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One Hundred Books: A journey through a century of John Newbery Award books

by
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Introduction

A Gold Coin in the Blue Sky: The Announcement

Frederic Melcher stood in the hot sun of one of the longest summer days of the year, June 22, 1921, holding his hat at his chest, waiting in line to speak at the American Library Association's annual meeting in Swampscott, Massachusetts. Though he waited patiently, the air buzzed with speculation as to what he would announce.

At the annual meeting only a two years earlier, Melcher had introduced "Children's Book Week" to the American Library Association, which he had created with Franklin W. Matthews, chief librarian of the Boy Scouts of America.

The recognition of a Children's Book Week suggested, for the first time, that libraries devote shelf space to children's books and raise awareness of these books in their collections. Children's Book Week offered welcome attention to the growing field of children's literature and was a resounding success. World War I had recently ended, and in the re-forming and strengthening of fractured family units, interest in literature for children was at levels not seen before. Books like May Gibbs' *The Complete Adventures of Snugglepoot and Cuddlepoot* and Norman Lindsay's *The Magic Pudding* were flying off the shelves. As evidenced by their titles, these books for children, though very popular, were not concerned with literary merit as with earlier classics such as *Treasure Island* or *Robinson Crusoe*. Melcher recognized this and strove to make a change.

The final event on the ALA schedule drew much attention because Melcher, already an influential book seller and editor of the popular trade magazine *Publisher's Weekly*, was expected to release the details of a new idea promoting quality in children's literature. More than

three hundred librarians—most of them members of the Children’s Library Association of the ALA—crowded the garage, the only annexed space with sufficient room for all of them. Fans thrummed to keep the hot air at bay as Melcher took a step up to the table on the podium and, placing both hands flat on the lectern, surely said something like, “Ladies and Gentlemen, I am pleased to introduce to you the annual award for distinguished literature for children, the John Newbery Medal!”

Many years later, Melcher recalled what an important event it was, and how he felt in the moment:

As I looked down from the platform at the three or four hundred people, I thought of the power they could have in encouraging the joy of reading among children. I could see that I was sure of having the librarians’ cooperation in Children’s Book Week, but I wanted to go further and secure their interest in the whole process of creating books for children, producing them, and bringing them to the children.¹

Looking back, this day is remarkable; his was a simple idea offered to a receptive audience. Did anyone expect that, a century later, the award would still be in existence, that millions of books would have been sold with this golden seal on its cover, and that many fortunes would have been made from its mark?

¹ Irene Smith, *History of the Newbery and Caldecott Medals* (New York: Viking Press, 1957), 36.

To Read Them All

To all Young Gentlemen and Ladies who are good or intend to be good.

—Dedication to *Goody Two-Shoes* (author anonymous) published by John Newbery, 1765

The first half of my fifth-grade year was a disaster. I attended public schools in Kalamazoo, Michigan, and my childhood was pretty unexceptional: I played soccer, had many friends, and hated math. What I loved more than anything was reading.

At Parkwood-Upjohn elementary, my teacher, Mr. Steele, was loud, overbearing, and carried a sharpened yellow pencil for cataloging and punishing the ever-growing list of Bad Kids in the class. He would assign the Good Kids a worksheet and then, while everyone else was supposed to be concentrating, he would publicly reprimand, berate, and mock these supposedly offending students.

Thankfully, I was on the Good list. But that didn't mean things were actually good for me: there was no classroom library, and all the yelling made the classroom a challenging environment for a young introvert already not doing well in school and completely adrift with long division. I took the opportunity of Mr. Steele's diverted attention to withdraw into my own world. I stopped doing any homework at all and eventually also stopped turning in any classwork. The days at my desk I spent drawing and writing fantasy stories about life in far-off galaxies.

At some point my parents became suspicious of the lack of homework for Mr. Steele's class, and his apparent lack of response to their many notes requesting updates on my progress.

They set up a conference. The principal, Mr. Steele, my parents, and I all sat around a beige kidney table at the back of the classroom. The meeting was short, and all I truly remember was getting in the car for the ride home and my father saying sternly, “You’re not going back to *that* school.”

Things changed dramatically for me then, and the second half of fifth grade turned out to be magical.

The Monday after the conference, I began Kalamazoo Academy, one of the few private schools in the city. “Welcome, Tyler,” the smiling teacher dressed in soft brown corduroy greeted me. *How does she already know my name?* I wondered. The place was kind of a miracle: students continued to work diligently when Mrs. Belonax stepped away to greet me at the door. For the two years I went to K.A., my world opened up.

There were only twelve kids in my class, so the teacher made sure I understood each step of long division before moving on. No one yelled. Most importantly, there were books. Hundreds of them. “You can read any book you’d like,” Mrs. Belonax smiled, noticing my eyes scanning the shelves, mouth agape. “You just have to write a one-page summary when you finish each one so that other kids can get a sense of the book.” I became a sponge. I must have written a hundred book reports that year.

Books saved my life. I don’t mean that lightly; if I hadn’t delved deeply into literature and reading anything available, there might still be that fifth-grade kid falling farther and farther behind, a skydiver with a faulty parachute.

And I was a strong reader as a kid. Not the best in my class, but my love of reading grew with constant attention. I loved being immersed in a fantasy world, a movie, with characters playing out scenes page-by-page before my eyes. To me, it wasn’t important who wrote the

books or where they came from or whether they had won any prizes. I loved them for the stories, the worlds they created in my mind, and all the characters I wanted to imitate.

One of my favorite characters was Jessie, the fifth-grade protagonist of *Bridge to Terabithia*. Jogging was a new thing in the early 1980s and it hit me at just the right age. In the book, Jessie was obsessed with running and so was I. Pouring over the details of his runs, I found myself slipping away, inhabiting the rhythms of his footfalls, becoming the character himself.

The story turns on a tragic event: in a heavy rain, Jessie's best friend Leslie slips on a log bridge at the entrance to their fort, Terabithia, and falls to her death. Each member of our class had a copy of the book and when Jessie died, the response seismic. Holding the book in front of my face, I wept silently, like Jessie trying to make sense of the loss. When I finally glanced around the cover to see if anyone had noticed my tears, I found the whole class crying, including Mrs. Belonax.

That same book magic overcame me often. I lost myself in the mind-control experiments of *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of N.I.M.H.* and became giddy at the prospect of living full-time in the Museum of Natural History in New York City like the children in *From the Mixed-Up Files of Dr. Basil E. Frankweiler*. But over the years, the power of those stories waned, and I did as most kids do: I forgot the books of my youth, leaving them to the next generation, and moved on to the science fiction of Isaac Asimov and book reports for *The Scarlett Letter* and *Red Badge of Courage*. Not until many years later did I notice that *Bridge to Terabithia* and many of my other favorite books had won the Newbery Award.

Almost two decades passed before I read my next Newbery book. It was my first-year teaching sixth grade in Campbell, California. By the end of the first month, I was finding teaching to be a much bigger job than I had anticipated. I was constantly rushing to get copies

made, rushing to eat lunch, rushing to pick up my students after gym. And the worst part was that all of this rushing around was peripheral to the actual task of teaching. Forget about Friday; by the middle of the week I was exhausted.

Until one Wednesday when things changed. I had dismissed the class in a flurry and was now standing in the center of the room enjoying the quiet, happy to have made it through one more day. A stack of papers teetering at a ridiculous height on my desk warned of many hours of grading ahead. Before I began that work, I decided to do something—*anything*—else and strolled over to the classroom library in the corner of the room, a makeshift area of Goodwill bookshelves anchoring an enormous, well-worn thrift store rug. I picked out a book and leafed through it. I gave it a couple sentences, set it down and grabbed another, this one sporting a round gold seal on its cover. I'd seen the seal before, though at the time I didn't know specifically what it meant.

The book I held was Louis Sachar's 1999 Newbery-winner, *Holes*. Hot off the press, it featured prominently in student book order forms. The cryptic first line hooked me: "There is no lake at Camp Green Lake."

Intrigued, I read quickly the first page, then burned through the entire first chapter, and, without a pause, the second. As the story of Stanley Yelnats and the mystery of his forced internment at a lake-bed desert began to unfold, I found myself sitting down on the small donated couch in the library corner. By the time I learned why Stanley and all the other boys were forced to dig endless cylindrical holes exactly five feet deep and five feet in circumference in the desert, I was smitten. With the realization that Stanley himself was integral to the mystery of what the camp warden needed to find out in that desert, I was sitting bolt upright, then, by Chapter 20, leaning forward, elbows on my knees. By Chapter 30, the sun had begun to set

outside my school. For the first time since fifth grade, I had become lost again in that special and fantastical world of children's books.

A few hours later, it was dark. Chapter 49, then —Bam! — all the pieces came together in Chapter 50. I closed the book with a sigh and shook my head in that way you do when you've read an A-1 whopper of a tale. My ground floor classroom was at the corner of the building, overlooking the parking lot. The neighborhood dog walkers must have wondered about the lone car in the lot, the single classroom still illuminated. And if they'd looked in through the windows, about the teacher sitting alone on a little beat-up couch, reading.

I returned the book to the shelf with a student already in mind to whom I would recommend it the very next day, locked up, and walked out to my car. Later that year, trying to teach a Newbery award-winning book would backfire spectacularly, but at that moment I was soaring.

Over the years, I have had a number of reading epiphanies, but this was a big one: that as an adult I found a children's book profound, complex, and funny.

You might not know the John Newbery Medal by name, but you might know it by sight, and it's a very good bet that you already know some of the stories that have won. *A Wrinkle in Time*, *Charlotte's Web*, *The Tale of Despereaux*, *Souder*, *Call It Courage*, *The Voyages of Doctor Doolittle*, *Hatchet*, *A Cricket in Times Square*, *My Side of the Mountain*, *Old Yeller*: each of these books has won or been a runner up for the Newbery Medal. Teachers are definitely aware; the award is featured prominently in Scholastic book clubs and at school book fairs.

It's now fifteen years since that late afternoon reading alone on my classroom couch. I've taken a two-year break from teaching and gone back to grad school for a degree in creative writing.

"Immerse yourself in stories," a writer friend advises before I leave. "Any stories." And I do. I'm studying creative nonfiction, so I'm making my way through *In Cold Blood*, *Into the Wild*, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, and am most of the way through the *100 Most Influential Articles in Long Form Journalism*. In my spare time, I read interviews with Susan Sontag, Ira Glass, Dave Eggers, and Michel Foucault, fascinated by the interesting narrators and their various journeys towards truth. But I need an escape from the intellectualization of narrative. I need my own investigation, something that engages me the way books used to when I was a child. Marveling at a writer's ability to "capture dialog" wasn't doing it for me. I wanted to be so immersed in a story that I forgot I was turning the pages. I wanted my own mental movie to be projected across my thoughts, one populated by characters invented by the author.

Much as I grabbed *Holes* off the shelf all those years ago, now I find myself holding another Newbery winner, *Missing May*. It's an ephemeral ninety-eight-page novella about a young girl who loses her only surviving maternal parent, Aunt May. The girl, Summer, and her uncle Ob try to deal with their loss in a number of gently humorous but affecting ways. In the end, they decide to plant whirligigs in May's old garden plot, her spirit the wind that twirls them. It may seem like a soft landing for a short book, but it had me at the edge of tears. It could have been a real memoir and I found myself sucked in to this little book for a few different reasons. First, I wasn't "studying." I reveled in the welcome distraction, and when I finish the book, I realized: These Newbery stories are the ones I want to investigate.

As I wrapped up *Missing May*, I found myself reflecting on the other Newberys I've read: How did these writers capture the child's perspective so well? How did they compose literature with so much insight? Were they all this good? How many were there? The more I found myself questioning, the less I realized I knew about this award. Who was the namesake, John Newbery? Who voted on this thing? When did it start? It was in the midst of all these swirling questions that one in particular grasped hold of me: What's the story of this award?

Over the years I have continued to read the Newbery Gold Medal winners, one by one. Recently, I decided that it was time to take on the whole thing, to read all one hundred. At the time, I had no sense of what that would entail, only that I would read every one.

One Hundred Books

I began reading. I printed out the list of the Newbery gold medal winners and immediately checked off the few books I knew from childhood or had read over the years. Then, in quick succession I read *Strawberry Girl* (1946) and *Miracle on Maple Hill* (1957). They're both simple stories of families moving from one region to another in the US and what problems or successes they encounter carving out their lives in the new place. Immediately I worried: what if all the medal winners are bland children's books like these? What if I'd already read the best of the best?

I had no particular plan for reading them, only that I'd look over the list and decide what was next. For the third book I decided to go back to the early years of the award and chose the 1928 winner, *Gay-Neck: The Story of a Pigeon* by Dhan Gopal Mukerji. The book starts off as a simple slice-of-life portrait of an Indian pigeon. It didn't really hit me until page thirty-five that anything was amiss; it was here that I came across a particularly problematic sentence. After

reading the first two books quickly, with only an occasional word that might challenge a young reader, *Gay-Neck* took vocabulary to another level. In the story, the narrator has traveled with his iridescent-throated pigeon across India to the Himalayas. On his first glimpsing the mountains, he reflects: “Their inviolate sanctity is something precious that remains a perpetual symbol of divinity.”

There’s nothing wrong with this sentence, grammatically. And it’s certainly evocative, and a strong spiritual response to the highest of earthly peaks. The problem here is audience. Ostensibly, this book is written for children. Having been an elementary classroom teacher and reading specialist for the last twenty years, I can say confidently that there are five different words here that the majority of fifth graders do not know. Precious might be known by some, Symbol by some others, but Divinity? Perpetual? Sanctity? *Inviolate*?

A vocabulary beyond the elementary years was not the first and only problem I would encounter with Newberys. But I found as I mentioned the Newbery award to those around me that the award has a bigger challenge to surmount: other than elementary teachers, librarians, and students, most people don’t even know the award exists. Or, if they do know about it, their knowledge is critical, superficial, and generalized.

“Oh, those are the books about White People,” said a friend.

“Those books are old,” said another.

Those two comments weren’t simply the major concerns raised: they were the *only* concerns. Mostly my question elicited furrowed brows, and “What’s the Newbery award for again?” Occasionally someone would follow up with “Isn’t that the award for picture books?”

For one hundred years, the John Newbery Medal Award has been given for the “Most distinguished contribution to American literature for children,” and each year one book’s cover is

emblazoned with the Award's coveted gold seal. It was the first children's book award in the world. Under the auspices of the American Library Association, a group of librarians and distinguished scholars in the field of children's literature convene and select one winner from all the children's books published that year in the US.

Simply being the oldest award for children's literature isn't sufficient for people to care. If that were the case, the award for most-efficient horse carts would still be around. As I have made my way through these books and the history of the award itself, it has become clear to me that not only has the award helped maintain a very high standard for literature for children, some of the figures involved in the Newbery award helped define how we view childhood itself.

When I began reading the books "officially," I was jazzed; I chewed through a dozen books fueled by the energy of a new project, a new challenge. A few years earlier, I made it a mission to watch all the Oscar-winning Best Picture movies, which felt like a similar task. With the Newberys, what I learned right off the bat is that though they are awarded to children's literature, the books themselves are much longer than I had anticipated, often over 250 pages.

This is not my first foray into children's and young adult books. I've been involved in children's education since 1999, and I've been a Reading Specialist since 2011, working in elementary classrooms, as an instructional coach for teachers, and designing literacy plans for a variety of schools. Since reading my first Newbery books, I've taken a professional dive into the world of reading. I have a pretty strong sense of what makes a book good.

What makes it good is the story itself. Some authors attempt narrative high-wire acts, which can be commendable or at least interesting, but such feats are nothing if they are not in service to a good story. The stories are what prompted me to investigate the genesis of the award

and how it developed through the century. Twenty years after pulling *Holes* off the shelf one day after school, I'm ready to share my journey with you.

Who is John Newbery?

“Newbery is a remarkable man, for I know not whether he has written or read most books.”

—Dr. Samuel Johnson (John Rowe Townsend, ed., *John Newbery and His Books*, xi)

John Newbery invented childhood.

It’s a big claim, but after examining his life, I found myself arriving at this conclusion.

First, let’s start with the man: John Newbery lived to the age of fifty-four, spanning the years 1713 to 1767. He married, raised six children, and published a wide variety of books, including children’s books and those of Samuel Johnson. He was English. He was known to be friendly.

There are no diaries or journals of his left behind, no portraits or drawings of his visage, and we know very little about his early life, only that he was born to a farmer in Berkshire, England. Because he was a man of letters, we can assume he must have had some education, and we know he apprenticed at a print shop. Other than this biographical outline, his history is, by and large, lost to time. What we do know about his life is astonishing.

The Father of Children’s Literature

Widely considered the first modern children's book, Newbery’s first publication, *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book, intended for the Amusement of Little Master Tommy and Pretty Miss Polly with Two Letters from Jack the Giant Killer*, arrived in 1744. A mixture of rhymes, picture stories, and games, it is recognized as the first publication with the express aim of giving enjoyment to children.

Life in Newbery’s England of 1744 brimmed with new ideas and conquests. The Enlightenment was at its apex; the notion that the universe could be rationally unwrapped of its

mysteries and cataloged brought excitement. It was in this context that Newbery wrote *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book*.

There had been children's stories prior this, the most famous being the stories of *Mother Goose*, which has its origins in Charles Perrault's 1695 book of the same name. And before that, John Amos Comenius created what is considered to be the first picture book for children in 1658, a kind of illustrated encyclopedia called *Orbis Pictus* ("The World in Pictures") with woodblock prints and pictures of all manner of things. But though *Mother Goose* and *Orbis Pictus* and other stories predate Newbery, they were considered folk tales, too rough and ready for children's consumption, or, in *Orbis*' case, having no story at all. Whereas *Orbis Pictus* seems to have been a one-off text with nothing more known about the author, Newbery went on to publish dozens of books and earn a very good living doing so. Other stories for children during Newbery's time consisted of writings that were explicitly lesson-based. Whether religious instruction, moral guidance, or lessons in early literacy, these works were by no means intended to be enjoyable or entertaining.

