, I didn't want to just regurgitate things you might have heard before. I wanted to offer you something new. So I stayed up most of the night and dug deep down to come up with three stories I have never told publically, but that speak directly to my career as a writer and to me in general. It's a brief trilogy, with the added benefit that you don't have to wait a year between stories.

Chapter 1: The Day that Shopping Carts Took Over the World

I'm often asked what gave me the courage to take the leap into writing. What made me believe that I'd be able to succeed? There are so many influences along the way, but there actually is one moment that I can pinpoint. A turning point that came during my last year in college.

I began college as a biological science major. Premed. I was good in science and math, and my parents

always told me I'd be a doctor. So I just went with the assumption. Even though I wanted to be a writer, actor, composer, director, and basically everything *but* a doctor, I went with it . . . until my sophomore year, when I changed my major, deciding to double-major in psychology and theater. My parents were dubious but still supportive, albeit reluctantly so.

Also beginning in my sophomore year, I wrote a weekly humor column for the school paper. It was called "The Anonymous Column, by Neal Shusterman." The irony was funny for the first two installments. Then the name just stuck. It became very popular. By the time I was a senior, writing had emerged as my greatest passion. The Anonymous Column had gained me counterculture celebrity status at the University of California Irvine, because I was constantly satirizing the administration and the various problems that plagued the school—from parking to incompetent bureaucracy to the questionable physicians at the school's "health" center.

During my last year there, I made a student film. UC Irvine is not known for its film program. In fact, at the time, they only had one film-making class. My epic feature, all of 23 minutes, was called *V: Invaders from Vons,* Vons being a ubiquitous supermarket in California. The movie was a parody of Steven Spielberg films, from *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (Spielberg et al., 1977) to *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (Kasdan, 1981) to *E. T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (Mathison, 1982), and was about shopping carts taking over the world. (Imagine our inciting incident. Point of view from a shopping cart rolling by itself through the aisles, the theme from *Jaws* [Benchley & Gottlieb, 1975] playing in the background. The cart zeroes in on a woman reaching for yogurt in the dairy case. She doesn't stand a chance.)

Once the movie was completed, I decided to show it publicly on campus. I used my column as a blatant advertisement for the movie (and titled that week's column, BLATANT ADVERTISEMENT FOR THE SHOPPING CART MOVIE). The movie was going to be shown at one of the school's lecture halls—ironically in the Biological Science Building.

As it turns out, my father was in town on business, so I invited him to come see the movie. Now, just so you understand my father, think of a cross between Jerry Stiller in *Seinfeld* and Archie Bunker. He was a character. Funny and cantankerous and whimsically contrary. He once told us that in elections, he made a point of always voting against whoever my mother voted for, just to cancel out her vote. His name was Milton, and when he lost his temper, we called it "The Full Milton."

When I first told my father I wanted to be a writer, he was underwhelmed. He was not much of a reader and was proud of it. He once told me that the only fiction he ever read willingly was in high school: The Studs Lonigan trilogy (Farrell, 1932–1935) about a Chicago gangster kid in the early 1900s (which, by the way, is where author Studs Terkel got his nickname). My father vowed never to read another fictional book, because what was there after Studs Lonigan?

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Anyway, the big night arrives. I'm pacing by the lecture hall entrance with my father. Ten minutes to show time. Five minutes. No one shows up. Not a single person. And I'm crushed. And embarrassed. And my father puts a paternal arm on my shoulder and says, "Let this be just another one of life's little lessons." And "Maybe this is a sign that you should rethink things . . . ."

Then—and I swear this actually happened—a friend of mine comes running up to me out of breath and says, "What the hell are you doing over here? Everyone's waiting around back."

I go around the building to the back side of the lecture hall, and there are nearly a hundred people waiting to be let in. The lecture hall was packed by the time I started the film. People laughed when they were supposed to. People cheered at the end when, to the emotional strains of the climactic music from *E. T.*, the hero cart that saved the world is taken away by a space ship made out of a desk organizer glued to the top of a Frisbee.

The shopping cart movie was a hit!

