



Kenneth Oppel

Airborn
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Printz Honor Book Acceptance Speech

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Thank you to the Young Adult Library Services Association, Booklist, and this year's Printz committee for selecting *Airborn* as a 2005 Honor Book.

This award is all the more wonderful to me because it truly was completely unexpected. I didn't even know I was eligible! One Sunday back in January there I was playing *Dungeons and Dragons* with my kids. The phone rang and someone asked for me with that hint of giddy expectation that usually only telemarketers can have. Also, I heard a fair bit of background chatter and noise, so I was pretty sure someone was going to try and sell me a holiday to Aruba. I'm so glad I didn't hang up.

I wrote *Airborn* after completing three books about bats. I loved my bats, but what a treat it was to write about humans again. They could eat food other than midges and mosquitoes, they wore clothing, they slept in beds – all this struck me as wonderfully novel.

One of the reasons I wrote *Airborn* was that I'd fallen in love with the great passenger airships which flew in the 20's and 30's. Their time was short-lived. They were frail, they tended to crash; and they could never be as fast, safe and efficient as the airplanes that replaced them. But I found the romance of them, and their almost dream-like quality, really entrancing, and I wanted to write a story about a boy who worked aboard an airship – and essentially lived in the sky. And from that initial impulse came the invention of an alternate past, in which airplanes haven't been invented, Titanic-sized airships rule the skies, and momentous discoveries are ready to be made by the daring.

I became very attached to this world, and felt that my characters came to life in a way I, as a writer, hadn't experienced before. But when I finished the book, I felt a bit anxious. I was worried it was just pure adrenalin. I wasn't sure if there were themes or even character development. Was it a gourmet meal or just a Flintstone vitamin? One of my writer friends thought I was being amusingly puritanical and tried to calm me down. He said "Look, what does Jim Hawkins learn at the end of *Treasure Island*? Avoid men with peg legs? Always pack extra cheese?"

So after that I tried to pretend I was Robert Louis Stevenson, even though I'd never actually read any of his books. But I'm pretty up on the storylines from watching the movies.

Fortunately, none of the reviewers denounced me as a fraud. I began to relax a bit. And my very favourite review for *Airborn*, referred to it as "almost absurdly entertaining." And I said to my wife, "That's what I want on my tombstone." She didn't think it was such a hot idea, not very dignified I suppose, but I'm still lobbying hard for it.

Why did I like this epithet so much? Well, naturally I liked the "absurdly" part, with its suggestion that the reviewer could scarcely comprehend the fun she'd just had, and really, was it altogether appropriate? Primarily I liked the "entertaining" part, even though there's often a critical dichotomy between art and entertainment. I think good art should always be entertaining, or at least give pleasure of some sort. And my chief goal as a writer has always been to tell a good story and give my readers a good time.

Nonetheless, I'm cursed with this puritanical streak, that makes me want everything to be about something. It's a terrible affliction. And I knew I wouldn't rest easy until I figured out, for myself, what my book was actually about.

And the answer was: Happiness. All the things, big and little, that we strive for, and that sustain us. (Of course, I'd known this all along, but my subconscious was just holding out on me). For me, my hero's love of airships and his longing for a home in the sky, were all expressions of curiosity and optimism and wonder, and that ongoing, restless search for happiness.

The scientist Johann Kepler, writing 400 years ago, said: "There will certainly be no lack of human pioneers when we have mastered the art of flight. Who would have thought that navigation across the vast ocean is less dangerous and quieter than in the narrow, threatening gulfs of the Adriatic, or the Baltic, or the British straits? Let us create vessels and sails adjusted to the heavenly ether, and there will be plenty of [brave sky travellers] unafraid of the empty wastes."

It was precisely this kind of Ulysean spirit with which I tried to infuse both my heroes, and my novel as a whole. Of the books I've written, *Airborn* is my favourite. I took a great deal of pleasure in writing it; and I'm delighted to know that I've been able to pass on some of that pleasure to you.

Thank you very much for this wonderful award.

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