So it was that the first actual children's storybook, one that was marketed as "pleasure reading," was Newbery's 1744 *Little Pretty Pocket-Book*. Though John Newbery was an advocate for children through his promotion of children's literature, there was something in it for him too: money. Simply publishing literature for children did not a market make, so Newbery set about creating that market himself. He capitalized on a number of child-specific features in the books: he printed *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book* in a smaller, 'child' size format, with covers of bright colors and pages engraved with flowers. For boys, the book was sold with a ball, for girls, a pincushion. This "gift with purchase" has proven to be a powerful inducement for children; it's

still employed in McDonald's Happy Meals. The effects of these marketing insights were immediate, and the book quickly went through dozens of editions.

There were other innovations: in the text of a Newbery book it was not uncommon to find an advertisement for upcoming book releases, or references to one of Newbery's products as a merchant, *Dr Robert James's Fever Powder*. Though there was a growing market for stories for children, it was Newbery's savvy promotions that maintained the groundswell. From this first book, Newbery went on to publish dozens more titles over the following decades.

As a side note, the *Pretty Pocket-Book* book also includes a woodcut print of a ball game, with a rhyme entitled "Base-Ball." This struck me as interesting, so I investigated it. Indeed, this is credited as being the first known print reference to "baseball." (It is still widely played, though known in England by its current name, "Rounders.")

John Newbery: Bookseller

The first reference to Newbery appears in a collection of essays on early English book publishers. Printed in 1865, *Shadows of Old Booksellers* by Charles Knight focuses on a dozen or so different publishers/booksellers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Available in the public domain, the copy I found online is a scan of the original book. The scans are high-resolution pictures of the pages themselves, so as you scroll through the document, you can see creases on the yellowed pages. While the reader cannot physically touch the book, seeing a scan in such high-resolution is still a remarkable experience. It's in full color, so the scans of the antiquated pages seem almost real. Because the writing is over 150 years old, the writing can

seem clunky to modern ears, filled with references to quirky publishers and booksellers whom Knight calls “those that make literary progress, in its commercial relations.”²

The book opens with a portrait of Thomas Guy, an eighteenth-century bookseller and man “of strong reason,” who amassed a large fortune on stock speculation. Selling cheap Bibles became his entrée into book publishing. It is not until the tenth chapter that John Newbery appears at all. But he comes in with a roar. Knight reports:

In the ordinary course of nature I began to put away childish things, and Mr. Newbery’s little books—although my father had a drawer full of them very smartly bound in gilt paper—had lost their old attraction. Priceless now would be this collection, mixed up with horn-books—a single copy of which is one of the rarest relics of the olden time.³

Of course, they are even harder to find now. But what is important here is not their value on the market, but their value in the lives of children.

Other well-known books have presaged Newbery’s *A Little Pretty Pocket Book*, such as Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) or Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726), but these were not written for children to read, though they may have swept up children in their fantastical voyages and adventures. What differentiated Newbery’s books was the intentionality, the direct and scaled effort to inform, educate, and entertain young minds. The difference between his books and what came before him was development of a true publishing house devoted to the genre of children’s books. *Shadows of Old Booksellers* refers to this idea obliquely: “There is nothing more remarkable in Mr. Newbery’s little books than the originality of their style. There have been attempts to approach its simplicity—its homeliness. Great authors have tried their hands at imitating its clever adaptation to the childish intellect, but they have failed.”⁴

² Charles Knight, *Shadows of Old Booksellers* (London: Bell and Daldy, 1865), 3.

³ *Ibid.*, 233.

⁴ Knight, *Shadows*, 240.

In the most comprehensive book on his life that I could find, *John Newbery and His Books*, John Rowe Townsend offers an overview of Newbery's life and excerpts from other biographies in which Newbery appears. With only a handful of accounts, it's a slim volume. A common theme in these scant texts is that almost all of what is written about Newbery is reported third-hand, but that "the consensus among these [writers over the centuries] is clear. It is agreed that he was energetic, optimistic, and benevolent—though his benevolence was not on a scale to impede him amassing a fortune." Townsend credits Newbery with gaining such wealth by offering a superior product, and in doing so with laying the groundwork for future publishers.

There is one existing historical biography of Newbery, *A Bookseller of the Last Century*, by Charles Welsh, but it is now long out of print and difficult to obtain. It was also written more than a century after his death. Townsend, in the preface to *John Newbery and His Books*, claims that Welsh's book is not even worth reprinting: "Some of it is inaccurate, a great deal is rambling or redundant and there are facts that Welsh does not appear to have known."⁵

Apparently, Welsh constructed a picture of Newbery primarily from references in writings about other booksellers. With so many primary documents lost, John Newbery remains largely unknown.

Newbery's Books

He who ne'er learns his A, B, C
For ever will a Blockhead be.

—*The Royal Primer*, John Newbery, 1751

Though we know little about Newbery the man, the impact of his books is well documented. Newbery published dozens of books for children, some with gifts, some without,

⁵ John Rowe Townsend, ed. *John Newbery and His Books: Trade and Plumb-cake Forever, Huzza!* (The Scarecrow Press: Metuchen, NJ, 1994), p.xiii.

but all with colorful covers and gilt bindings. The titles give a description of the contents. Representative examples include *A Pretty Book of Pictures for little Masters and Misses: Or, Tommy Trip's History of Birds and Beasts; with a familiar description of each in Verse and Prose* (1752), *A Collection of Pretty Poems, for the Amusement of Children three feet high* (1756), and *Food for the Mind: Or, A New Riddle Book compiled for the use of the great and the little good Boys and Girls* (1758).

Words like “adorable,” and “precious” come to mind when reading these titles. An avuncular air permeates the writing, a role Newbery cultivated as bookseller and author. Sadly, these books were generally not preserved and are consequently extremely rare. I found out through the British Library website that there are no known first editions of *A Pretty Little Pocket Book*. Nor are there any second editions. The earliest surviving copy of this very popular book is the tenth edition, dated 1760.⁶

Given that the books were made for young children, the same population that currently mashes peanut butter into keyboards, it makes sense to me that few of the original books have survived. But why hasn't the writing itself remained?

Perhaps, though the marketing of the books was remarkable, the ideas that captivate children fall out of fashion. *A Pretty Little Pocket Book* is still being reprinted by a small press, much to my surprise, and I was able to pick up a copy printed by Dodo Press (“specializing in the publication and distribution of rare and out-of-print books”). The back jacket claims that *A Pretty Little Pocket Book* had twenty-nine editions by 1800 alone. It was certainly popular in its day.

⁶ Collection Items, *A Pretty Little Pocket Book*. *British Library Website*, United Kingdom, March 22, 2019 <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/a-pretty-little-pocket-book>

The opening line of *A Pretty Little Pocket Book* is “The grand Design in the Nurture of Children, is to make them *Strong, Hardy, Healthy, Virtuous, Wise, and Happy*; and these good Purposes are not to be obtained without some Care and Management in their Infancy (sic).”⁷

The pages that follow are dedicated to the parenting of children in this light and comforting tone. As a reading specialist, I found the children’s rhymes themselves fascinating; Newbery employed a simplified vocabulary, little text per page, and connections to a base of knowledge young children can access easily. These three qualities are indicative of a thoughtful creator, and I would be interested to know more about Newbery’s process in crafting this book. Did he consult with educators at the time? Did he work from a certain philosophy on learning? We will never know. Only the writing remains. Here’s the first rhyme, “Chuck-Farthing:”

*As you value your Pence,
At the Hole take your Aim;
Chuck all safely in,
And you’ll win the Game.*

Newbery's stories were intended to provide lessons and may seem didactic by today’s standards, but they were very popular and enjoyed by children for many decades after their publication. Newbery wanted to present the world as a meritocracy, the chief good to be fostered being the child’s character. Most Newbery stories concern a young person who works hard and, as a result, becomes prosperous.

John Locke, an English philosopher writing a century before Newbery, argued that children should be considered reasoning beings, and in the spirit of the Enlightenment, Newbery emphasized this. Newbery’s *A Pretty Little Pocket-Book* included a great variety of genres of instruction, with its lessons, games, and riddles, but there was a backbone to it all: good action and good character are always rewarded.

⁷ John Newbery, *A Pretty Little Pocket Book* (Dodo Press: Gloucester, UK, 2009), Preface.

Newbery Books in America

Though John Newbery did not live long enough to hear of a place called the United States of America, his books, surprisingly, did. According to John Rowe Townsend, Newbery's *Royal Primer* was the first of his books to be reprinted in America. It was published and "improved" by Philadelphia publisher James Chattin in 1753 to include regional and dialect connections to America. This updated *Royal Primer* was more suited to American tastes, and the book was an important influence on late eighteenth-century editions of *The American Primer*, one of the most widely used of all American text books.⁸

Other enterprising book publishers in the early US reprinted Newbery's and many other authors' works, but these appropriations took place in the Wild West of copyright; simply by changing title pages and "adapting" the books with minor changes to reflect American dialect and regional concerns, these publishers were able to print the books with impunity. Suing for intellectual copyright infringement was not a major British concern at the time.

Newbery Invents Childhood

In the long course of human history, a discrete period of life called childhood, and the pleasures and privileges now associated with it, turns out to have been a rather recent invention. A precursor to it might have been John Locke's 1690 essay *Concerning Human Understanding*. Here, Locke proposes that human consciousness comes into life as a blank slate, onto which family, society, and culture inscribe their knowledge. At the time, children were seen primarily

⁸ Early Children's Literature, Digital Guides. *Birmingham Public Library online*, England, March 22, 2019. (http://www.ampltd.co.uk/digital_guides/early_childrens_literature_parts_1_to_3/publishers-note.aspx) Accessed 4/1/2019.

as low-functioning, miniature adults who from an early age were put to work to support the household.

Not long after Locke's essay, French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau brought to life the idea of childhood as a separate stage of development. In one of his most important works, *Emile, or On Education* (1762), he ruminated on the separate-ness of a child's developing intellect: "We can never put ourselves in the shoes of children; we cannot fathom their thoughts, we lend them ours; and always following our own reasoning, we stuff their heads with extravagance and error."⁹ At the time, this was radical theorizing. The book, for religious reasons, was widely burned upon publication. Fortunately, many others saw value in his thoughts, and Locke's educational theories went on to form the basis of French public schooling after the Revolution. If Locke established the territory known as childhood in his theories, it was John Newbery who brought it color and rhyme and spoke directly to those experiencing it.

⁹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, or Education* (Emile, ou de l'Education) (New York: Basic Books, 1979) ,Bk. 3

How Did This Award Come to Be?

A young boy stands beside a seated young girl with outstretched arms, both welcoming the gift of a book from a man standing tall between them. The children's arms signal expectation; though we do not know the nature of the books or the man gifting them, we know that they are desired. The man smiles as he lays a hand on the boy's shoulder.

This simple scene is stamped onto a gold disc. This is the Newbery Medal. The scene with the three figures is used to represent the Newbery Honor books, a "runner-up" designation. The obverse is used to represent the single winner of the Newbery Award and it consists of an open book, its binding a torch illuminating these words: "*For the most distinguished contribution to American Literature for children.*"

This shiny gold seal on the cover is often the first thing you notice when looking at a Newbery winner, and it is the design of René Paul Chambellan. Though not a major figure of the movement, Chambellan was an architectural sculptor of the Art Deco era. You've probably seen some of his work without knowing it; he designed some of the tritons and dolphins in the Rockefeller Center fountains and the gargoyles that adorn the Chicago Tribune building. Though large parts of the story of the creation of the Newbery medal are lost, what remains are the details: that the Newbery award creator, Frederic Melcher, commissioned Chambellan's medal sight unseen. Given Melcher's haste to launch the award, it is not surprising that the medal's design was not completed by the date of the announcement of the award and that consequently Melcher could only allude to its existence.

Frederic Melcher

The year 1910 marked a time of great change and innovation; the Age of Modernism was underway. Maria Montessori's educational model was catching on in the US, Jean Piaget became director of the Rousseau Institute in Geneva, the site of his most important contributions to developmental psychology, and in 1910, Frederic Melcher, originator of the Newbery award, married children's book author Marguerite Fellows.

Though his love of children's literature had developed in earlier years, this mutual interest solidified his commitment to developing public outreach for children's books. Over the next decade, Melcher went on to become the editor of *Publisher's Weekly*, which he would direct for four decades, and as he climbed through those ranks he became a strong ally in developing children's literature as a viable economic endeavor for publishers. For the first time the trade magazine's pages offered a whole section devoted to these works.

The year 1910 would be an auspicious one for children's literature, as children born that year came into the world in the very midst of a revolution of thought and idea. Twelve years later, on December 27th, 1922, Frederic Melcher submitted the paperwork to the American Library Association confirming Hendrik Willem van Loon's *The Story of Mankind* for acceptance as the winner of the very first John Newbery medal. A rollicking tale of history and adventure for young adults, Van Loon's award-winning story fell into the hands of the nation's twelve-year-old children, then entering sixth grade, the perfect age for his tale.

For the next six decades, Frederic Melcher's presence in children's literature in general and the Newbery in particular, loomed large. He contributed scholarly articles and deliberated on the Newbery selections. And, like Newbery himself, he devoted columns in his magazine to forthcoming books for children and issues surrounding the production of such literature. For

example, in 1939 he published an editorial in *Publisher's Weekly* entitled, *Men Wanted*. Here Melcher engages a discussion with authors arguing about whether children's books have become too feminized. After hearing from Howard Pease, author of many "boy's" books, Melcher weighs in: "In a representative list of books for children issued in the past dozen years, prepared by Ann Carroll Moore, two-thirds of the books were written by women. One of the objectives before the publishers of children's books may well be to find more men who have something to say and know how to write to compete in the field where women writers now outnumber them two to one."¹⁰ The next decade took a decidedly male bent; five of the next ten Newbery winners were male authors, and seven of the ten are books squarely aimed at boys.

Though he penned many such editorials and shared his opinion on books far and wide, little has been written of Melcher's life. In following an internet crumb that referred to a Melcher autobiography, I found myself on an antique bookseller's site looking at an obscure, privately-printed publication entitled *On Becoming Acquainted with Books*, author Frederic Melcher. Originally published in an equally obscure 1945 volume, the essay was reissued "on [the] occasion of the presentation of The Regina Medal of The Catholic Library Association to Frederic G. Melcher, at a luncheon, Pittsburgh Hilton Hotel, April 23, 1962."¹¹

Though only thirteen pages in length, I thought it might be my only insight into who Melcher was as a person and his interest in children's books. I was right, but the information did not come cheap. I found myself pressing the Purchase button for the first collectible book I've ever bought in my life.

A week later, a manila envelope arrived, containing a short volume within an ornately designed paisley cover. In this slim document, Melcher talks through his life, reminiscing on a

¹⁰ *Men Wanted*, *Publisher's Weekly*, 1939.

¹¹ Frederic Melcher, *On Becoming Acquainted with Books* (Privately Printed, 1962).

variety of experiences: the family library (“not large but it had additions at Christmas and birthdays”); first experiences with theater (*Little Lord Fauntleroy* on a rare trip to Boston); and his precocious academic rise (skipping two grades and entering high school at the age of twelve).

But most interesting to me was his recollection of time spent at his local library:

As I was a busy reader of almost anything that came to hand, this branch [Newton, Massachusetts] was a place I frequently visited even though its facilities were not what a town demands today. In the early (eighteen) nineties there was no special service for children . . . and we took what we could get.¹²

Clearly, he hungered for good books to read and devoured them when available. The essay wraps up with Melcher letting go of his dreams of becoming a chemist or civil engineer and taking his first \$4-a-week job “in the book business” as a gangly sixteen-year-old, naïve to the possibilities of his future.

Books were not his only passion. Melcher was also very active in the Unitarian Universalist church. To recognize his work in publishing books on progressive religious themes and fighting censorship, the Unitarian Universalist church established the Frederic G. Melcher Book Award as a memorial in 1964. According to their website, the award is given annually to the work “judged to have made the most significant contribution to religious liberalism.” Topics deemed appropriate for the award include: “racial justice, liberation movements, international peace, and civil liberties.”

Melcher also received the Regina Medal at age 83, a prestigious recognition by the Catholic Library Association of his publishing work in Children’s Literature. It was here that the brief biography was presented, and it perfectly bookended Melcher’s professional career in 1962. Less than a year later on March 9, 1963, Melcher passed away.

¹² Frederic Melcher, *On Becoming Acquainted with Books* (Privately Printed, 1962).

The Connection

There are many ways in which Frederic Melcher and John Newbery are cut from the same cloth, not the least of which is the ways they engaged the literary world. Noted author and publisher Christopher Morley, who worked closely with Melcher, described his work ethic thus: “The number of books, schemes, ideas, transactions, ceremonies, speeches, promotions, dinners, awards, conferences, editorials, articles, that have passed through his (Melcher’s) mind, leaving, apparently, no trace of erosion or corrugations on his brow,” wrote Morley, “stagger me to contemplate.”¹³ All this while also being the editor at *Publisher’s Weekly*. He was a busy man even without the Newbery award.

This strain of workaholicism was evident in John Newbery, as well. Using the pseudonym of Jack Whirller, Samuel Johnson described Newbery as a whirlwind, “whose business keeps him in perpetual motion.”¹⁴

Newbery was constantly publishing new books; dozens of popular children’s books, many books for adults, all while relentlessly promoting his *Dr. James Fever Foot Powder*, a fever cure-all to which he had obtained the patent. In the children’s book *Goody Two Shoes*, a character’s father passes away because he was “seized with a violent fever in a place where Dr James Fever Powder was not to be had.”¹⁵

The fact that both Newbery and Melcher were innovative and worked tirelessly at their profession of children’s literature is notable, but most interesting to me is that both of these men rose to prominence embodying the spirit of the age from which they came: Newbery recognized

¹³ Irene Smith Green, “The Newbery-Caldecott Medals: Legacy to Children’s Literature,” *Horn Magazine*, March 1964.

