

YALSA EXCELLENCE IN NONFICTION SPEECH

By Rex Ogle, January 2020

When I was a kid, our apartment dumpsters were these immense blue metal 10x10x10 foot cubes. They were on the backside of the parking lot, and anytime you walked past, you had to force back the nausea that rose up from the sour smell of garbage heated under the Texas sun. At least twice a week, it was my job to take out the trash. And on more than one of those occasions, I saw something of value inside.

I'd hop up, into the little window, and step inside. I had to tread gently across garbage bags, distributing my weight just so, to avoid my foot breaking through thin plastic bags into the mulch of rotting food, dirty tissues, and dead cigarette. My only real fear was falling onto a broken beer bottle. Despite the danger, I returned many times—always to search out some potential treasure that might be cleaned and given a second life. Maybe I'd find furniture for my family's empty apartment, or a gently-used toy for my baby brother, or maybe something I could forge into a fun Halloween costume for myself.

Writing a memoir like *Free Lunch* was a lot like dumpster-diving. I was going into a place I didn't really want to—my own past of poverty and family violence—in the hopes of finding something that might make life slightly more bearable. Except here, I couldn't be careful. Here, I was required to throw myself into the worst parts of my past to dig up all the stuff that might form a thesis. Rotting food was replaced by the shame of growing up on welfare. Dirty tissues, the guilt of having survived violence where others hadn't. The ash of cigarettes was the emotional soot that blurred my vision and stunted my growth. And those broken beer bottles I feared? Suffice it to say, memories can be sharper than glass.

When I started writing *Free Lunch*, I thought writing non-fiction would be easier than crafting fiction—because hey, it really happened. But *oh man* was I wrong! There is a specific kind of difficulty in finding a narrative within a life that can't be altered to have a happy ending. To provide an authentic voice, I retraced my steps—watching old movies and reading 80's comics and listening to the same music from autumn 1989. To confirm locations, I returned to Texas, visiting past apartments and schools, friend's homes and favorite restaurants. But easily the hardest part was attempting to attain the complexity of character found in the duality of parents who are equal parts monster and caretaker. For that, I tried to reconnect with my mom and my stepdad, both whom I tend to avoid. Hearing their voices raised the hairs on the back of my neck, but invoked certain accuracies, like my stepdad's stutter and the way my mom's voice becomes shriller with questions about the past.

Putting thoughts into words and arranging them in word documents, I found myself regularly overwhelmed by anxiety and bouts of depression. Finishing a chapter equated with vomiting,

uncontrollable crying, or suffering the most vicious of panic attacks. Glasses of red wine and phone calls with friends helped on occasion, but not often enough.

I couldn't stop though. **My story isn't one that I wanted to write. But it's one that I *needed* to write. Because I wasn't writing *Free Lunch* for me.** I was writing it for all the students currently out there on the same *Free & Reduced Lunch Program* that fed me through my school years. I was writing it for the kids currently living in similar situations, dealing with difficult conditions and trauma at home. And I was writing it for the young readers who needed to feel a little less alone.

Thanks to the generosity of my publisher, **Norton Young Readers**, and incredible Foundations like **An Open Book** and **PEN/Faulkner**, I've already started to meet some of these youth at Title 1 schools. I've talked about my story, signed books, and been received with questions. One girl wanted to know which hand I wrote with—*I'm right-handed*. One boy wanted to know my shoe size—*9 and a ½*. But some questions were harder than others. For example, Why was my stepdad racist? Why did my mom hit me? And maybe the most difficult question I got, Have I ever thought about taking my own life?

I never liked being lied to as a kid, so I don't shy away from these questions. Instead, I try to answer these teenagers with the same direct honesty that I honed while I wrote my memoir. My stepdad learned to be racist from his dad. I don't truly know why my mom hit me, but I suspect because it was her way of making me stronger, to protect me from the things that hurt her when she was a little girl. And as for thoughts of suicide... Yes, I've had them. But god or the universe or fate or whatever you believe in put me here for a reason, and I'm not going to waste my chance to make the world a little bit better, if I can.

And I want to. I come from very little. So starting at the bottom means there's no other direction to reach than up. And I want to help others reach for their ambitions, like those who helped me.

I'm not talking about my stepdad, who called me a wetback and a beaner. I'm not talking about my mom, who told me I would never amount to anything because I dreamed too big and the world hated dreamers. And I'm not talking about my real father, who told me that being a writer was a waste of time, because the real world didn't have time for stories.

The people who helped me were kind, compassionate souls with love in their hearts. First and foremost was my Abuela, who truly came from nothing, from a dirt floor home in Mexico with thirteen brothers and sisters, who pushed me again and again to stay in school, to pursue an education, and encouraged me to read. This is the wonderful woman who took me to my local library, got me my first library card, and told me, "If you ever need to escape, escape here."

And (*como siempre*) she was right. For years to come, when I needed to run away, I went to 1201 Municipal Way, to the Grapevine Public Library. And I ran away often. If bullies were too much, I ran to a book about wizards. If being evicted from our home was scary, I ran to a book

about time travel. If the screaming wouldn't stop, I ran to a book about wars among the stars. And if my black eyes and bruises ached too much, I ran to photo books with cuddly kittens and pouty puppies. The librarians didn't always know my circumstances, but they always provided me with smiles, book recommendations, and a healthy, positive escape. I lost myself in pages, rather than drugs. I threw myself into fantasy, rather than vandalism. I felt the pain of others, rather than focusing on my own.

Libraries were safe havens, and librarians my angels. If I can provide even a fraction of the aid they gave to me, by sharing my story, then I'll consider all the pain of creation worth it. Because without books, without reading, without libraries, I am certain, that I would still be fumbling for treasures among the trash.

To all of the librarians, to ALA, and to YALSA, Thank you. I am in your debt.