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Zarrow Award for Young Readers' Literature winner speaks to Webster students

By Corey Jones Tulsa World May 5, 2017 0





Laurie Halse Anderson told a group of Webster High School students Friday that three seemingly unrelated things led her to becoming a best-selling author.

She said a vivid imagination, short attention span and tall stature set her on a path to later writing a historical adventure trilogy about an enslaved girl — the first installment of which was read by a ninth-grade English class at Webster.

Anderson, author of the “Seeds of America” series, is the winner of the Tulsa Library Trust’s 2017 Anne V. Zarrow Award for Young Readers’ Literature.

The Webster students read her book “Chains,” which was awarded the 2009 Scott O’Dell Award for historical fiction and was a 2008 National Book Award finalist. The subsequent books in the “Seeds” series are “Forge” and “Ashes.”

Anderson told the 40-some students gathered that she loves America’s promise — that everyone is created equal — but we aren’t there yet. She said she hopes the students took away a message that if Americans better understand the nation’s history, then some of the remaining barriers will be lowered.

“The history of our nation is important, and (the students) as citizens need to own it so they can make our country what it should be,” she said.

Anderson recalled how as a student her height always meant she was assigned to the back row in class, where her mind wandered as her eyes gazed out the windows.

Overcoming a reading disability, she cultivated that imagination and her interest in history to eventually produce “Seeds of America,” the trilogy that depicts two young sisters’ struggle for freedom amid the American Revolution.

Anderson said the series took 25 years to produce, much of which was spent poring through primary source documents. She read accounts from slaves in the 1700s and 1800s to explore their lives — what it was like to lose family members or liberate themselves.

"They taught me what that felt like," Anderson said.



She described a life-changing moment when, while reading as a student, she stumbled upon the fact that Benjamin Franklin owned slaves his entire adulthood. Unbelieving, she went and found primary sources to corroborate it — letters, tax documents, census data.

"I read that fact, and I went, 'No he didn't. Not my Benjamin. My Benjamin is a good guy,'" Anderson said.

Her inspiration to write "Chains" came from the realization that her country wasn't what she had been told it was. She called slavery "our nation's original sin" but said she came away more patriotic from learning our roots.

She referenced George Washington, who also owned slaves but took the unprecedented step of freeing his through his will after he died.

"Heroes don't have to be perfect; heroes can be flawed," Anderson said.

The Anne V. Zarrow Award is a recognition given by the Tulsa County community to a nationally acclaimed author who has made a significant contribution to literature for young adults, according to the Tulsa Library Trust.



Staff Writer Corey Jones



Corey is a general assignment reporter who specializes in coverage of man-made earthquakes, criminal justice and dabbles in enterprise projects. He excels at annoying the city editor. Phone: 918-581-8359



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