¹⁴ Samuel Johnson. *Selected Essays*. David Womersley, ed. London: Penguin Classics, 2003.

¹⁵ John Dawson Carl Buck, *The Motives of Puffing: John Newbery’s Advertisements 1742–1767*, *Studies in Bibliography*, Vol. 30: p.196. 1977.

childhood in the full throes of the Enlightenment; Melcher established excellence in the same pursuit during the Modern age. Both were industrious, but whereas Newbery established the territory of childhood and new ways to engage children, it was Melcher who sought to transform children's books into literature.

Melcher Meets Newbery

Melcher was a passionate book man and focused on promoting literature for children, but there seems to have been a specific event that took place on his way to Swampscott, MA on June 21, 1921 that will forever link Melcher and Newbery.

Considering their parallel histories, it makes sense that Melcher picked a fellow book-seller such as John Newbery for the symbol and honoree of an award. Melcher was undoubtedly aware of Newbery's role in children's publishing; he had apparently just finished reading the aforementioned *Shadows of Old Booksellers* by Charles Knight before his big announcement of the award at the ALA meeting in Swampscott, MA.¹⁶

What seems strange is that Melcher did not explicitly connect the award in any way to John Newbery's legacy; there's no mention of his work directly, and even the 125-page outline of the rules and regulations and history of the Newbery award document makes no mention of Newbery other than a brief three-paragraph biography on the front plate.

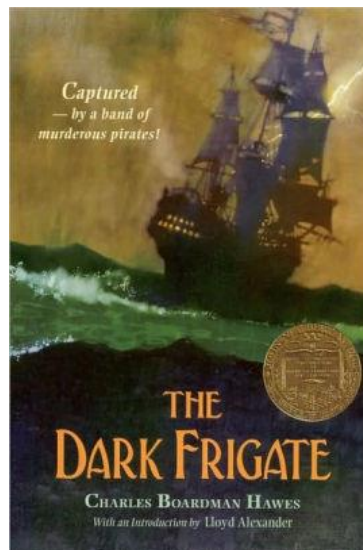
There remains one tantalizing final clue in the write-up of a book for sale at Biblio.com: a re-printing of the *Pretty Little Pocket Book*, book for its 200th anniversary in 1944. Publisher: Frederic Melcher.

¹⁶ Irene Smith. *A History of the Newbery and Caldecott Medals*. New York: Viking Press, 1957.

The Best Newbery Winners You've Never Heard of

Truly great writing can achieve transcendence, a quality that keeps readers returning to Nobel prize-winning authors, or to influential books read in college. Unfortunately, children's literature does not enjoy a similar vitality; the great books one reads at ten years old are often dismissed in the eager search for something more challenging, or more popular. This perspective is understandable as a developmental function of youth, but it means that much great writing is left behind, forgotten.

Because the Newbery Award winning books are so meticulously catalogued by the American Library Association, the entire list of books is easily accessible and almost all of them remain in print. As a result, there are many hidden gems, stories lost to time by changing literary tastes. In reading all the books, several stories have stuck out, stories that have missed the mainstream mass-marketing success but are nonetheless great books. I've chosen four to share with you as Newbery Winners You've Never Heard Of.



1924 The Dark Frigate

Author: Charles Boardman Hawes

Illustrator: Warren Chappell
Country: United States
Genre: Historical novel
Publisher: Little, Brown
Publication date: 1924
Place of Publication:
Length: 264 pages

Adventure on the High Seas: *The Dark Frigate* 1924 Winner

Full Title: *The Dark Frigate; wherein is told the story of Philip Marsham who lived in the time of King Charles and was bred a sailor but came home to England after many hazards by sea and land and fought for the King at Newbury and lost a great inheritance and departed for Barbados in the same ship, by curious chance, in which he had long before adventured with the pirates.*

Story Overview

Quick: a group of pirates has taken over your ship and killed your beloved Captain. That dastardly pirate assassin becomes the new leader of the ship and likes your pluck. He promotes you to first mate. *What do you do?*

Your best friend is saved as well, but after an escape attempt, he is beaten and put in stocks. He leaps to his death from the ship's deck when being removed from the stocks, before he meets an even darker, more prolonged death by torture. You're still trapped on board the ship with his killers. *What do you do?*

The Newbery gold medal winner of 1924, *The Dark Frigate*, is filled with these kinds of moral challenges and is a rollicking pirate's tale to boot.

Before you face these moral quandaries, though, you've got a more immediate concern: getting your hands on the book at all. My centenarian grandmother was nine when *The Dark Frigate* came into the world almost one hundred years ago. Needless to say, the book is not in as wide circulation as it once was.

It is old, to be sure, and that's actually a cultivated part of the book, for although it is approaching one hundred years of age, it chronicles a time even farther back, seventeenth-century England, now three hundred years ago, and could easily have been a companion to the all-time great pirate tale, *Treasure Island*. To delve into these pages is step into the long ago and far away, to a land of high adventure, of swashbuckling thieving and cunning pirates on murderous expeditions.

The story begins with an unassuming journey: Philip Marsham, the nineteen-year-old protagonist, has been orphaned when his father's ship is lost at sea (his mother had passed in his early childhood). He sets out on foot for Bideford, a small town in southwest England, with only his small inheritance and the hope of a good job on a ship. Though the town Bideford itself was small, it was, in Philip's time, one of the busiest shipping ports in England (the third largest in the sixteenth century, according to Wikipedia). The adventure gets rolling when Marsham joins the crew of the large but deceptively sweet-sounding trade ship the *Rose of Devon* and hits the high seas.

What Makes This Book Unique?

The Dark Frigate is the third and final novel written by Charles Boardman Hawes, and is a faithful evocation of the grand adventure tales of yore. It is a true irony that Hawes passed away suddenly of pneumonic meningitis at thirty-four before he had a chance to learn that *The Dark Frigate* earned the gold medal and would be forever enshrined as a Newbery winner. Most "great books" are written by well-seasoned authors, and it's the only Newbery book I've heard of whose author died before receiving the news. This fact alone makes the book much more compelling.

There are two dimensions that make this a compelling and challenging book:

Elevated Language

This is a book review for the adult reading this book. Kids will struggle with the language. For example, try out this first sentence with your third grader:

Philip Marsham was bred to the sea as far back as the days when he was cutting his milk teeth, and he never thought he should leave it; but leave it he did, once and again, as I shall tell you.

Wait, how many times did he leave? I'm telling you, the language is tricky. The next sentence is just as challenging:

His father was master of a London ketch, and they say that before the boy could stand unaided on his two feet he would lean himself, as a child does, against the waist in a seaway, and never pipe a whimper when she thrust her bows down and shipped enough water to douse him from head to heels."

I've seen this challengingly elevated language in several Newbery books. It's not unique, but Hawes' diction is even a big step further.

There wasn't much scientific research about how children learn to read around the time of *The Dark Frigate*, but to give a sense of what kids were expected to know, only a few years prior to the publication of *The Dark Frigate*, H.D. Lukenbill's *Orthography and Spelling for Third and Fourth Graders* was released.¹⁷ The third-year spelling list on page 23 is made up of these words:

Harp	Iron
Face	Hush
Croak	Silver
Drank	Shown
Hear	Silent
Heat	Third
Felt	Soak
Fire	Raise

¹⁷ H.D. Lukenbill, *Orthography and Spelling for Third and Fourth Graders* (Taylorville, IL: Parker Press, 1919), 23.

Times have definitely changed, but still, *The Dark Frigate* is recommended more for the teen in your family than the nine-year-old. Yet the language is well wrought. For example, Hawes describes Philip Marsham's attraction to the pub shotgun as follows:

The stock was of walnut, polished until a man could see his face in it, the barrel was of steel chased from breech to muzzle and inlaid with gold and silver.

The characters are convincing; drawn out of single lines, they are described like statues come to life.

Intense Violence

Death by land is a sobering thing and works many changes; but to my thought death at sea is more terrible, for there is a vast loneliness, with only a single ship in the midst of it, and an empty hammock for days and weeks and even months, to keep a man in mind of what has happened; and death at sea may work as many changes as death by land. (p. 75)

A false tone is set in the beginning of the book that any violence we'll encounter is playful.

Instead, there should be signed release that the reader is an adult. Or a requirement to watch a Quentin Tarantino film before beginning the book.

Before his life at sea, Philip Marsham is traveling across England to the port. At a pub in a small town, he comes across a beautiful unattended gun in a bar and decides to shoulder it and take aim at a decorative plate on a shelf across the room. It's a funny prank, he thinks, but the gun proves too heavy and his finger slips on the trigger and he ends up taking out most of the plate collection on the wall, showering the owner of the gun in ceramic shards and puncturing a large sack filled with wine. In the chaos, Marsham leaves the place running and thus begins his adventure to Bideford. *Ha-ha!* Thinks the reader, this will be a jolly old adventure! And for the

rest of the foot journey, they're right. Philip Marsham is, by turns, slippery and successful with the various people he meets on the road.

He falls briefly in love with the shopkeeper's daughter and crosses paths with a man called The Old One, who exudes darkness. But none of these adventures carry any violent heft. In the manner of Dickens, each chapter on the seas ends in a new twist of fate, or on a note of pure dread, and this feels very much like serialized adventure rather than a children's book. Yet from the moment we board the *Rose of Devon* with Philip, we realize it's not a children's book at all.

One week into the voyage of the *Rose of Devon*, a rope snaps unexpectedly and the boatswain up on the mast is thrown from a great height. He falls, "clutching at the great belly of the sail," for anything to stop his plunge. He disappears into the sea without a sound and does not surface. It is with this incident here, on page 75, that the cold brutality of the book takes a distinct and much darker turn.

Not long after this initial death, a second ship draws near and the crew that come aboard turn out to be pirates, led by one particularly nasty character that Marsham remembers as The Old One. Quickly, The Old One orders one of his men to kill a member of the crew of the *Rose of Devon* above deck, for all to see.

"Well done," the Old One said to his man.

"Not so well as one could wish," the man replied, wiping his knife on the mate's coat.

"He perished quietly enough, but the knife bit into a rib and the feeling of a sharp knife dragging upon bone sets my teeth on edge." (p.110)

Shortly thereafter, the captain of the ship, hearing the commotion, races to the deck. One of The Old One's henchmen lying in wait grabs him by the hair, yanks back his head, and drives a knife "deep into the captain's bare throat." (p.112)

From here on out, it's total carnage. There's blood sloshing around on the deck as one by one the rest of the crew begins to discover the cold, psychotic nature of the pirate seizure. The Old One has indeed cast the entire ship into paralysis thanks to the horror and the terrible reckoning of his sociopathy and the degree to which they are trapped and under his control. Younger readers will undoubtedly feel the same, times several thousand.

Unsure of the line at which a book becomes too violent, I decided to turn to Goodreads to get a bead on what other readers thought of the violence. Reviewer Phil Jensen led off his review by posing that very question: "*Is it too violent?* I don't think so. If you're old enough to follow (the storyline), then you're old enough for the violence. It is less disturbing than many others in the genre, such as *The Slave Dancer* and *My Brother Sam Is Dead*. Really, if I read a pirate story without some spurting blood, I feel cheated."

Farther down in the reviews (195 of them, to be exact, for an obscure book that came out in 1924), Erin has this rebuttal: "I do not think this is appropriate literature for children, what with all the loose bar wenches, alcoholic sailors, and multiple scenes of cruel violence."

What the Author has Achieved

There are some obvious reasons why *The Dark Frigate* has all but disappeared from shelves. First, it's old. No one is reading about adventures on the high seas anymore. Second, it's gruesome. But the language of the book is so evocative you really feel like you're at sea with Phillip. And the moral quandaries posed by the adventure keep you nailed to your seat. If you're not scared off by the dark qualities, this book is a gem.

How Does the Newbery Committee Pick the Winner?

The Library Down the Road

It was not on any special day that I began my official journey to read all the Newberys. I had made the decision casually and then followed up with an email to the Indianapolis Public Library, seeking an authority on Children's Literature from their ranks. I was sent the name of Daniell Wilkins, Children's Librarian. I wanted to find out more about the Newbery from a reputable source, and I was living in Indianapolis at the time, so I contacted the Indianapolis Public Library directly from the webpage, having no idea who would be reading my email. I had fallen in love with the Newberys myself; now I wanted to know what role they played for a children's librarian. Are the Newbery's influential? How does a children's librarian regard these books?

I was new to Indianapolis, so I was surprised when the address that came up for Daniell Wilkins' branch was on College Avenue. I lived on College Avenue. The blue Google Maps line that appeared on my phone screen was short: the library was located a mere five blocks away. I followed up with an email to Daniell Wilkins and she invited me down to the library to chat, so I hopped on my bike and made my way south.

The College Avenue library is a new building, window-walls of glass and curved concrete swooping away from the entrance. Daniell is helping a patron when I walk in but motions me to sit in a chair to the side. She's petite, with long brown hair that she whisks behind an ear often, and a warm smile. When she's done speaking to the patron, she turns to me.

“So, you're interested in the Newbery award?”

“Yes,” I respond, moving to the front edge of my seat. “I want to find out more about the Newbery, and more about its place in Children’s Lit, so I wanted to pick your brain.”

“Sure,” she says, smiling back. “*A Wrinkle in Time*, *The Door in the Wall*, were books I read and loved as a child. They had a sense of wonder, mystery about them. A certain magic that elevated them above the regular story. That hard-to-put-your-finger-on thing. Then there are a handful of books that I read that have that magic that I found out later were Newberys.”

“What do you notice about the books as a group?”

“I’m sure people raise the concern about the homogeneity of the Newberys. If you look at the big sweep of the content of the books, they are gentle, sweet stories of white people in America. There has been an effort to diversify, but just by looking at the titles and topics, you can [occasionally] see that a book about another culture has kind of been “thrown in there.” But it’s almost like a token thing.”

At this point, I’d only read a portion of all the books, so I couldn’t respond categorically. But even with my limited exposure, I’d already read books by a number of non-white authors or narrators and featuring a handful of countries. I mention this to her.

“It’s true, there has been crossover recently with *Last Stop on Market Street*, or *The Adventures of Hugo Cabret*. There are a lot of Newberys I would like to recommend to my daughter, who is eight. But the mono-perspective isn’t necessarily something I want to share with her.”

“How popular are the Newbery books? Do kids come in asking for them?”

“Very rarely do I get someone coming in and asking for a Newbery specifically. If they do, usually it’s a parent looking for a story from their childhood. But it’s always the parents asking. As for me, I was always very interested in history as a child, so I wanted to learn about

the past, like *The Door in the Wall*. But kids nowadays seem much less interested in the past. They want to read about characters that are going through what they're going through. The Newbery books I know are so far removed from what modern kids' lives are like, that they don't seek them out."

I'm curious about this. "Do you ever steer them to Newbery books?"

"When I am in the role of advising a young reader on what books to select, I ask them what they have they read that they really like. Then we try to find something similar to that. We try to find a good fit, not just the 'best' book. I don't automatically go to a Newbery; they are challenging and they're not going to fly with a lot of kids. In fact, they work for less and less kids nowadays."

As we talk, I glance around at the library's open floor plan. The center of the space is occupied by computers, a couple dozen of them. Gray bookshelves line the walls, punctuated by a single colorful display of children's books. I see some covers I recognize, books like *Captain Underpants* and *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*. Both series were very popular where I worked in my most recent elementary school, but I'd forgotten them and they're not common in graduate writing programs. I point over to the display. "Do children react differently to displays of these popular books versus award-winning books?"

"For the majority of kids coming into the public library, we are competing against their iPhones or the internet, and so we don't really care what it is they are reading, just that they are reading at all. Newbery books often present kids with challenging situations, forcing them to extrapolate and ask themselves what they might act like in that situation. They are required to transpose themselves into that character's head and think through the choices they are making. This is a very complex intellectual situation for most kids and they aren't necessarily seeking

that. Often, they are just seeking entertainment. So, unfortunately, we often respond to that by offering entertainment to keep them ...reading.”

“So, what led to this dynamic you’re describing, where kids kind of like the “easy way out?”

“The emergence of the immediacy of the media. Before, when you were a kid and were bored, you went outside, or you sat inside and read a book. Now media is always there, always accessible. Twenty to thirty years ago, there were a limited [number] of ‘entertainment’ shows, and the news. That was it. Now media is on a twenty-four-hour cycle.”

She continues: “Books used to be about forming your character. Parents recommended books that taught lessons, morals. Books that help you become a good person, not just help you be a good reader. And that is something that seems to have diminished. Now, it seems, people learn who they are by watching TV, instead of [by] reading stories.”

“Do you have the power to purchase these stories?”

She grimaced. “I actually have a very limited role in selection. I only purchase about two thousand books a year. Most purchasing is done out of the central office. We’re a large system with twenty-four branches and the general collection floats between libraries. If you want to know more about book buying, you should really talk with Janet Spaulding. She’s the Collection Development Librarian at the central office. She’s definitely going to be able to answer all your questions,” she said as I stood to leave the library.

“Thanks,” I said smiling. “I will.”

Daniell didn’t answer my deepest questions, but she did start the gears turning and piqued my curiosity about the Newbery process. She said what many others would go on to say

as I researched this project: “I know someone with whom you really should talk.” Any time someone offered a suggestion, I followed up. But to establish the purpose of the award, I really needed to talk with people who worked with the Newbery books. After all, the award is not about popularity but literary excellence, and I wanted to find out what the jurors understood by that.

