

Excerpts from Natasha Friend's acceptance speech at the NLA/NEMA Conference
October 26, 2007

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Small wonder I became a writer as I spent the vast majority of my childhood in the library. From the age of nine on I could be found skulking around the section of books deemed inappropriate for my age. "Mature readers only"—boldface, double underlined. This was my Mecca—home to "Go Ask Alice," "Catcher in the Rye," and anything and everything by Judy Blume. I have a distinct memory of standing at the checkout desk with my stack of unsuitable reading material while Mrs. Howe peered down at me over the tops of her half-moon glasses, her mouth drawn up like a change purse. "How old are you, Natasha?" "Eleven," I told her, "a very mature eleven." That was the year I doctored a cover for Judy Blume's infamous Forever, paper clipped the good parts, and passed it around my sixth grade classroom until the teacher caught me and called, to my horror, my father, who marched into the school, perused the paper clipped parts, shrugged and said, "At least she's reading. At least she's not watching television."



In the Friend household, television was the root of all evil. To my brother and me, being the only two kids in the state of New York without a TV seemed like the worst form of child abuse. Looking back, of course, I see the method to our parents' madness. They were laying the groundwork. They were guaranteeing that we would become book lovers. And while not every book lover is destined to become a book writer, I knew early on that I had an inner Judy Blume. I was sure that someday I, too, could write a book that girls would sneak around the library trying to find.

I'm only half kidding about the sneaking around part. I had a feeling that by writing Perfect, the story about bulimia targeting a young audience, I would incite some raised eyebrows from adults. Who wants to think about their 13-year-old daughter, an eighth grader, sticking her fingers down her throat after lunch. Not everyone wants to accept or believe that a book like Perfect is important. But it's not a "how to" guide for becoming bulimic, not a reason for fear, but rather an opportunity to jumpstart an open dialogue about some challenging issues, namely body image and eating disorders. I commend the educators and librarians in the state of Nebraska for their wisdom to know the difference and for their willingness to let the students be the judge of whether the message of Isabelle's story matters. I believe that I and any author who chooses to can have an enormous impact on today's young readers by broaching tough, even taboo, topics in an accessible way.

Since Perfect was published, I've received hundreds of emails and letters from girls across the country sharing their stories—some of them heartbreaking, others inspiring, all of them evidence that books can and do make a difference in the lives of readers.

I'm delighted to be here today, and both as a book lover and a book writer, accept the Golden Sower Award. Thank you so much for this honor.