This was my grand, shining moment. Nevermind graduation (where, by the way, the valedictorian quoted from one of my columns during her address);

this was my defining collegiate experience. *Invaders from Vons!* One dollar admission plus free popcorn.

And as my father watched the response of the crowd, he was all smiles. Then, when everyone had left, he said to me, "Neal, I think you might be able to make this whole writing thing work."

I discovered during those three days that I existed—an individual separate and apart from my foundering marriage—and that I would still be here after it was over. It was not the end of the world.

And to me, that made all the difference in the world.

My father passed away in 2013, and true to his nature, he never read any of my books. *But* . . . he always went out of his way to go into bookstores, so he could put my books face-out on the bestseller shelves, whether they belonged there or not. That's how I knew he was proud of me.

Chapter 2: The Day the World Didn't End

A few years ago, a teacher who had been following my work for years commented that my writing changed right around the year 2000. It became more thoughtful. Deeper. It touched on more universal issues and provoked more thought. More often than not, it's others who notice things about yourself that you're too close to see. As it turns out, that was the year of my divorce.

My ex-wife and I met when we were 19. A dorm romance. And from that moment on, we were joined at the hip. We became Neal-and-Elaine. We looked at people we knew getting divorced, and for us it wasn't even in our vocabulary. That was something that happened to *other* people. It would never happen to us. We were above that. I was naïve enough to think that the kind of relationship troubles that plagued others were beneath us. I didn't know it at the time, but I was seeing the world, and my own life, in a simplistic, childish way.

Around the time that Erin, our youngest daughter, was born, my wife and I were drifting apart emotionally. By this point in our lives, everything was about the kids. We tried to do "date nights" with each other and found that we had nothing to talk about. No common interests beyond our children. After 18 years as an inseparable couple, we had fallen out of love. We were each other's first love and had become a couple before we could become individual adults. She was wise enough to see that this had to end. We couldn't continue for the rest of our lives in a loveless relationship. People talk about broken families and failed relationships. Frankly, I find those characterizations hurtful and offensive. Our relationship didn't fail; it was completed. Our family isn't broken; it decompressed in a much-needed way.

But at the time, my pride wouldn't allow me to see what needed to happen. "I can fix this," I insisted. And I proceeded to set up hoops for myself to jump through, thinking they would save the marriage. Nothing was working, but I refused to accept it.

Then something remarkable happened. Out of the blue, I was called by a high school friend I hadn't seen in maybe 15 years. It was one week short of my 20-year high school reunion, and my classmates had been looking for me. It wasn't like I was all that hard to find, but I was no longer a part of any of those circles. While I had grown up in Brooklyn, my father, who was an engineer, had been assigned to a project in Mexico City while I was in high school, so I had gone to the American School of Mexico City—a school that I had loved but hadn't been back to since graduation. The reunion would be held there, and my friend wanted to know if I could go. I started to make excuses: "I can't just drop everything." "One week notice? Can you imagine the cost of airfare?" And then she said something to me that hit a chord so deep, I still remember the sound of her voice saying it: "If you don't go, you're going to regret it for the rest of your life."

Ten minutes later, I bought a roundtrip ticket to Mexico City.

I went alone, but I was not alone. I was among friends. The reunion was a spectacular three-day party, and those 20 years seemed to melt away in minutes. I discovered during those three days that I existed—an individual separate and apart from my foundering marriage—and that I would still be here after it was over. It was not the end of the world. That was a feeling I tried to capture years later in my novel *Bruiser* (2010), which deals with, among other things, divorce, emotional pain, and the fear that your world

is over.

The day I returned home from the reunion, I told my wife that I would agree to a divorce. We would, as we always did, put the kids first, and our split would be amicable. At that moment, I grew past my childish notions of what a relationship should be and the idea of happily ever after. One can't be grateful for divorce, but what I can be grateful for is that it forced me to grow—not just as a human being, but as a father, and also as a writer. I saw my life and the world from a new perspective—an honest perspective and, therefore, a healthier perspective.