I came away with three things from my conversation with Daniell: First, it’s depressing what’s happening in the war for kids’ attention between electronic media and books; second, the more Newberys I read, the more I learned that they are actually not “gentle, sweet stories of White people”; and third, I needed to call Janet Spaulding.

The American Library Association

There is an interaction in my interview with Daniell that I omitted. She mentioned the American Library Association (ALA) in one of her responses, and naively I asked if it is a union for librarians. Daniell didn’t respond directly, just laughed, presumably because I should have known that the American Library Association is the oldest, largest, and arguably most prestigious library organization in the world.

In the Chicago neighborhood of Near North, right on the edge of the Gold Coast, sits a rather nondescript white and blue building. From its doors, you need only walk a third of a mile and you’re at the famous Water Tower Place in one direction; half a mile in the other to Gino’s East, some of the best pizza in the city. This quiet building is the administrative home of the American Library Association. The ALA is located only blocks away from Chicago’s Magnificent Mile, an iconic stretch of Michigan Avenue noted for its extreme affluence. With an

extensive membership covering libraries in North America and around the world and a host of wealthy patrons, the ALA is a worldwide powerhouse.

Founded on October 6, 1876 during the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia, the mission of ALA is “to provide leadership for the development, promotion and improvement of library and information services and the profession of librarianship in order to enhance learning and ensure access to information for all.” The ALA is not a union but relies on support from members. And it has a lot of members—more than 57,000 from around the US (and a very small percentage of international chapters). And it is powerful. The ALA has been an important force in everything from recognizing “excellence in publishing” to raising funds for a variety of library projects. The ALA has its fingers in many pies, and it is a powerhouse of literary support. Members come out in droves to their annual conferences. According to their own website, “The ALA annual conference is notable for being one of the largest professional conferences in existence, typically drawing over 25,000 attendees.”

So, what does this have to do with the Newbery? The ALA serves as an umbrella organization to eleven smaller member organizations. There’s the Association of College and Research Libraries, the Library Leadership and Management Association, the Library and Information Technology Association, and the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC). Though these divisions all fit under that ALA, they operate very independently; they publish their own books and journals, provide their own continuing education classes, generate their own revenue and have their own Directors and board. To join any of these associations though, one must first be a member of the American Library Association.

Like its umbrella organization the ALA, in its own orbit the ALSC is likewise the largest and most prestigious of its kind. The ALSC springs from a combination of a number of

associations, the first being the Children's Library Association (formerly the *Section for Library Work with Children*, which had its first meeting in 1901).

The ALSC Midwinter Meeting: Where the Newbery Got its Wings

It is the 2018 midwinter meeting of the American Library Association in New Orleans and Jim Neal, the president, takes the stage. There are whoops and hollers as he is introduced, an honor not usually associated with library gatherings. But this is an important meeting; the atmosphere in the room is electric. I'm unable to attend in person, but the entire proceedings are available through video online.

"Thank you, Sandra," he says, turning to his introducer, Sandra Hughes-Hassell, president of Young Adult Library Services Association. He is wearing a dark grey suit and grey patterned tie. He's balding and wears glasses. Thick half-moon shadows appear on his cheeks when he looks down at his notes on the podium. I'm imagining that at a typical library meeting, it wouldn't be shocking if he gave a prolonged accounting of various nonfiction selections on early Russian composers. But this meeting is different.

After acknowledging his introducer, he spins back, the lapels of his jacket spreading awkwardly as he extends his arms in a symbolic embrace of the audience. His face breaks into a large smile. "O-M-G!" He half-yells, his face breaking into a large, boyish smile. "I have dreamed of being up here all my life!" He doesn't say exactly why this has been a lifelong dream, but it is implied: the awards are the ALSC's most recognized selections of "children's and young adult literature and media," and the Newbery gold medal is at the top of the heap.

Why all the hullabaloo for a children's book? Why does the literary world care about this award in particular? The short answer is money. Having that gold Newbery circle on the front

cover ensures that the book stays in print for decades at a minimum. It means never-ending school orders. And if there are sequels and movie rights, the sky is the financial limit.

But that's not on the minds of the ALSC president as he announces the winner. To win one of these awards is to rise above the ocean of other children's books produced annually, to be recognized for one's contribution to *literature*, not just another *Fun with Dick and Jane*-type of book. What the ALSC cares about is that of all the book awards, the American Library Association's are the most prestigious.

(Sidebar)

The Newbery is the original, but it has spawned many other awards presented at the Midwinter Conference, “the premier event for recognition of books and media for children and young adults.” They are:

1. **Caldecott Medal:** for the most distinguished picture book for children.
2. **Coretta Scott King Book Awards:** for books that demonstrate an appreciation of African American culture and universal human values.
3. **Virginia Hamilton Award for Lifetime Achievement:** This Annual award is presented in even years to an African American author for children and/or young adults, and in odd years, for substantial contributions through active engagement with youth using award-winning African American literature for children and/or young adults.
4. **John Newbery Medal:** for the most distinguished contribution to children’s literature.
5. **Children's Literature Legacy Award** (known as the Laura Ingalls Wilder Medal until 2018): Awarded to writers or illustrators of children's books who have made substantial and lasting contributions to children's literature.
6. **Margaret A. Edwards Award:** Awarded for significant and lasting contribution to Young Adult literature.
7. **May Hill Arbuthnot Honor Lecture:** Awarded for a career contribution to children's literature.
8. **Michael L. Printz Award:** Awarded to a book that exemplifies literary excellence in Young Adult literature.
9. **Mildred L. Batchelder Award:** Awarded to the most outstanding children's book translated into English and published in the US.
10. **Odyssey Award:** Awarded to the best audiobook produced for children and/or young adults, available in English in the United States.
11. **Pura Belpré Awards:** Awarded to a Latino or Latina writer and illustrator whose work best portrays the Latino cultural experience in a work of literature for children or youth.
12. **Alex Awards:** Awarded to ten books written for adults that have special appeal to young adults ages 12 through 18.
13. **Robert F. Sibert Informational Book Medal:** Awarded to the writer and illustrator of the most distinguished informational book published in English.
14. **Schneider Family Book Award:** Awarded to the book that best embodies an artistic expression of the disability experience.
15. **Stonewall Book Award:** Awarded to the best book relating to the GLBT experience.
16. **Theodor Seuss Geisel Award:** Awarded to author(s) and illustrator(s) of the most distinguished book for beginning readers published in English in the United States during the preceding year.
17. **William C. Morris Award:** Awarded to a work of young adult literature by a first-time author writing for teens.

Examples of Non-ALA Awards

The Carnegie Medal: Awarded to the best children’s book in England.

Hans Christian Andersen Award: Annually recognizes one living author and one living illustrator for their lasting contribution to children's literature.

American Indian Youth Literature Award (AIYL): Awarded to best writing and illustrations by and about American Indians

While all these ALA awards carry weight in the children's publishing world, there is one that sticks out. And at this meeting, it has been saved for last.

More than an hour into the presentation, the final award appears on the large screen behind the presenter. A large book in front of a burning torch, the words on the page read, "*For the most distinguished contribution to children's literature.*" This is the award in which everyone is the most interested. It's the top dog, the best: the Newbery Award gold medal book.

A Timeline for the American Library Association/Children's Library Services and The Newbery

1876: The American Library Association is formed.

1890: The first children's room in a library is established. The public Library of Brookline (Mass.) set aside an unused room in its basement for a children's reading-room.

1941: The Division for Children and Young People is renamed the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC).

1957: The Association of Young People's librarians is split into the Young Adult Services Division and the Children's Library Association.

1958: Reorganization of ALA leads to the establishment of the Children's Services Division.

1977: The Children's Services Division is renamed the Association for Library Service to Children.

The Vote

The process of picking the winning Newbery is pretty simple, on paper. Each Newbery committee members get to nominate seven books over the course of a year and bring them to a meeting. The committee meets to discuss all the nominated books for the year and then to vote on them using a ranked choice method. Each committee member gets to vote on three books, and each vote is weighted: four points to the first choice, three points to the second choice, and two points to the third choice.

Two factors decide the winning book: eight of the fifteen committee members must have voted it in first place, and it needs at least eight points more than the second place. After deciding the winner, the committee moves on to whether they will name honor books. Honor books can only be chosen from the books on the final medal-winning ballot.

How to Get on the Team

Of the fifteen committee members, seven are appointed and eight elected by ALSC membership. If a member does a good job, he or she might be able to return, but one can only be on a committee once every four years.

The challenge is to become one of the most distinguished *contributors* to the field of children's literature. Not only does one need to be of expert knowledge of children's literature, a person has to be sufficiently well known for the ALSC membership to vote on them, or sufficiently respected for the Association to appoint them: "Committee members are chosen for their experience and represent a broad range of geographical areas as well as sizes and types of libraries. Members may include special and public librarians, university educators and

professional reviewers. Members may not be employed by a children's trade book publisher, author, or illustrator."¹⁸

The handbook trades in generalities on this point, but rest assured, it's a very high mark to achieve.

Choosing the Book

What's it like choosing the winning book? It involves lots of debate. From thousands of entries, winnowing down the selection of books to discuss with the committee is difficult.

First, each member needs to read all the books of the year and select some they feel make the cut. Then each member has to craft convincing arguments for why the books they chose are worthy of being read and debated by the rest of the committee. The ALA recommends following these tips in the committee discussions:

- Use good critical analysis, no vague words (cute, nice, good, etc.).
- Be cooperative—listen to each other, no side conversations.
- Refer back to the criteria to keep the discussion focused.
- Make comparisons only to books that were published in the year under consideration.
- Clarity—be clear in what you say. Think through the point you are making and speak loudly enough to be heard by everyone.
- Be concise—be sure that what you have to say adds to the discussion; try not to repeat what others have said.
- Do not book talk or summarize the plot.
- Refrain from relating personal anecdotes

The guidelines here are for how to conduct oneself in discussion. What's missing are the details that bring a person to the table, prepared: First, a member gives up a year of her life and devotes it to reading hundreds of books. Basically, she needs to read everything she can get her hands on that has come out over the prior year. Even with her esteemed background in children's lit, and

¹⁸ American Library Association John Newbery Award Committee Manual 2015, p. 13

no matter how much reading she does, this Newbery assignment forces her to bump it up a few notches.

Second, she can't talk about what she's doing. With anyone. Ever. As the ALSCA puts it in their "Confidentiality of Discussion and Selection" section:

It is important to preserve secrecy between the time the winner is selected and the time the announcement is made to the winning author, the publisher and to the public at large. This secrecy ensures adequate publicity for the awards, avoids the dissemination of misinformation, and avoids the possibility that any business might profit from receiving information earlier than the general public.¹⁹

The Books That Make It In

First, any author considered must be a citizen or resident of the United States. Second, what the author produces has to be considered American literature and be published here in the United States. This is the reason that not a single Harry Potter book has been considered for a Newbery.

The Newbery committee claims it will consider all forms of writing whether the story is fiction, nonfiction, or even poetry. But this is a bit disingenuous; over the last century, only three or four winners have been non-fiction, and only *Lincoln: A Photobiography* (1988) contains authentic photographs. There are only two poetry books, *Joyful Noise* (1989) and *A Visit to William Blake's Inn* (1982). And all three of these winners are more than thirty years old.

The book can be part of a longer series (which is not uncommon) but odds are best if it's the first one in that series, for winning books often spawn sequels. Only three series books have

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 37

won that are not the first in a series: *Dacey's Song* (1983), *The Grey King* (1976), and *The High King* (1969).

A handful of authors have won twice and there's a case where both a father and son have won! This also happened in the 1980s: Sid Fleischman won for *The Whipping Boy* (1987) and two years later his son Paul won for *Joyful Noise* (1989). There is hard and fast rule that no reprints or compilations are considered.

But all these requirements are just to get the book to the starting line. Once it's been submitted, it joins the four-foot-high stack of books to be read by a committee member. So, what do books need to stand out? Here's how they are judged, according to the ALSC Newbery Handbook:

- Interpretation of the theme or concept
- Presentation of information including accuracy, clarity, and organization
- Development of a plot
- Delineation of characters
- Delineation of a setting
- Appropriateness of style.

But the true metric is the overall quality of the book: "Committee members must consider excellence of presentation for a child audience." Keep in mind, for the ALSC, children are defined as "persons of ages up to and including fourteen."

The public will find out which book won by tuning in to the ALA Midwinter Meeting, held in January or February in various locations. But authors find out first; they get a phone call from the committee just prior to the press conference.

KT Horning

Rarely did I pick up a Newbery that I didn't enjoy. But occasionally it happened. Halfway into *The Rollerskates* (1937), I found I could barely continue: a rich, entitled young lady is left in New York City in the care of a "home" while her parents travel to Europe for a year. As the rich boarder, she is given all the freedom she desires, which she uses to rollerskate around New York and become acquaintances with various shopkeepers and locals. First of all, almost nothing happens in the story, and second, it's narrated by a brat. I tried to apply a historical context to her personality, or empathy for her abandonment, but no matter what I did, it wasn't enough; the pages turned to wet sand.

While looking for some historical context to better connect with the book, I Googled "Newbery Award Past," and there in the search results was the link to an online course entitled: *The Newbery Medal: Past, Present and Future*. At first, I signed up just to help me get through *The Rollerskates*, but quickly found that the course would provide an invaluable context to all the books I was reading.

The course was online, and the fee was not exorbitant, so I enrolled through the American Library Association website. I rubbed my hands together in anticipation after receiving the enrollment confirmation email. Looking back, I realize how lucky I was to find it; for this course would prove pivotal in changing my perspective of the award and its history.

The students consisted of children's librarians and elementary teachers and the odd parent, all female. *The Rollerskates* turned out not to be the monster I had initially judged it to be; as soon as the message boards on it opened for discussion, I found others made very interesting points in its defense. And this happened with each new book or decade of books. Everything about the course was invigorating, from the curriculum—a survey of the Newbery

books separated by decade— to the erudition of the professor and facilitator, KT Horning of the University of Wisconsin, Madison.

For example, while reading *Strawberry Girl*, the 1946 winner, one of the students posted on the discussion board that she found the consistent use of the term “Cracker,” and the rural Florida dialect presented in the text difficult to navigate. KT responded.

“I, too, struggled with the dialect, in addition to the tone of some of the characters’ comments. I also struggled to understand the cultural norms of this Florida community. (Did it bother anyone else that the characters were shoeless?) Consequently, I regard this novel as more of an in-class read than a free-choice selection. I think that younger readers (as well as adults) would benefit from first reading non-fiction pieces that provide a historical background and context for the novel and its dialect.”

Throughout our weekly reflection assignments, Dr. Horning maintained this steady air. She was informative yet light-hearted and facilitated all discussions well. As we plowed through the books and joined in numerous back-and-forths, she held the ship steady.

None of the other students were attempting to read all the Newbery Gold Medal books and I made a misstep in thinking I was coming to the course more knowledgeable than the others. When I mentioned I was in the process of reading all the Newbery books, KT wrote back, “Wow, that’s admirable! I still haven’t read them all.” I leaned back in my chair, resting on my own laurels. What I didn’t clarify is that I meant strictly the Gold Medal winners. I would come to find out later that really truly reading all the Newberys means all the Honor books as well. Where I was, about halfway to one hundred books, I wasn’t even a quarter of the way through them all.

Each week we investigated a different decade of books, and with each decade I noticed that the reference articles that appeared in the folders for continuing research were packed to the gills. I assumed it was because... Well, I don't know what I assumed. When you're taking a class, it just makes sense that there is an overwhelming amount of support material. The professor should be an expert in their field, right? Well, the more I investigated, the more I learned that these materials, from obscure *New York Times* notices and ads for books released in 1923, to editorials from the *Elementary English Review* in 1941, were all the work of KT Horning's research. If there is an Chief Expert on the history of the Newbery Awards, it is KT Horning. She's done it all, from running the place (President of the American Library Association), to sitting on the Newbery Committee, and everything in between. Along the way, she's penned the introductory essay to the most recent analysis of Newbery books and is a regular lecturer on topics in Children's Lit.

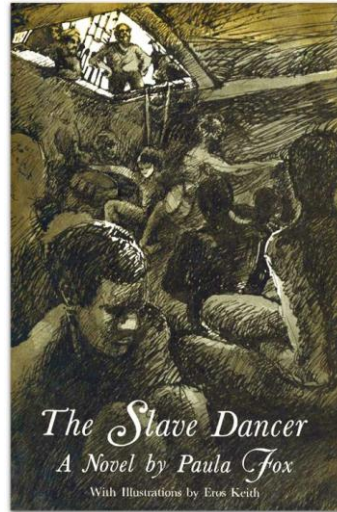
While she didn't consent to a direct interview, I found that the articles she sprinkled throughout our discussions and the directions she suggested led me to my own research. By the end of the class, the cynic had entirely left the building and I joined my soft-headed classmates in pursuit of greater insight.

It was one of KT Horning's articles that got my wheels spinning. It's titled "Men Wanted?" and appears in the 1939 issue of *The American Book Trade Journal*. It's a little wonky in that its analysis is strictly of how to move the most units in book sales, but it's the meat of the thing that hooked me: seven decades ago, Frederic Melcher, the guy who invented the Newbery award, defended the role of women in their sure hand at writing great, transcendent books. The title offers this in a succinct, somewhat saucy rejoinder. What it's hiding is the guts it took to print something like this; as Editor of *Publisher's Weekly*, Melcher was in a position of

enormous publishing power at that point in his career, and the idea that women were doing a fine job writing books of literature for children and that men were not particularly needed was not a popular opinion to express.

The article is short, only two columns long, but reflects an admirable perspective. Spurred on by this article, I found myself appreciating Frederic Melcher's literary perspective with more depth. I could see why he was, according to the London's storied *Bookseller* magazine, "The greatest all-round bookman in the English-speaking world."

