

Excerpt from Bluestem acceptance speech by Lesléa Newman, author *Hachiko Waits*

Good morning to all.

I am so happy and honored to be here today to accept the Bluestem award for *Hachiko Waits*. This award means so much to me because it is a result of the efforts of librarians who put the book in the hands of the students who read it and voted for it. As an author, it doesn't get much better than that.

People always ask me, where did you get the idea to write *Hachiko Waits*? There are two answers to this question. The first answer is, "I don't know." Or as a friend likes to say, "I went to the idea store" which is a clever way of saying she doesn't know where ideas come from. But the truth is, as a writer, if you're very, very lucky, an idea comes along and taps you on the shoulder. In this case, when I felt a tap on the shoulder, I turned around and saw a paw. A large paw. A very large paw. I had no idea whose paw this was. All I had in my mind was a vague memory of hearing a story about a dog who had waited for a really long time for his master's return. I did not know the story took place in Japan. I did not know the story took place in the 1920's and 1930's. I didn't even remember where or when I had first heard of the story.

As you know, librarians love mysteries. So I went to my local librarian and spoke to the head of the reference department, Mrs. Feeley. Now Mrs. Feeley and I are old friends. I first met her in 1987, when I was researching a short story I was writing that featured Harvey Milk and I've been asking her random questions ever since. So I said to her, "Do you know a story about a dog that waited at a train station for ten years hoping for his master's return?" And she smiled a big smile and said, "Ah, you must be talking about Hachiko." Now if she would have said, "Ah, you must be talking about Shep" I

would have written an entirely different book. Shep lived in Montana, has a similar story, and also has a statue in his honor. But I didn't know this at the time. Mrs. Feeley is the one who put me on the road to Shibuya Station, and when she couldn't answer my questions, she introduced me to another librarian named Miss. Fukumi.

At the time, Miss. Fukumi was a retired reference librarian but as you know, once a librarian always a librarian. Miss Fukumi grew up in Japan in the 1920's and 1930's and was delighted that I was writing a book about a dog she had learned about when she was a child. Being a librarian, Miss Fukumi never throws anything away, and so she had many resources at her fingertips including her own 2nd grade primer from 1936 which included the story of Hachiko. She also dug up an actual photograph of the day Hachi's statue was dedicated at Shibuya Station. So even though she was no longer working as a librarian, she went above and beyond the call to help me with my book, offering to read the whole thing and offer me feedback, which was invaluable. And not to be out done, Mrs. Feeley continued finding information for me long after I was done with my book, or thought I was done with it, because every time Mrs. Feeley called to tell me she had found out something else interesting either about Hachiko or about life in Japan in the 1920's and 1930's, that fact made its way into my story.

So you see, if it wasn't for these two librarians, I never would have been able to write my book and I will always remain eternally grateful to them.

When I was growing up, often my friends told their parents that they were going to the library when really, they were sneaking off to smoke cigarettes, be with their boyfriends or do other things they weren't supposed to do. I also told my parents that I was going to the library, but in my case, I wasn't lying. I really was going to the library.

Because the library was my safe space, my haven, my heaven. I wasn't the pretty girl, or the popular girl, or the athletic girl, or the artistic girl. I was the bookworm. And thank god for the library, where I could go and find any book I wanted, turn to any page and be transported to another world. Libraries mattered when I was growing up and libraries matter now. And I thank you from the bottom of my heart for giving the school children of Illinois who love to read a place of their own.