Chapter 3: The Day I Turned to Jell-0

I do a lot of school visits, and my large-group presentations are all question-and-answer, because I find that kids will ask about all the things I'm going to talk about anyway, but when it's motivated by them, they own it a little bit more. Of course, the downside of that is that I never quite know what questions they're going to ask—and the first question of the day always sets the tone for the rest of the presentation.

At one visit, there was this kid whose hand went up even before I finished putting out the call for questions. I could tell that this one was going to be one of those interesting ones. I call on the kid, and he asks:

"Mr. Shusterman, what drugs were you doing when you wrote *Full Tilt?*" (2003).

To which I responded, "Nothing but my own brain chemicals."

Which is true. Despite writing stories that might seem drug-induced, I was never into any sort of chemical stimulation. I didn't get high, I didn't drink all that much. I didn't drop acid. I was always kind of boring that way. Sorry to disappoint any of you who might be wondering. But I did have one major drug experience that I don't talk about much. I've decided to share it with you now.

About 10 years ago, I had gone with my sons Brendan and Jarrod on a trip to Playa del Carmen in the Yucatan Peninsula. It was a vacation, but a working one, because I was researching Chichen Itza, the ruins of the great Mayan city, for my novel *Everfound* (2011). This was the first major vacation with my son Brendan after his diagnosis and hospitialization for schizo-affective disorder. At this point, he was worlds better than he had been but was still on a pretty powerful antipsychotic called Seroquel. Seroquel pills are very similar in shape and color to extra-strength Excedrin. Add to this fact that I, like a moron, decided to put all our medications into identical handy-dandy little Zip-loc bags so they'd take up less space, and you have a recipe for chemical disaster.

The morning of our Chichen Itza tour, I had a headache, so I downed a couple of extra-strength Excedrin as we were rushing to get out of our hotel room and to the tour bus. As I was swallowing, I realized that the pills felt a little bit large in my mouth, but it was too late. I had taken 800 milligrams of Seroquel—*twice* my son's dosage, a dosage his doctor had him slowly work up to.

Despite writing stories that might seem drug-induced, I was never into any sort of chemical stimulation.

I tried to induce vomiting with no success. I tried to call Poison Control and discovered there is no number for Poison Control in Mexico. I tried to find out what the lethal dosage of Seroquel was online and found this to be the one time in history that you couldn't find something on the Internet. Finally, I was able to get through to a psychopharmacologist at a local hospital who told me that 800 milligrams wasn't lethal. "You may get a little sleepy, though."

I may get a little sleepy. Fine. I can deal with that. So we got on the tour bus, and about half an hour later, I ceased to be able to feel my hands. And I suddenly realized that I no longer had any bones. I turned to Brendan and Jarrod and said. "Uhh Thurrrrk derrr Srrmbptum Wrugggg."

Did any of you see *The Wolf of Wall Street* (Winter, 2013)? Do you remember the scene where Leo DiCaprio took two Quaaludes and tried to get down the front steps of a country club to his Lamborghini? That's *exactly* what it was like. The tour bus made an emergency stop, and I spilled out the door onto the pavement in front of some hotel somewhere. My sons, who were 19 and 17 at the time, had to physically carry me because I couldn't walk or speak. They tried to get me something to drink, but I couldn't swallow. They got me a juice box, figuring that would be easier for me, but I couldn't sip on the little straw. And

everyone who passed was laughing. Look at this *borracho loco*, drunk at seven in the morning. So the boys folded me into a taxi, and we took it back to our hotel. They carried me to the room, tucked me in bed, and proceeded to spend 24 hours watching pay-per-view and ordering the most expensive items on the room-service menu—which, by the way, they deserved, because they rose to this occasion, dealing with a totally incapacitated father, in a foreign country, and managed to keep us all alive.

In the end, we are the sum of our experiences: the choices we've made; the times we put everything on the line, not knowing the outcome; the moments we grow up a little, even when we thought we had no growing up left to do; the accidental psychotropic journeys.

What I remember most about those 24 hours is the feeling the medication gave me. It was like being encased in Jell-O. It took so much motivation to make the slightest physical or mental movement; just rolling over, or moving my arm, or thinking about anything left me completely exhausted. I remember realizing I had to go to the bathroom. It took me half an hour just to make my body get out of the bed, and every step toward the bathroom felt like I was dragging a ball and chain on each foot.