And thanks to KT Horning's guiding hand I found my way through many of the Newbery books in which I might otherwise not have found much value. By discussing and analyzing and generally pulling them apart, I started to see more value in them, even the clunkers.



1974 The Slave Dancer

Author: Paula Fox

Cover artist and Illustrator: Eros Keith

Country: United States

Genre: Historical novel

Publisher: Bradbury Press

Publication date: October 1973

Pages: 176 pages

Story Overview

Slavery engulfed whole peoples, swallowed up their lives, committed such offenses that in considering them, the heart falters, the mind recoils. Slavery debased the enslavers, and self-imposed ignorance of slavery keeps the mind closed and the heart beating too faintly to do other than insult and wound with such phrases.
—Paula Fox, 1975 Newbery Acceptance speech

Fifty-four years after *The Dark Frigate*, the story of a boy on another seafaring adventure won the Newbery. Though they share many details—a lunatic, murderous captain and a dark twist of fate upon the ship—these stories approach their dark themes differently. Whereas *The Dark Frigate* by its elevated language offers a tale for the reader to follow, *The Slave Dancer* is drawn in sharp relief: the goal is to escape. Where *The Dark Frigate* is about the horror of one boy's journey, *The Slave Dancer* illuminates a society bent on dehumanization and genocide.

The Dark Frigate is ultimately about the exterior adventure: we watch as pirates take over the ship and wonder how the good Philip Marshaw will prevail. And at the end of that tale, he does: Philip walks free because his heart has always been true. In the final act, Philip returns home in search of the girl with whom he had fallen in love at the beginning of the story. *The Slave Dancer*, however, offers no such comfort.

There was no one to save me – and I didn't even know from what I needed to be saved
(p. 22).

When a sack is thrown over his head while he is running an errand down by the boardwalk, protagonist and narrator Jessie Bollier is kidnapped and paddled out to a waiting slave ship. With developing dread as he comes to consciousness, he learns that the ship is bound for Africa, and that he will be late returning to his home to greet his mother with the promised candles. “With luck,” the crewman Claudius informs him, “you’ll be back in four months.”

Here the reader inevitably begins to imagine what this immediate kidnapping might mean. How could one simply be plucked entirely from the life one once knew and placed on an unwelcoming ship for four months? “My mother will think I’m dead!” I cried and ran wildly. . .” Jessie ends up falling down and curling up “like a worm.” He is distraught, but the crew needs his labor and there are some sympathizers aboard. This situation turns out to be effective foreshadowing; after sailing east across the Atlantic, Jessie is at ground zero for the loading of the intended cargo, those who have also been kidnapped, and are also unaware of their fate, and whose lives are in the hands of the same crazed captain and his mate. The difference: Jessie’s captivity takes place above deck. The cargo goes in the holds below. To call this place hell would not be a stretch: “Our holds were pits of misery. Two men were found dead the second morning, and Stout dumped their bodies over the side as I dumped the waste” (p.77).

As the newly enslaved are herded onto the ship, a large African man stands ready with a whip to ensure compliance. *The Slave Dancer* is a dark tale and is presented unvarnished. Jessie witnesses the treatment of these people in horror. No detail is spared here, from the throwing overboard of those who are sick, to the floggings, to the interior of the galley stuffed so full that people sleep on top of each other. It's a brutal, brutal book, and it is liberal in its use of the term "Nigger."

On our last morning [at the African port], the little girl – the first to be brought aboard *The Moonlight* – was carried to the rail by [crew member] Stout. He held her upside down, his fingers gripping one thin brown ankle. Her eyes were open, staring at nothing. Foam had dried about her mouth. With one gesture, Stout flung her into the water (p. 77).

The journey back home is awful. When finally almost at the American coast, a massive storm kicks up. It rends the boat in two, killing all cargo and almost all crew, save the captain, Jessie, and his African counterpart, Ras. The two boys, one white and one black, survive the sinking of the slave ship, watching as the captain, drunk, tries to swim to safety. He doesn't make it. The boys are washed ashore in Mississippi (Jessie thinks it is Cuba), at the feet of an older black man working a very small, very hidden piece of farmland. He's an escaped slave and he negotiates a way for Ras to travel through the underground railroad to the north, with folks that speak the same African language. He then provides a map for Jessie to walk home to New Orleans.

After a few days of trekking, unsure of his map, Jessie does eventually make it back home, back to the little house from which he disappeared. His family is ecstatic at his return.

The touching coda is that Jessie can't hear a penny whistle without deep sadness, reminded viscerally of how he'd play while the ship captain ordered daily of the dancing of the slaves above deck, and the dust that rose from the deck with their shuffling feet. He also wonders about Ras's fate. The ending lands with a gentle touch, Jessie safely returned but disturbed by his

experience on the slave ship. But the odds are low that Ras made it safely to the North, and even if he did make it, he would still have been forced to reckon with the fact that his entire family was ripped from their homeland and violently killed, and that even in the northern states of America he would face a life of a second- or third-class citizen at best.

More than most Newberys, which often have the principal aim of entertaining while presenting a moral dilemma as the fulcrum for internal connection by the reader, *The Slave Dancer* has bigger aims. Paula Fox wanted to bring into moral focus an issue as big as slavery itself.

What Makes This Book Unique

Each of the sailors is sharply individualized, the inhuman treatment of the captives is conveyed straight to the nose and stomach rather than the bleeding heart.

—Kirkus Review, October 15, 1973

A storm develops into full fury just as a foreign ship comes into view, a ship that might seek to take over the illegal slave ship. Jessie watches from across the deck: “I cried out in terror myself as I saw the luminous crest of a wave in the darkness, and right behind it on the next crest, a number of small boats coming directly at us, the rowers bent against the wind.” The story is taut, and Fox is at her best when writing about the ravages of the sea and the emotional toll of the slave trade on humans. The images she paints are of simple forms, Winslow Homer seascapes with their evocative loneliness. In these scenes, she inserts real terror: “At that moment, [crew member] Sam Wick picked up a black woman and simply dropped her over the side. With hardly a pause, he then kicked over two men.” The large undulating waves, the small boats paddling towards the ship to condemn it, and the frenzy of cold-blooded murder display the spare power of Fox’s prose.

When I first began the book, I didn't know the year and pegged it as being from the 2000s, in which case it seemed strange that a slave narrative would be written through a white narrator, even though that character is set up as a kidnapped, poor kid himself. The cynic in me took issue with the whole thing seen through white eyes. Now that I know that the book appeared in 1974 and before Alex Haley's *Roots*, it must have been a powerful experience at that time.

The Tarantino Caveat

It's hard to believe this is a book for children. It's really, really violent. In one scene, for example, the ship's crew attempts to get a new slave to drink water. The slave, his knees pulled to his chest, is defiant and unresponsive:

“Pour it in his mouth,” Purvis said.

“His mouth is shut,” I said in a whisper.

“Open it!”

“How?”

“Here,” said Stout, suddenly appearing next to us. He took the cup from my hands, lifted it, then shoved it forcefully against the man's clenched lips, grinding it back and forth like a shovel teasing hard earth, until trickles of blood dripped down the brown skin and onto Stout's fingers” (p.74).

This is just the everyday violence. Beyond this there are many murders. The physical violence, along with the liberal use of the term “Nigger” being spat from the tight, loathsome mouths of the amoral crew, make it a difficult book to read, even as an adult. With the interest in learning more about the slave trade, I found it compelling, but for elementary students who do not have an analytic context, it is hard for me to recommend.

What The Author Has Achieved

Paula Fox does stretch credulity, presenting Jessie's childhood trauma and fact of his kidnapping as justification that he is, in some ways, just as bad off as the Africans being sold as slaves. Jessie, by all accounts, has a rough life. But his is a free life, and as he travels on the water, at more than one point he is shown learning to love the ways of the ship and the environment of the open ocean. Moreover, he's above deck. There is no equivocating: those in the hold, stuffed with the despondent, diseased, and dying human cargo, are far worse off than he is.

And yet, there is nothing in Fox's fictional account that rings hollow; slavery is an ugly scar on American history—one of its ugliest—and it is important that this history be shared with our youth. We need not repeat it. But can they handle the violence?

I looked into other analyses of *The Slave Dancer* and found that in 1977, librarian Binnie Tate expressed a more nuanced, critical race approach:

Even when the characters responsible for the insults are clearly described as evil and unsympathetic, their remarks still have the ability to wound young black readers deeply. And if an author intends to show that human oppression dehumanizes the white oppressors as well as the oppressed blacks, then it is necessary to delineate the humanity of the blacks. This was never done in *The Slave Dancer*.²⁰

So, it's complicated to say the least. But in its context, shortly before Alex Hailey's *Roots* hit the shelves, and forged in the same cultural crucible as *The People's History of the United States*, it's fair to say that Paula Fox has achieved something extraordinary.

²⁰ Binnie Tate, Binne. "Racism and Distortions Pervade 'The Slave Dancer.'" *Cultural Conformity in Books for Children: Further Readings in Racism*. Ed. Donnarrae MacCann and Gloria Woodard (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1977), 149–153.

How Are the Books Chosen?

The Book Buyer

The Newbery is an award for distinguished children's literature, but very rarely do the books read as if they are for actual children—or so it seems to me. In the 2012 gold medal winner *Dead End in Norvelt*, the main character has a constant problem with bloody noses, which results in some older-kid pseudo gore; in one of the many, many scenes involving blood, the narrator Jack (a stand-in for author Jack Santos) catches himself at the beginning of a bloody nose: “I noticed a bubbling river of blood running out my nose and across my lips” (p.72), he tells us, continuing to discuss the event in great detail. And later in the story, he walks in on his neighbor, who appears to be peeling the skin off her arm, a thoroughly gruesome depiction, only to find that she is waxing her hands as a warm and soothing antidote to arthritis. By the time this scene ends, it hardly matters that it's just wax she removed; we've been given a scene right out of Friday the Thirteenth. We've lived through the horror of the scene.

When I think of kid's books, I think of silly or heartwarming events, books that stop short of engaging violence. Situations to which kids can relate, like when Ramona loses her book bag, or when the dog Ginger Pye runs all the way to school and appears in the window next to her favorite child and master (“Who's a Good Boy!”), or at the very most when, in *Tales of a 4th*

Grade Nothing, Peter asks, “What happened to the turtle, Fudgie?” and we read that “Fudge smiles guiltily, ‘I swallowed him up.’”

These events are developmentally appropriate for kids of ages eight to twelve, and they engage their real concerns e.g. What would *I* do if my younger brother swallowed *my* pet turtle? Kids are not thinking about blood spraying everywhere, or flesh that’s being ripped off arms. (Well, I might be wrong in this day in age. But the point is, such gory books are much more commonly read by older kids. Like kids that can drive.)

Thinking about *Dead End in Norvelt* leads me to wonder about the definition of children’s literature at all. Even though I work in the world of reading, I still found myself confused, not only about eligibility but also about what makes something a children’s book versus a Young Adult book. What books are eligible for Newberys? Who better to clarify this for me than a book buyer. A book buyer has a unique power to influence to what children have access, what kinds of books will be staring back at them from the shelves.

Janet Spaulding

Daniell, the Children’s Librarian, passed on contact information for the Indianapolis Public Library book buyer, Janet Spaulding. Before I reached out to her for a phone interview, I looked online to find out more about her and learned that

Janet Spaulding began her Indianapolis Public Library career in 1997 as a Page. Spaulding has served the Library as a children's librarian, supervising librarian, and currently as collection development librarian for juvenile and teen materials. In this role, she works with staff, community contacts, and vendors to create a diverse collection while staying on top of new trends and titles in children's and young adult literature.

As the book buyer for all the branches of the Indianapolis Public Libraries, Janet is responsible for researching demand and deciding what titles to add to the existing collection, currently approximately 100,000 books. She does so by following blogs (“in excess of 200”), other reviewer sites, and more traditional review agencies like Kirkus and Publisher’s Weekly.

Clearly, she has her finger on the pulse of children’s literature and I looked forward to talking with her. From our emails setting up the call, Janet was very accommodating, even willing to connect after her work day to answer my questions. As our conversation got underway, I found myself increasingly curious to know how books are leveled and marketed to children. And Janet was the perfect person to ask.

As a school teacher, it’s a challenge to connect with any outside interests during the school day. Any free moment is snatched by a student with a bloody nose or an administrator requesting specific test scores. Janet was very kind to accommodate an interview call after her work hours; by the time school is done in Minnesota, it’s an hour later in Indiana. Still, I was excited to connect; Janet had insight into a world of children’s literature that was unique to me.

The bell had rung for the end of the school day and the building was practically empty when we connected. I put my phone on speaker, so I could type with my hands free and sat at the kidney table in my office while we talked.

First, I was curious about the scope of her book buying. After brief introductions, I asked, “How many titles do you buy annually?”

She was quick with statistics. “In 2015, I was responsible for the purchase of 10,000 new titles.” She paused, and I heard the clicks as she opened a reference document. “In 2016, 11,000.”

“How do you go about that process of deciding which books to add to the IPL collection?”

“I’m very taken by the idea that the books we read are *Windows* and *Mirrors*, the idea that books are a safe way for readers to view an experience, like through a window, that is unlike their own, or where they can see their own experience in it, as in a mirror.

It was not until after our conversation ends that I realized how much the concept of *Windows* and *Mirrors* spoke to my own philosophy of reading. Of course, the first layer of connection to a story is its readability; kids have to be able to access the text to get the story from it. Too many unknown words and the storyline skitters off into oblivion. But following closely is how the reader feels about what they are reading. If the topic is too divorced from their own world-view (or is clearly the design of another person—think essays in a standardized test), they’ll be lost that way too. Nothing hooks a kid faster, or better, than a character going through life challenges or questioning in similar ways to their own.

I wanted to examine this more, but I was curious about the Newbery awards. “What role do Newbery winners play in your purchasing?”

“I always watch the webcast on the day the Newbery is announced and am madly typing so I can send out an email to all of the IPL staff. I can guarantee that within an hour they will get phone calls and patrons at the door wanting what was just announced.

The winners do carry a certain amount of weight. Even if you’re not aware of the children’s book world, it is a stamp that this is a book of quality to read. Six to ten copies might be purchased of a usual YA book; with the Newbery winner I order an additional thirty-five

copies. Newberys have a chance to go down as a classic. A true classic will withstand the test of time. They sort of become classics in their own right.”

“How do you approach controversial language or topics in children’s books?”

“I am a believer that you shouldn’t shy away from something that might be a little uncomfortable. Some of this “controversial” vocabulary is part of the world that kids need to know and see and hear. In some instances, it is reflecting reality. I don’t think that language should be hidden or discounted or ignored. I see books as an opportunity to teach. Use the offending word as a chance to educate a child. Give them background on what it meant historically and how it is used today.

“*George* [a Scholastic book about a transgender fourth-grader that has generated much controversy] is the first middle-grade book dealing with a main character that is transgender. I did not shy away from this at all. Whether it is controversial for some portion of our population or not, it can be a Mirror or a Window for another child, and that helps to create empathy.”

As we talked, I continued to think about the idea of Mirrors and Windows in Newberys. *It’s like this, cat* (1964) offered a first-person present tense fourteen-year-old narrator trying to figure out life in NYC, or . . . *and now Miguel* (1954), the story of a Hispanic twelve-year-old shepherd who longed to join the adults on their summer sojourn in New Mexico. Both of these were great examples of Windows. And there were many more among the winners, numerous historical novels in settings all over the world.

Important to note, many of the Newbery winners were written by white women who lived in America, but the attempt has been made, at least, to offer a window into another world.

There are, however, very few Mirrors in the Newbery world. African American kids have strong examples of narrative main characters in *Souder* (1970), *M.C. Higgins the Great* (1975),

Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry (1977), *A Year Down Yonder* (2001), and *Bud, Not Buddy* (2000).

All but one of those stories take place in the Depression-era, Jim Crow South. The two or three other books featuring African American characters are fantasy, or slave history of Africans. If you are of Chinese descent, there are only two *Mirror* books available. From there, the list continues to dwindle; one Central American lead, one Korean lead, one Japanese lead, One Spanish lead and a Ghost. No luck if you're from Thailand. Or Russia. Only two books feature Native American characters, and one of those is almost ninety years old. There are, however, many, many, stories featuring preteen white girls, and, strangely, medieval adventures.

I had more questions about the books themselves.

“Any issues with controversial Newbery Books?”

“No problems with them. From a library perspective, I’ve found that the controversies over these books come less with the content than the idea that one book should have won over another. Over the last few years, the winners have used the Newbery as a platform to speak up about diversity, as part of the we-need-diverse-books movement. That’s not a controversy per se, just an interesting thing to watch. Both *The Crossover* (2015), *Last Stop on Market Street* (2016) are examples.”

“Would you say there is more diversity happening currently?” I asked.

“There is more diversity in books now, Matt de la Peña book *Last Stop on Market Street* just swept the award after Trump talked badly about him. It’s become a little bit of a political platform.”

“Do you get any pushback on that?”

“I really don’t. Every once in a while, we get a complaint about a word in a book, but none that I can recall are from Newberys.

“What I find is that people zero in on a single word and they take it out of context. In my position, we have to look at the whole picture to see if this word is being read in isolation, and if it is really a controversy.

At the risk of overgeneralizing, I have noticed that the calls to censor and restrict tend to come from people who are very conservative and religious, and they have a very specific viewpoint that they want their child to see, and they are applying that viewpoint to all others. At the public library, we can't do that. We serve way more people than just those that share one particular point of view. My view: It's parents that need to monitor what their children are reading.”

“Are old Newberys still popular?”

“If old winners are available, I will always keep them in stock. Two of our most popular are *Maniac Magee* (1991) and *Holes* (1999).

That she mentioned *Holes* as an old book cut me to the quick. It was one of the first books that got me back into the Newberys. I could see why it was a title that would be kept in stock; it's a great book. But there's one point I wanted to make specifically: it's not *old*.

“Why those two in particular?”

“That's a good question. I think that those two have the ability to speak to a wider audience. The older ones have more girl appeal than boy appeal. These two are broad enough for a child to see themselves in the book rather than getting pigeonholed. In terms of popularity, *Island of the Blue Dolphins* (1961) and *A Wrinkle in Time* (1963) are the earliest that are still popular. I keep six copies or so of these books, compared to the newer Newberys where I keep like twenty-five in the system.”

“Ok, here’s my big question: In your opinion, are the Newbery books really ‘The Most Distinguished?’”

Janet paused here before answering. “I think the Newbery winners are very high quality. It’s the one award that, for the most part, focuses on middle-grade fiction. The committee that decides has met for a year reading books and they are looking for the cream of the crop.

Other awards are equally distinguished but focus on a different aspect, such as illustration [Caldecott]. The Coretta Scott King award is equal in quality, but doesn’t have as much history, or as much name-recognition. But they’re not necessarily looking for the audience of Newbery; the focus of the Coretta Scott King award is to highlight underrepresented voices on race.”

“Has there ever been a year you thought there should have been a different winner?” I asked.

“Sometimes I’m surprised, but for the most part I see why they’ve chosen a particular book. I’m not a huge fantasy reader, so I’m not drawn to that, but some others find that interesting.

As the book buyer for a large library system, my goal is to provide a fresh and relevant collection for our kids and families. This is more important than picking a book because I like it. It’s not about me and not about my preference. The Newbery committee faces the same criteria, to see what strong contenders are and what rises out of that.”

“I work with grades three to five primarily and I find that the Newbery books are inaccessible to them due to reading level and the complexity of their themes. Have you experienced this with Newbery books?”

“Well, the Newbery award is really focused on the Middle Grade audience. There is another award, the Printz award, which recognizes Young Adult literature.”

I found myself confused by her delineations. Throughout my professional life I’ve only ever known of Children’s Literature and Young Adult. Early Readers existed for emerging readers in the primary grades, but I’d never heard of Middle Grade. Which wouldn’t be a big deal, except that it is MY JOB. I decided just to play cool and ask.

“Can you tell me the difference between Middle Grade and Young Adult writing?”

“There is not a clear line between these categories. It can waver. When I’m selecting items, I have to note in the catalog which category a book is in. There’s a certain portion of items I order that I can’t tell, so I have to read a couple chapters of those books before I can label them. When I read the description, I look for how old the main character is. If they are over the age of thirteen it is almost always a YA book. Then I ask: Does the book deal with a topic that is teen-sensitive? If so, how does the story deal with it? Teen books are far more likely to explore sexual identity, for example, or suicide—in general, issues that teens not children grapple with.”

“Ok, now can you share the difference between Middle Grades and Children’s Literature?”

“Certainly. Children’s Lit is the big umbrella. Middle Grade fiction is a group within that. I’ll break down the different categories of Children’s Lit for you, but I recently wrote a blog post about Middle Grade fiction, so that has a lot of info about that group.”

(Sidebar)

E-Z Guide to How Librarians Divide Children’s Literature

Picture Books Pre-Kindergarten–1st grade

Easy Readers 1st–3rd grade

Easy Chapter Books 2nd–4th grade. 7–9 years of age

Middle Grade: 4th–6th grade. Stories where vocabulary and concepts are appropriate for their age and reading level. It is typically kids ages 8–12.

Young Adult: 6th–9th grade. Generally for students who are strong readers but not quite ready for adult concepts. Themes often reflect an individual experiencing transition in life. Up to age 14.

Children's Literature vs. Middle Grade

Here's what we know about reading: The first books that are read to us serve the purpose of acquainting us with the act of reading. We learn how to hold a book, which way the letters orient on the page. Kindergarten teachers call this Concepts of Print.

Next, we learn by sight the relative code that is our alphabet. Most of us solidify the learning of our letters by memorizing the ABCs song (which—mind-blower—is sung to the tune of *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star*).

As we make the leap from being able to recognize letter shapes to understanding that they each represent a sound, we truly begin to read. We sound things out phonetically, while at the same time memorizing common words known as Sight Words. The goal is to know those common words automatically, without combining the pieces (try sounding out “the” or “and” for example).

Children's books serve the dual purpose of entertaining and providing literacy guides. Through them we learn that letters indicate sounds, and that words name objects and actions.

These books instruct, guide, and inform. When children have mastered the fundamentals of reading, they move on to books that have more words and fewer pictures. The stories are divided into episodes, or chapters. Around fourth grade, a developmental shift typically occurs; all the tools for decoding and developing vocabulary from context have become ingrained and, in a formal way, children stop learning to read and now read to learn. This is Middle Grade literature; as kids come across new words, they are able to figure them out by context, or from the root of the word, because by now they know a few dozen prefixes and even more suffixes. Character and story arc and author's intention are studied much more closely.

This developmental stage tends to be exciting and many voracious readers are born. The training wheels are off and the world's literature is available to the young adult. Favorite book series are devoured and dog-eared, and fan clubs are joined. A great example of a Newbery winner that fits this description is *Island of the Blue Dolphins* (1961). The main character, a young woman named Karana, a member of a small Native American community on an island off the coast of Santa Barbara, is left behind when a group of Russian hunters remove all the rest of the inhabitants. She lives alone for the next eighteen years, with only rare contact from outsiders. A boat is sent from the nearest coast and she is retrieved, living the rest of her days at the Santa Barbara Mission. She is hardy and resourceful, and kids identify with these qualities, as well as the larger theme of loss—of family, of culture, and of identity.

This is information I know from my work with and study of readers in my day-to-day life as a teacher. But in my conversation with Janet Spaulding, I learned much more.

Features of Middle-Grade writing

Here's what I learn from Janet about this middle genre of books: Middle-grade fiction is aimed at children ages 8 to 12 (grades 4 to 6) and features pre-teen characters who may be a little older than the reader. While teens and adults may appear as secondary characters in the story, the main character who drives the story will be of middle-grade age. In comparison to novels written for kids ages thirteen and up, middle-grade fiction tends to be shorter in length with less complex vocabulary and sentence structure. Stylistically, middle-grade fiction embraces a wide variety, including prose, novels-in-verse, and hybrid novels (intermingling text with illustrations). These novels are likely to be written in the third person and feature a single element/event around

which the story is based. Unlike novels written for teens, middle-grade fiction has an outward focus where the plot hinges more on what is happening to a character rather than in a character.

Fiction opens the world for kids and offers them a safe way to learn about experiences that are unlike their own. Through the pages of a book, kids can explore contemporary topics, such as diversity, prejudice, war/conflict, adversity, illness and death, but in a gentler way than teen or adult books might address those same issues. It is equally important that kids be able to see their own life experience mirrored in stories that feature characters with whom they can identify.

Now I get it: Middle Grade is the territory of the Newbery.

What Does Winning Mean?

What I think I'm doing when I write for the young is to articulate the glorious but fragile human condition for those whose hearts have heard but whose mouths, at the age of five or ten or fourteen, can't yet express. But the truth is, I can't express it either.

—Katherine Paterson, author of Newbery Gold Medal winners *Bridge to Terabithia* (1977) and *Jacob Have I Loved* (1981)²¹

What does it mean to write a children's book, and to have it win the prize for the Most Distinguished of a given year? Though I've been unable to contact a Newbery-winning author directly, there are plenty of print references to their feelings about the process; all the acceptance speeches are published in compilations issued by Horn books. The writer responses range from overwhelmed to incredulous, to just plain silly. But it is clear that for all of them this award is a life-changing experience.

²¹ William Zinsser, ed., *Worlds of Childhood: The Art and Craft of Writing for Children* (New York: Mariner Books, 1998).

In her 1980 speech for *A Gathering of Days: A New England Girl's Journal, 1830–32*, Joan Blos said: “It is an awesome thing to be told that you have made a distinguished contribution to children’s literature. I learned that I had won the Newbery medal late in January. The actual moment of notification – suitably close to midnight— was an event of transformative proportions, having all the trappings of magic, and not to be believed.”

Other winners are incredulous. Virginia Sorenson, author of *Miracles on Maple Hill* (1957), remarked: “Since the day the sky fell, the 4th of March, everybody has been asking, ‘How does it feel to receive the Newbery Medal?’ At first, I took this rhetorically as, ‘Hello, how are you?’— but then I saw that people were pausing to look at me, expecting an answer.”

Some winners are humorous. Joseph Krumgold went for the funny bone with his second gold-winning book, *Onion John* (1960): “To be sure, at the first news, there’s a moment of humility – a sense of being unworthy of a reward so great as this. But that moment passes very quickly. And pride takes its place, an overweening and continuous pride. Physically, I’ve found this state to be an inward pressure resembling an old-fashioned case of dyspepsia.”

Whether overwhelmed, incredulous, or just plain silly, two common threads I found in reading many of the acceptance speeches are that: 1) they’re not very interesting if you’re not already a big fan of the author, and 2) they rarely mention children. The children’s authors’ speeches read the same way adult fiction writers talk in metaphors about their craft; the work is in service to a higher power, whether that is (most often) a recognition that what they have produced is Literature, or a higher power like God.

After all my years as a classroom teacher, this feels very foreign. As Katherine Paterson recognized in the opening to this chapter, to work with children is to recognize that they are messy and complex and most of the work remains inexpressible and unanalyzable. The best

teachers, I've noticed, become a conduit between children and the outside world; children look to them for guidance from confusion, and they trust that care will be taken of them as they are challenged to grow. In return for that confidence and responsibility, it's the teacher's duty to help understand what they are going through, to know what they think is funny and what is profound.

So it's confusing for me reading these Newbery acceptance speeches; the writers seek acknowledgment of their craft as Writers, not for their connection to the children who will read their work. It seems to me that in the same way that when I craft lessons I have to let go of my "adult" self and think about what it's like to be sitting at a desk in my classroom, so too does a children's book author. Teaching is a complex act. I'm not trying to "be" a kid, but I am trying to channel what it's like to be a kid. The writers I like best do the same. So far, I've read many Newbery books, but it's rare that I come across a story that resonates in this way. *Missing May* (1993) does it, and so does *Call It Courage* (1941). Most books written for children are transparent; they read like adults just pretending.

Yet one of my favorite authors, Maurice Sendak, gets it.

People think I have some magic link to my childhood. If there is such a link, it's a process that bypasses my conscious mind, because I have very little real recollection. I couldn't stop and tell you why I'm writing and drawing certain episodes; they're coming from some inner source that does recollect.²²

Sendak was connected to the primacy of the work; he wasn't writing to be recognized, he was writing to figure something out. A second quotation from Sendak illustrates this well:

A little boy sent me a charming card with a little drawing on it. I loved it. I answer all my children's letters – sometimes very hastily – but this one I lingered over. I sent him a card and I drew a picture of a Wild Thing on it. I wrote, 'Dear Jim: I loved your card.' Then I got a letter back from his mother and she said: 'Jim loved your card so much he ate it.' That to me was one of the highest compliments I've ever received. He didn't care that it was an original Maurice Sendak drawing or anything. He saw it, he loved it, he ate it.²³

²² Zinsler, *Writing for Children*, 21.

²³ Luke Davies, *Hergé and Me*, Brisbane Times, 2011. (<https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/movies/herg-and-me-20111201-1o7jw.html>). Accessed 4/1/2019.

Newbery Committee Member: Lee Galda

I found Lee Galda's contact information through the University of Minnesota, where she is Marguerite Henry Professor of Children's Literature, Emerita, and former Newbery committee member. Though she was contacted out of the blue by a stranger, Dr. Galda very kindly offered to speak with me about her experience. I was a little overwhelmed; Dr. Galda fits the definition of an exemplary scholar in the field; she is the author of numerous articles, books, and book chapters about children's literature, and has sat on the review boards of several professional journals and on the editorial boards of *Children's Literature in Education* and *Journal of Children's Literature*. In 1998, she co-authored *The Development of School-Based Literacy: A Social Ecological Perspective* and was children's books department editor for *The Reading Teacher* from 1989 to 1993. Sometimes it's difficult to gauge someone's standing in a field for which one does not know the key players; but being the children's book editor at the journal *The Reading Teacher* alone would elicit awe from professional reading specialists—as it does from me.

We traded emails specifying dates and times and I noticed her communication style was clipped; no salutations, no extraneous information. Would she like to meet in person or chat by phone? "Phone is fine." she wrote back. I would come to learn that Dr. Galda does not mince words; she can come off as terse, but she is very thoughtful in her responses. She fleshed out a vivid picture of what it was like to serve on the Newbery award committee.

When I sent a list of questions, she did not comment on any of them but clearly one stuck out: "*Newbery occupies a confusing space for me as a reading specialist; they can be challenging for the readers I work with. Does the tone/content/language of the books ever get*

discussed?” I didn’t find out until our conversation was underway that I had unintentionally struck a nerve.

It was a freezing winter day when we connected. The only time Dr. Galda was available was during my prep period and the only space with any privacy at my school was in my car, so I made my way out to the lot.

In Minnesota folks put their wiper blades up when the forecast calls for heavy snow, and though it was sunny, all blades stood at attention for an afternoon accumulation. I set my phone on speaker mode, and held my laptop perched on the tops of my knees. The phone rang, Dr. Galda picked up, and after short pleasantries, she started in.

“I just want to say, right off the bat, the Newbery is not an award for popularity. If someone said, ‘Oh but kids won’t be naturally drawn to a particular story,’ that comment itself is inappropriate to the process. The charge of the committee is to find the Most Distinguished book. No limitations, except that it needs to be an original work. ‘*Kids Need to Like It*,’ does not appear anywhere in the guidelines. Someone did, in fact, bring that up on our committee, but it was challenged: you cannot consider it.”

I was taken aback.

“I was a reading specialist, too,” she continued, “And I could tell what you were thinking from your question. I just wanted to clear the air right away.”

It wasn’t obvious to me what the best path was, so I kept her engaged with the work that we share.

“Did you have any conflicted thoughts or challenges being on the Newbery committee that came from your perspective and experience as a reading specialist?”

“No, I didn’t have any conflicts, and I worked in a very large, very poor inner-city district in Milwaukee. The Newbery award is not meant to address the needs of children, it’s meant to identify a single book as Excellent.”

She paused. “I would argue, so would a friend who teaches fifth grade in Minneapolis, that to *not* offer our kids who struggle access to wonderful, challenging books through a variety of means [doing read alouds, etc.] would make for a sorry state of affairs. There are other prizes from other sources that meet those needs: High interest Low Level readers, recommendations from the National Council of Teachers, and the International Literacy Association does a list of children’s favorites. There are many avenues accessible to finding good books for your kids. But the Newbery isn’t it, and that’s not a flaw of the award. The award has been around since 1922, so it serves a different purpose than informing people who work with struggling readers.”

“What year did you sit on the Newbery committee?”

“I was on the 2003 committee, and the book that won was Avi’s *Crispin: The Cross of Lead*. We shocked a lot of the librarians by having *five* honor books. But we had good reasons for including them. Regardless, Avi’s book was such a masterful job of writing and a riveting story. And to hear him talk about it after, writing the book with such verisimilitude, was just amazing. And that year we had a really good pile of books in front of us.”

“Can you walk me through how the books get nominated?”

“Well, first the books are sent to us by the publishers. We read them all and then we nominated the books to be considered. [Our committee manager] kept track of all the nominations. When we showed up for committee meetings, she had all the books in the room waiting for us. Any book from any committee member that they even mentioned was there. We would read and email and talk about books.”

“How big is the committee?”

“Fifteen people. It’s an unworkable number, but the Newbery has strict discussion rules: go around the table and everyone gets to say their piece. This process was stilted at first, but gradually it got better. By the end it worked out beautifully.”

“After that, how were the books eliminated?” I asked.

“We had a table full of books, but any books that no one spoke up for were, literally, taken off the table. Then we got a chance to say what we thought. Then those books were taken off or left on the table one by one. There’s a numerical thing that you do to tabulate the votes. Any book that is not given a first, second, or third choice vote got taken off the table.”

“How do you move to a final vote?” I wondered.

“When the entire committee is ready you vote. First choice gets four points, second gets three points, third gets two points. You have to keep discussing and voting until one book gets at least thirty-two points and an eight-point lead [over] the next book. Avi’s book rose to that clear choice. I was thrilled with that, though my emotional favorite was *Pictures of Hollis Woods*, also Nancy Farmer’s *House of the Scorpion*.”

“What was the most challenging part of sitting on the committee?”

“There were *so many* books to read. I personally had in my study, three massive piles of books. I could look quickly over a book and with 99% accuracy put it in the No pile. But even with this filter, I still had a huge pile of Maybes. Then a smaller pile of Definites. I read through that Maybe pile very carefully. Really, everyone, did that; our obligation was to read all the books.

Turns out others on the committee had different ideas about what constitutes a good book. It took something like three days of discussion, very very late into the evening before we

[decided that] *Crispin* was the winner. But the books that rose to the top were discussed in every round.”

I decide to change up the questions and investigate Dr. Galda’s understanding of to whom the award is geared. After all, she was on the committee that enforced the rules. “Are Newbery’s really ‘children’s’ books?”

“*The House of the Scorpion* got a lot of argument on that topic: some said, ‘This is a book for fifteen or sixteen-year-olds.’ I would say, ‘I’m sorry but my thirteen-year-old and all his friends just gobbled it up.’ We had a lot of heated discussions. There were a couple [of] academics, a couple [of] librarians, mostly public, not school librarians, so there were varying degrees of knowledge about kids.”

After having spoken with Janet Spaulding, the Indianapolis Public Library’s book buyer, I was curious about what Dr. Galda’s take would be on the distinction between Children’s Lit and Young Adult. Would she describe the Middle Grades genre, too? So, I asked: “What’s the distinction between Children’s Lit and YA?”