And I realized—for the first time *understood* in a way that I never understood it before—how it felt to be heavily medicated during a psychotic episode. And this was a dose of what Brendan felt every day with his medication.

After the medication wore off, we went to Chichen Itza, two days late. On the bus back to our hotel, I talked with Brendan about the medication, about how it made me feel, and it turned out to be a bonding experience. It was also on that bus ride that I asked Brendan if he thought it might be okay if I wrote a book about mental illness. About the way the disease and the medications make you feel. About how reality can bend in such strange ways that you don't really know what's real anymore. And he said, "Yeah, you should write that. I'd like to read it."

So, while I would never wish an accidental Jell-O-encased anti-psychotic trip on anyone, I'm glad that it happened. Because if it hadn't, I might never have written *Challenger Deep* (2015).

In the end, we are the sum of our experiences: the choices we've made; the times we put everything on the line, not knowing the outcome; the moments we grow up a little, even when we thought we had no growing up left to do; the accidental psychotropic journeys. They inform us, mold us, teach us. "Life's little lessons," as my father would say.

I'd like to close with a quick look at what's on the horizon. In October of 2018, *Dry*, a book I co-wrote with my son Jarrod, will be published by Simon & Schuster. It's a survival story set in Southern California when the water supply actually runs out, and the thin veneer of civilization is stripped away over a period of one desperate week. There's a Holocaust-themed graphic novel coming from Scholastic called *Courage to Dream.* Also a stand-alone novel from HarperCollins called *Game Changer*, about a high school football player whose tackles are so hard, he bounces into alternate dimensions and is forced to see the world and his own life from vastly different perspectives. There's also a new middle-grade series I'm co-writing with Eric Elfman to follow our Accelerati trilogy (2014, 2015, 2016). And, of course, there's the final book of the Arc of a Scythe trilogy (2016, 2018), *The Toll,* due out in September of 2019.

I suppose it's fitting, then, to have received this prestigious honor during a year when the conference theme is "The First Chapter . . ."

. . . because I'm just getting started!

Neal Shusterman *is the* New York Times *bestselling author of more than 30 award-winning books for children, teens, and adults, including The Unwind Dystology, The Skinjacker trilogy,* Full Tilt*, and* Challenger Deep*, which won the National Book Award.* Scythe*, the first book in his newest series, Arc of a Scythe, is a Michael L. Printz Honor Book. The second book in the series,* Thunderhead*, was published in January 2018 and debuted at number 3 on the* New York Times *bestseller list.* Dry*, co-written with his son Jarrod Shusterman, is on sale October 2, 2018, with film rights already sold to Paramount. Neal also writes screenplays for motion pictures and television shows. Visit him at Storyman.com and Facebook.com/NealShusterman.*

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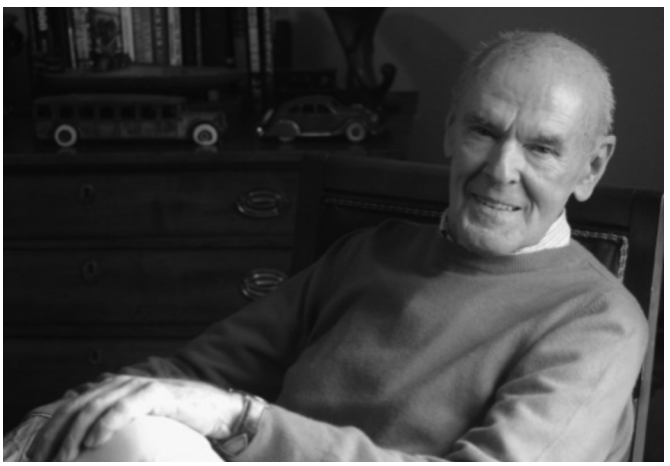
This issue of *The ALAN Review* is dedicated to the life and work of Richard Peck (April 5,1934–May 23, 2018).



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"If you cannot find yourself on the page very early in life, you will go looking for yourself in all the wrong places."