“Well, *House of the Scorpion* brought up the distinction between the Newbery and YA. Newbery is birth through age fourteen. And we reviewed a picture book last year, for better or for worse, depending on your opinions.

My thirteen-year-old son read *House of the Scorpion* on the way to soccer with his friends in the car. They had one copy and they loved it. It’s eligible for the YA award. The age limit is a little higher for the Newbery than it probably should be; seems like twelve should be the upper limit. That thirteen- to fourteen-year-old age bracket is eligible for both the Newbery and the Young Adult awards. This is a function of how the Newbery set the parameters.”

“What was the most challenging part of being a committee member?”

“For me it was not talking out of turn; I’m used to a more free-form discussion. I did hold my tongue in classes until my students all had an opportunity to speak, but because we were a committee, I found it difficult not to have a free-form discussion.”

“What was it like if a book you really liked didn’t get the votes it needed to move on?” I asked.

“Well, your heart does get set on some books. I loved Pat Giff’s *Pictures of Hollis Woods*. I used that book in lessons for the next ten years after it got published. But because we were so orderly in our conversations over nominated books, I had to contain my compliments until it was my turn. I could not argue that the winning book, *Crispin* was not better on some levels. It was certainly a more difficult book to write.

Just as this award has nothing to do with popularity, it doesn’t matter which book you liked the most: again, it needed to be The Most Distinguished. So, I understand why *Crispin* won.”

“Where do all the Newbery nominations come from?”

“Smaller publishers are more than welcome to send books; they have to meet the criteria, the author needs to be a citizen or resident of the US. The book must not be dependent on other media for its enjoyment: this has raised an interesting conundrum for Graphic Novels. I would have loved to have been on a committee where graphic novels were discussed.”

“Is there any way in which you thought that the committee [format] is outmoded?”

“The discussion set-up was intended for efficiency but also to make sure everyone gets a voice. It helps people not be shy, but it also forces people to insert their opinion. It quells the dominant voices and gives a platform to those who shrink from it. It was a huge committee,

people from inner-urban and suburban libraries, and people from the south, the Midwest, the west. It wouldn't have been as valid if we hadn't had that structure in place.

Another way it felt outmoded was from the makeup of the committee members, specifically people's beliefs about children. People who say they 'know' kids often don't, really. And there were some of those claims on the committee. You've got to open yourself up to kids and be a part of their lives. Throughout my time as an academic, I made sure to always be a volunteer in some capacity in local schools. I've always felt the need to stay in direct contact with kids. Otherwise how could I talk about children if I didn't know children? That might be the only arcane aspect to how the process functions."

"So, all in all it worked well?"

"It was a fairhanded process. It was also an exhausting experience; doing all the reading on top of your day job, which in my case meant raising kids and being a professor; I wasn't very good company for the whole year because I had my nose stuck in a book all the time.

Also, our process at the annual meeting was long. Very long. We were in Philadelphia that year. We worked straight through dinner. I just remember someone showing up with bags of snacks to offer us something to eat.

"You got to notify the winners, right? What was that like?"

"It's all secret. What happens is that you have to decide the day and time to notify winners, then the next morning those winners are announced at the ALA conference. But before the conference announcement you call the authors. It's exciting, but busy. Avi had been in attendance at ALA but got sick and had to fly back to Denver right at the beginning.

So, it was with some reluctance that we had to call him at four or five in the morning. He answered the phone almost immediately. There wasn't caller ID then, so he was totally shocked.

He happened to be up at that hour because his daughter had asked him to proofread something she had written. He was so moved. It was something like his twenty-fifth book, so quite a milestone. He had won the Honor in the past, but not the Gold. After Avi, we still had to call all the honor book winners. And we still had to be present at the announcement press conference! When we called Pat Giff [*Pictures of Hollis Woods*, 2003 Newbery Honor], she told us later that she hung up and danced around her kitchen. Carl Hiaasen, who wrote *Hoot*, was chasing his two-year-old down the stairs when we called him. The phone rings that morning and it happens. It's like the Nobel prize. It's exciting; the whole committee is there and cheers and laughs with the author."

"But still, you've got to keep it completely secret, right?"

"Yes, secrecy is important and can be challenging to uphold; the day before announcing, some committee members were at a dinner event hosted by Hyperion Press. It was the night after we made our decision, there was a day's lag. So, there we were, surrounded by good friends but we could not say a word. We couldn't even smile. It really is a huge thing in the world of children's book writers. [Winning a Newbery is] practically a promise of eternity."

Dr. Galda and I exchanged some pleasantries, wrapped up the conversation, and I was left sitting in my car watching white plumes of my frozen breath, thinking. I looked down at my watch and realized I had a few minutes left before my prep period was over and students show up at my door.

I found Dr. Galda's description of the inner-workings of the Newbery committee fascinating; some chaos, but everyone principled, everyone at least attempting to refine their choices together.

In his 1998 excoriating exposé of the Nobel committee’s underlying chaos and backbiting, Michael Specter had this to say:

A committee of six is charged with directing the lengthy selection process, winnowing the field, then recommending the finalists—usually five— to the rest of the members. This year there are six finalists; the winner will be chosen by a majority of secret ballots stuffed into an antique silver drinking mug. Bickering is common and the battles . . . were often intense. . . But in an age where privacy is increasingly rare, the rifts within the academy have never been so apparent- or so public. The conflicts today are usually portrayed as generational disputes within the academy, but the problems are also deeply personal. Members are forbidden to discuss their deliberations, but, even if they were not, they would have trouble finding the time: they are simply too busy savaging each other.²⁴

One thing I’ve learned in talking with a former Newbery committee member is this: in contrast to the Nobel group, at least they’ve got their shit together. That said, I found myself still stuck on the initial concern I had entering my conversation with Dr. Galda: Is it *really* not important what kids think about the books, only that a committee of experts has deemed one The Best?

²⁴ Michael Specter, “The Nobel Syndrome, Letter from Stockholm,” *New Yorker*, 10/5/1998.

What Makes the Award Controversial?

Children's Book means a book for which children, up to and including age 14, are an intended and potential audience. Books for this entire age range are to be considered. ALSC awards are given to "children," defined as "persons of ages up to and including fourteen."

In some instances, award-winning books have been criticized for exceeding the upper age limit of fourteen.

—American Library Association John Newbery Award Committee Manual 2015, p. 69

The Classroom, The Crucible

The beginning of the school year in California is always hot. A charge of excitement starts launches the new school year, but the sun's heat is relentless and soon the afternoons drag. Air conditioning is not a feature of California public schools and with thirty young people in the same room, all the floor fans do is push the warm, sticky air around and around. The first month of school is a good time to investigate the properties of shaved ice, not to introduce challenging literature.

Unfortunately, in classrooms across the country this is the exact time that fresh and expectant elementary teachers do just that. I know this because for many years I was that teacher.

It was early in my career when I decided to delve into the Newberys instructionally. I was excited in those first few days to get started on our first Class Novel, a book that we'd read and study together, one that all students would have in common. Having been reinvigorated by *Holes*, I was excited to share some of the magic with my students. I put in a request for a class set of the books with the office, and within two weeks, they appeared. It's not common that a school will order class sets of books without multiple teachers weighing in, but I was so enthusiastic at the time that the principal signed off immediately. In my mind, we'd argue about

the character's motivations, we'd develop a common language for discussing books, and most important, my charges would get swept up in the magic of the story, just as I had, many times in elementary school.

That first year I chose *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* as our class novel. *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* is a Newbery award-winning tale of adventure and intrigue featuring some laboratory rats that, through the various trial drugs, have developed super intelligence. The story stuck with me through my youth and as a new teacher I remembered it fondly. "Teach what you love," a veteran told me. *Mrs. Frisby* seemed a solid place to start our year in literature.

Along with my personal interest, a previous teacher had created a curriculum folder to go along with each chapter that focused on vocabulary and elements of plot. As a new teacher, this curriculum was invaluable and though I remember glancing over the first vocabulary list and frowning at its challenges (*Abstemious? Dilatory?*), it meant I wouldn't have to do all the planning myself. Teaching research methods for projects for the science fair and long division would occupy the majority of my planning time.

The roll-out of the book did not go well. After giving an overview of the characters and describing how we would study the book together, I solicited students to read aloud. "Will you read for us?" I asked, pointing to a new student in the back. He shook his head *No* vigorously. I tried again with a different student. Again, *No*. Eventually, when they saw I was going to doggedly pursue this path, a few hands reluctantly went up. I was a naïve young teacher, and I was being taught a lesson.

After the first week, I graded the first quiz on the book and was struck, again, by the challenge of teaching this book: all but four or five students failed. The students who passed did *very* well, and I noticed that they were the same students who volunteered to read each day.

By the middle of the book, each minute of the reading lesson sagged like wet cardboard. Each session of our daily thirty minutes of Drop Everything and Read (DEAR) time, *Mrs. Frisby* was greeted with groans and the book itself became a whisper-barrier, a note-writing protector, and, in some cases, a pillow. When I threatened a pop quiz, the class got nervous, but nothing changed. So, I followed through, and, again, the same four or five students passed. And they aced it.

I knew things were not going as planned when, walking around the classroom I asked, “What do you think Mrs. Frisby’s motivation was to talk to the rats in the rose bush?” A student new to the school raised his hand.

“Miguel?”

He set his book down and scrunched his eyebrows. “Teacher, why are you making us read this book?”

I should’ve gotten the hint there, but I didn’t. In the spring I dragged the class through the Holocaust-survival tale, another Newbery winner, *Number the Stars*. It’s a great book, but only if you know its historical context of WWII. I thought I gave good background information for the students to understand the story. I realized I hadn’t when Miguel asked me at the end, “Mr. Sassaman, why did the Jews run away? Were the German soldiers bad?”

The next year we slogged through *Out of the Dust*, a poignant coming-of-age tale written completely in free-verse. The action, if you can call it that, takes place in the middle of the Dust Bowl, a setting which is only one or two slots lower on the scale than free-verse. The scale being *The Most Boring Things 5th Grade Kids Have Ever Read in Their Entire Lives*.

After a few tries, I relegated the Newbery books to the Advanced Readers small reading group in my class and picked titles that were more in line with the actual reading levels of my class. “Shoot for the middle,” my elementary teacher cousin advised. Finally, I did.

My first choice, Beverly Cleary’s one-trick-pony, *The Mouse and the Motorcycle*, was a huge hit. There’s no actual story in the book, but the fact that a cute little mouse rides around on a toy motorcycle with a helmet made of half a ping-pong ball is captivating to an audience of ten-year-olds.

And it was here that I confronted my first important truth that was hard for me to wrap my newbie teaching head around: the Newbery winners are not particularly kid-friendly.

Trying to find a solution to the lack of interest displayed by my students, I came across a quote by Lucy Calkins, a curriculum-writer and professor at Columbia University Teachers College. “I can't help but believe that thousands, even millions, more children would grow up reading if the Newbery committee aimed to spotlight books that are deep and beautiful and irresistible to kids.”

This marked a major shift in my thinking. I wasn’t the first to find out the hard way that the Newbery gold medal winners are not *irresistible* kids’ books.

My mission in education had shifted as well. Initially drawn to the profession out of general altruism, I was finding that I wanted to focus specifically on reading. It’s one of the foundations needed to navigate the world successfully. I wanted to help break down that barrier for as many kids as I could.

I agreed with Lucy Culkin and I noticed that the main thrust of reading in classroom teaching was done by well-meaning, misguided teachers such as myself. So many kids were being left behind and the key, it seemed to me, was in more deliberate reading instruction, not

reading books aloud in class. I didn't want just to get by being an average *teach to the middle* teacher any more. I enrolled in a graduate program for my Reading Specialist license.

As evening classes began, I found myself thrust into a new world, one highly critical of current practices. "We're going to change the way you think about reading," a professor smiled as an introduction to the program. By now, I was totally on board. Little did I know it would mean a complete shift in my estimation of the Newbery winners. And as big a challenge as it is that the Newberys are often out of the realm of the majority of elementary readers, there are other problems the award books face.

If Newbery Loses, Captain Underpants Wins

Finally, and this is one of the gravest faults, too many of the books issued, especially for younger children, are trivial in content. Exceptionally beautiful in format, prepared and presented with meticulous care, they are shallow and inane in content.

—"Certain Higher Standards," *Publisher's Weekly* p. 196, 1941

Dav Pilkey is a literary god. With well over 70,000,000 books sold and a net worth that's in the bazillions, he qualifies to join the ranks of publishing giants like Stephen King and Dr. Seuss. But I guarantee that unless you're around children in the elementary grades, you've never heard of him.

At school, I'm looking up massive selling writers on the internet, when a fellow teacher fourth grade teacher walks by.

"Have you ever heard of Dav Pilkey?" I ask.

"Who?" She responds.

"Dav Pilkey."

"Pinky?"

"No, P-I-L-K-E-Y."

“Nope, doesn’t ring a bell. Is he an author?” She knows I’m learning about the Newbery award. “If you tell me a title, I might recognize his books.”

“Ok,” I say, smiling. “Here’s a title: *Captain Underpants*.”

“Oh, *that* guy.” She groans. “Of course, I know him. Well, know *of* him. I don’t actually know anything about him except for the fact that that I didn’t like his books when I was a librarian. I was always annoyed that the second-grade boys, that’s all they wanted to read.”

“Why was that annoying?”

“Because there is *much* higher quality literature out there, but the boys were always distracted by the fact that the book focused on farting and underpants as super powers. I never did a critical reading of it. I mean, maybe there is some literary value to that stuff. I just never saw it.”

She’s not mistaken. I witnessed the exact same response by the boys in my classrooms. I have actually paged through these books, looking for any sign, any morsel of depth. New vocabulary? *Nope*. Characters with more depth than cardboard? *Nada*. An actual story arc? *Zilch*. You get the same caloric content from eating a bowl of Cap’n Crunch.

“At least,” the teacher friend says with a shrug, “they liked them and there’s value in that, right? A librarian would say it’s not your job to tell kids what they can and cannot read. They’re reading something they enjoy.”

The reading teacher in me repeated, *At least they are reading*. But later I would ask myself: Is that really enough? *Captain Underpants* is uniquely situated to challenge the question of whether it is best to have kids read whatever they want.

“I had a very similar experience with the *Goosebumps* books,” Heather tells me. “I thought they were not great literature, but kids got obsessed with them. They would read one

after the other after the other. And ultimately I concluded that was a good thing.” And I can attest: Goosebumps are much more intellectually inspiring, use creative descriptive language, and are well-paced, if thinly plotted.

You know one of the only authors who has sold more books than Dav Pilkey?

R.L. Stine.

Kids Don't Like Them

So, *Captain Underpants* is out of the Newbery running, but that doesn't mean popular books are not valued. I decide to scan a commentary thread on the second book in the Underpants series, *Captain Underpants and the Attack of the Talking Toilets* (I don't want to give the whole thing away, but let's just say it's a *shitty* adventure story hahaha), to get a sense of why folks are drawn to the *Underpants* phenomenon. There are 2,064 reviews up on Amazon, and over 522 copies of the book for sale, and for a mere cent you can own your very own copy.

The reviews are almost uniformly five stars and are just as uniform in their subject matter; in all but a few of them, parents extol the virtues of how a funny comic book got their kid to read, or how much are fun they are to read together.

Cutemonster summed up most sentiments with this comment: “Don't rule out comic books. They are a fun, visually engaging way to encourage kids to read.”

Does the Newbery need to be likable?

Since the Newbery award is for children's books, you'd assume that the books selected by the ALSC committee would be loved by children. Unfortunately, that's simply not the case.

Strange as it may seem, a debate has been raging since the early days of the award: Do kids actually like the “most distinguished” book of the year?

I conducted an informal study at Prairie Seeds Academy, the elementary school where I teach. It’s a Hmong charter school and on a Friday, a fifth grade teacher lets me come in to her class to take a brief class survey.

“Ok, I’m here to get a sense of what kids like to read at your age,” I said, standing at the white board with a dry erase marker in my hand. “Let’s start with what books were your favorites over this year. Think of two or three books you’ve loved, shout them out, and I’ll make a list up here.” As students yelled out their favorite titles, I compiled the list, busily making hash marks next to repeated titles. I set a two minute timer and when it went off, I stepped back from the board to look at the results. *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* came up a few times, so did the comics from the series *Pokemon*, and *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. Interestingly, the most common books to come up were the two class novels a teacher used with the class, *The Birchbark House* by Louise Erdrich, and *Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes* by Eleanor Coerr.

Any information gleaned from such a casual survey is, of course, anecdotal, but two things stuck out to me: Not a single Newbery made the list. And the most common books referenced were books taught by teachers. I taught *Sadako* to the class, interspersing chapters with origami lessons. In the end, the entire grade could fold their own crane. It makes sense that that kids would remember a book that they worked through with a teacher’s guidance, chapter by chapter, focusing on various characters or themes or elements of writing. It also makes sense that the power of an adult to tell children what books are best has disproportionate weight in their own decision-making.

My heuristic survey was illuminating, if amateurish. Others have applied a much more rigorous research methodology. John Beach, associate professor of literacy education at St. John's University in New York, decided to look into the popularity of adult-chosen books to the popularity of kid-chosen books. For the former, he used the Notable Children's Books, an annual list of great books from authorities in the field of children's literature. For the latter, he used the results of the Children's Choice Awards, the tally of ballots sent in by 12,500 kids across the country.

Here's what he found: in the past thirty years of book lists from these two sources, there is only a 5 percent overlap between the Children's Choice Awards, run through the highly-regarded International Reading Association, and the Notable Children's Books list from the equally revered American Library Association. *Five percent.* That's one in every twenty kids who thinks a notable children's book, like a Newbery, is worth voting on.

The Newberys are too hard for elementary readers, and the kids don't like them. Worse, kids are highly influenced by the options presented by academic figures in schools. Professor Beach wrapped this all up in one highly controversial statement: "The Newbery has probably done far more to turn kids off to reading than any other book award in children's publishing."²⁵

So, the popularity debate rages on: From Melcher's worry in the 1930s that kids' books were too thin, through today when New Yorker writer Rebecca Mead wonders: "What if instead of [reading books that are not challenging], young readers hungry only for more of the palatable same?"²⁶

²⁵ Valerie Strauss, "Are 'sad and difficult' Newbery Medal books turning off young readers?" Washington Post 1/17/2009 https://lancasteronline.com/features/entertainment/are-sad-and-difficult-newbery-medal-books-turning-off-young/article_85fac70e-71ae-59ec-b576-db36e269445a.html). Accessed 4/1/2019.

²⁶ (New Yorker, October 22, 2014: <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/percy-jackson-problem>)

As a reading specialist, I find myself firmly on the side of both Frederic Melcher and Rebecca Mead: the kids who read *Captain Underpants* do not necessarily go on to read challenging texts. It's true that you need the basics to be able to access the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. But just the basics won't get you anywhere; you also need much beyond the basics.

But more to the point: we don't really want kids "just reading"; we want kids who grow and develop their vocabularies to understand shades of meaning, who expose themselves to texts of increasing difficulty, who challenge themselves to contrast themes between works, and who employ sophisticated and complex analysis of character and story structure. There's something more at stake than my belabored analogy, but kids should enjoy the process, and be challenged by what they read, consistently. And I say this with knowledge that is not commonly brought to arguments like this: We're in the midst of a Literacy Crisis. And I mean crisis with a capital C.

Recently an acquaintance remarked to me that her kids loved reading the *Lord of the Rings* in third grade. When I commented on how she should be proud of such remarkably adept readers, she replied that surely there were "outliers on either end" of the reading spectrum. And this is where many well-intentioned parents perpetuate a very common misconception: some kids learn to read, and, well, some kids just don't. In this common analysis, a small percentage of kids are great at reading and a small percentage kids suck at it. Hopefully you're one of the great readers; that's the way of the world. Unfortunately, actual data on our reading "health" do not bear this out.

According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (N.A.E.P.), a nationwide biennial assessment often referred to as "The Nation's Report Card," fourth grade students who have read, say, *Harry Potter* (which puts them in Advanced) comprise only 9 percent of readers in both public and nonpublic schools. At the other end, 32 percent, or a full one-third of all

students in fourth grade, are trying to string together the words in the story *Mr. Cooper is Super* at Basic or below.²⁷ That's a frightening statistic: fully one third of all students are reading below their grade level. We have a lot of work to do getting kids read beyond Mr. Underpants.

Profanity, Blasphemy, and Execrations

Granted, Newbery books aren't on the same scale as some of the young adult books out there, but that doesn't mean that they don't mention violence. It's interesting that former Newbery committee member Lee Galda brought up racism, as there is plenty of racism in Newbery books. And while that does bear examining, there is a more alarming quality that I've come across in the books: If there is one defining characteristic across the scope of Newbery books it is brutal violence. There are stabbings so deep and so brutal that the knife blade gets stuck in the bone (*The Dark Frigate*), or where a knife cuts through the victim's throat "like butter" (*The Graveyard Book*). There are clear descriptions of rape (*Julie of the Wolves*), descriptions of men and dogs being beaten to near death (*Souder, Shiloh*), and a girl who throws a bucket of lit kerosene on her mother, burning her so severely that she lives out her last days in excruciating pain and eventually dies (*Out of the Dust*).

They're no Quentin Tarantino flick, but they can be challenging to read, psychologically. The images persist.

The Newberys are controversial from other perspectives as well. As of the most recent accounting, five Newbery winners sit on the list of the hundred Most Commonly Challenged

²⁷ 'How did U.S. students perform on the most recent assessments?' *The Nation's Report Card: The National Assessment of Educational Progress*, Washington D.C., 2019 (<https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/default.aspx>) (4/1/2019).

Books in the United States:²⁸ *A Wrinkle in Time*, *Julie of the Wolves*, *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, *Bridge to Terabithia*, and *The Giver*.

The agency that compiles these banned book citations, the OIF, is run by the ALA, tracking the formal complaints registered against books through schools and libraries. The OIF also compiles statistics on books that have been banned. The results are disaggregated by decade, and the most recent data is from 2000–2009. While this may not provide an up-to-date reference, at least we can see a picture of how books are challenged.

Since its publication in 1962, *A Wrinkle in Time* has become one of the most frequently banned or challenged books. There are the opinions of classroom and reading teachers such as myself that it's too dark for younger children and leveled beyond middle elementary grades. But there are more outspoken voices, making a concerted effort to have the book removed from public consumption. Conservative Christians have led the charge, and their central objection has been the way that the book's author, Madeleine L'Engle, mixes religion with science. There's blasphemy in the idea that science could trump acts of God, and *A Wrinkle in Time* fairly revels in this thinking. The father in the story has invented a way to travel through time and space, by bending both. It's called a Tesseract, and it allows the characters to move freely around the universe. High blasphemy.

L'Engle was, in truth, an Episcopalian, yet at the time, many Christians viewed her religious references as unorthodox. "She was engaged in this project of revisioning Christianity, pretty much like C.S. Lewis was with *The Chronicles of Narnia*," says Marek Oziewicz, a

²⁸ 'Top 100 Banned/Challenged Books: 2000-2009' *ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom*, Chicago, IL, American Library Association, (<http://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/top-100-bannedchallenged-books-2000-2009>). Accessed 4/1/2019.

professor of literacy education at the University of Minnesota. It was “a vision of Christianity as a form of science, and science as a form of search for spirituality.”²⁹

Ten years later, in 1972 the next book on the list was published, *Julie of the Wolves*, the coming of age story of a young Inuk girl in the far north of Alaska. Over the years, parents have objected to a specific scene in the book in which Julie’s husband via arranged marriage sexually assaults her. This event precipitates Julie’s flight, alone, into the vast Alaskan tundra. Trying to reach San Francisco, she hopes to cross the hundreds of miles of the desolate expanse by her wits; no tools, no shelter. The entire story is of hardship. Julie, for example is forced to survive on food regurgitated by other animals at one point, but no other scene rises to this, two-thirds of the way through the book. Julie’s arranged husband, Daniel, comes home late from working, opens the door and berates her:

“They’re laughing at me. That’s what’s wrong. They say, ‘Ha, ha. Dumb Daniel. He’s got a wife and he can’t mate her. Ha.’”

He pulled her to her feet and pressed his lips against her mouth. She pulled away. “We don’t have to,” she cried.

“They’re laughin’,” he repeated, and tore her dress from her shoulder. She clutched it and pulled away. Daniel grew angry. He tripped her and followed her to the floor. His lips curled back and his tongue touched her mouth. Crushing her with his body, he twisted her down onto the floor. He was as frightened as she.

The room spun and grew blurry. Daniel cursed, kicked violently, and lay still. Suddenly he got to his feet and ran out of the house. “Tomorrow, tomorrow I can, I can, can, can, ha, ha,” he bleated piteously.”³⁰

One of the biggest surprises to land on that list, for me, is my childhood favorite, *Bridge to Terabithia* (1978). As for why the book has been placed on the banned list, author Katherine Paterson explained, “Initially, it was challenged because it deals with a boy who lives in rural Virginia, and he uses the word “Lord” a lot, and it's not in prayer. Then there are more

²⁹ ‘A Wrinkle in Time’s’ Long Religious Controversy,’ *The History Channel online*, 8/31/18 (<https://www.history.com/news/wrinkle-in-time-banned-christian-controversy>). Accessed 4/1/2019.

³⁰ Jean Craighead George, *Julie of the Wolves* (New York: Harper Collins, 1972), 120.

complicated reasons. The children build an imaginary kingdom, and there was the feeling that I was promoting the religion of secular humanism, and then New Age religion.” But with any reasonable distance, it’s easy to see that these complaints are ridiculous; Paterson’s parents were Christian missionaries, and she is married to a Presbyterian minister.³¹

The most frequently cited reasons to challenge *The Giver* (1994) have been “Violence” and claims that the book is “Unsuited to [the] Age Group”—or in other words that it’s too dark for children. This comes from Barbara Jones, director of the Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF), which maintains a database of attempts to remove books from schools.³²

The last book on this list, *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (1977), was first challenged in 1993 by a Louisiana high school because of “racial bias.” Then in 1998, a California middle school challenged it because of “racial epithets,” and an Alabama elementary school library because of “racial slurs.” But most telling, in 2004 a Florida school district challenged it because it was “inappropriate” for the age of the group reading it. The racial slur referred to is the term “nigger.”³³

How do these books get banned? Well, seventy-one percent of the challenges were to material in schools or school libraries. Another twenty-four percent were to material in public

³¹ American Booksellers Association website, posted 7/29/2002 “Connecticut Residents Seek to Ban Two Newbery Medal Winners from School” (<https://www.bookweb.org/news/connecticut-residents-seek-ban-two-newbery-medal-winners-school>), accessed 4/1/19.

³² Blatt, Ben. Slate, posted 8/14/2014, ‘Why Do So Many Schools Try to Ban *The Giver*?’ (<https://slate.com/culture/2014/08/the-giver-banned-why-do-so-many-parents-try-to-remove-lois-lowrys-book-from-schools.html>), accessed 4/1/19.

³³ Atlanta Black Star website. ‘10 Black Books You May Not Have Known Were Banned or Challenged’ 3/24/2014 (<https://atlantablackstar.com/2014/03/24/10-black-books-you-may-not-have-known-were-banned-or-challenged/9/>). Accessed 4/1/2019.

libraries (down two percent since 1999). Sixty percent of the challenges were brought by parents, fifteen percent by patrons, and nine percent by administrators.³⁴

It is important to keep in mind that these five children's books are on a list that includes both well-known controversial adult books (*Mein Kampf*, *The Satanic Verses*, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, *Ulysses*, *Naked Lunch*, *Tropic of Cancer*), and the more predictably controversial (*When Dad Killed Mom*, *The New Joy of Gay Sex*, *A Time to Kill*). But keep in mind, these are children's books.

In The Midst of a Reading Crisis

Tran is banging his head against the wall, forehead first and not gently. He's only ten and small for his age, but the rhythmic Thump, Thump, Thump has some real weight behind it; he's trying to do damage. We're in a crowded room of fourth graders, each with white cardboard study carrels on their desks and computers in front of them. It's the mid-year reading assessment, but no one is looking at their screen. Everyone is looking over at Tran, and then back at me.

I don't work with Tran in small group; the only information I have is that his scores were low back in the fall. What I do know is that just three minutes after I read the testing instructions out loud and everyone had logged on to test, Tran raised his hand.

"I'm finished," he said as I walked up. He was looking at his computer, but not at anything in particular. More like looking through the computer.

"Whoa there!" I said sternly, crouching down to his level. "What's going on here? We just started. You need to do your best here. Go back and review each answer and give it your best shot." I cocked an eyebrow at him to say No Monkey Business.

³⁴ Banned and Challenged Books. A website of the ALA Office For Intellectual Freedom. (<http://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/statistics>) Accessed 4/1/2019.

“No,” he said, not breaking his dull stare at the screen. “I’m done.” That’s when he stood up and walked over to the wall.

I was strict with Tran because the mid-year assessments are important. The beginning of the year results are a jumble; kids are new and fresh off the buzz of summer. The routines of school haven’t been established and it’s not uncommon that kids who’ve been swimming and bike riding and video-gaming haven’t been reading much. Sometimes not at all.

The winter assessments hold much more weight; with two points of data, now we’ve got a trend line that shows positive or negative change on a variety of reading skills. We’re measuring their understanding of phonics, fluency, comprehension, vocabulary. And when parents, principals, and classroom teachers ask: How is this child doing in reading? Now we can see. It is mid-year and I want to see something—anything—about Tran.

I try sticking my hand on Tran’s forehead while telling him to stop, but he just smashes it into the wall. Luckily, after a few more head knocks, Tran stops on his own. He leans his whole body on his forehead, shoulders slouched. Noticing that he’s calmed, I put a hand on his shoulder and crouch at his side again. He immediately starts crying. He does not look at me when I ask what’s the matter but talks directly into the wall. “I don’t know how to read,” he says. “I hate reading.”

Though eventually I get Tran to calm down and return to his seat, a cloud of guilt clings to me; how did I let Tran fall through the cracks? The answer, unfortunately, is simple: I am one reading specialist working with nine different classrooms over three grade levels. When composing my schedule and compiling small groups for reading intervention classes, I’m poring over the assessment data for low readers who struggle with similar deficits. It’s the best way to remediate; if I’m teaching six kids with six different disabilities, everybody’s floundering. But

this method also cuts out students like Tran who fall through the cracks, students who are quiet in class, follow the rules, and are helpful to the teacher. Many times these kids get overlooked; their scores are very low, but they're quiet and on task and the classroom teacher suggests I attend to a different student with similar reading needs but more behavior issues.

Then the assessments roll around and that's where I really get to learn about Tran's struggles. It's tough to feel like my work is the equivalent of putting a finger in a dike; kids not getting the help they need floating by struggling secretly for air.

Tran can't read the Newbery books. In fact, the books that Tran can read—and should be reading—are geared towards emerging readers in first grade. But that's not what his teacher and school librarian put out on the display to show off as great literature. Navigating the world of text that surrounds him is a daily struggle for Tran, and sadly, schools are populated with more students like him than the kids who read beyond their years and soak up advanced books like the Newberys. When I see Tran banging his head against a wall in frustration, I wonder why, over the span of one hundred Newbery books that only a couple are books that Tran can read. Is the Newbery committee secretly a group of elitists? Do they not care that the message coming across schools loud and clear is that only advanced readers can have access to “the best” stories?

In this developing frustration, I decide to reach out to someone who knows, talk with someone who can address these concerns: a Newbery committee member.

Lisa Van Drasek, Newbery Committee Member

It is November in Minnesota, which means it is freezing. Once again, I'm sitting in my car in the school parking lot, laptop bunched up against my chest, the engine idling. It's my prep

period, and a few earlier I'd gotten the name of a former Newbery Committee member, Lisa Van Drasek. We exchanged emails; I told her about my quest and she agreed to be interviewed.

I'm lucky to score this interview: Lisa Von Drasek is, in the world of Children's literature, a total badass. Not only did she found the Cook Prize (given to a STEM book chosen by children in grades three to four), she reviews children's books for the New York Times and has been a juror on the National Book Awards, the American Library Association's Notable Children's Books, and, most important to me, has been on the Newbery Award Committee in 2002. The book she voted on was *Crispin Cross of Lead*, which won the Gold Medal in 2003.

My phone is set to speaker as I type and ask questions. My feelings are still running strong, thinking about Tran about how challenging the Newbery is for kids reading at or below grade level in fourth or fifth grade. And forget the third graders.

Lisa opened the conversation with an air of congeniality as we began to talk, but very quickly the interview took a turn; my discontent with the Newberys has been gathering wind. Tran is right there at the forefront of my mind and I share this: the Newbery being labeled "the best" puts teachers in awkward situations trying to teach some of the stories.

"That's not our problem," she replied, in curt dismissal. "The books are chosen for literary merit, not popularity."

The speaker on my phone could barely cope with the idling engine noise and I realized that to conduct the interview I would have to cut the engine and relinquish my sole source of heat. With no heat source, the temperature dropped precipitously. Lisa continued explaining her position.

"The number one thing to remember about the Newbery for classroom use is this: at no point is what you are talking about a consideration. When we [the committee members] are

evaluating the books of the year, at *no time* will someone say: “This is the perfect book for fifth graders.” It simply doesn’t come up. Consideration of the book’s reading level, how it might be used in classroom instruction, bringing into account teacher experience, none of these things come up ever. Period.”

She really did say *Period*. And that wasn’t the half of it.

“When people complain that the language of a particular book is inappropriate or that the content is not for fourth graders, the answer is always: Every book is not for every child. The Newbery is, ideally, considered in a vacuum, not with any connection to classroom use. Nowhere in the criteria is the readability of a book given consideration.”

In the moment, it seems like an easy answer to a complex problem. “I know you’ve been an elementary school librarian,” I say. “Doesn’t it cross your mind that the Newbery is skewed to advanced readers? Why aren’t great books recognized for non-advanced readers?”

“They are, and they aren’t. *Frog and Toad* did win, as an Honor book in 1973 and that’s a first grade book. But when you’re sitting reading four hundred books, you realize quickly that the good books must be good enough to have a deep discussion. There are books you read that you really enjoy. *Clementine* is a great example; it’s a wonderful read aloud, it’s a great high-low (high interest, low reading level) reader that speaks to the ADD kid, they can really relate. But it’s not a book you can have a deep discussion about. I’ve also noticed that it’s hard for humorous books to win. It’s hard to have a deep discussion about a funny book. That’s why there’s so much tragedy in the Newbery books. People die all the time.”

“Were there books you liked for children as a librarian?”

“Yes, as a librarian, there are tons of great books I could recommend. But remember, these books need to be voted on by the entire committee. One book like you’re describing that

comes to mind is *The Inquisitor's Tale* by Adam Gidwitz, at the fifth to sixth grade level. It's a great book for teaching tolerance, history, and it's a great quest tale. It's got everything, but it didn't win. A committee said it was one of the best books of the year. If you look at the honor books, these are the books committee members really liked but it's a point system and its ranked. *Inquisitor's Tale* is deep, and moving, and really funny, but, like I said, funny doesn't win the Gold when it comes to Newbery books."

I don't want to derail the interview by harping on this one topic, so I move on, even though I haven't heard a rationale that changes my mind. There are many more aspects to being on the Newbery committee that I want to hear about. So, I ask, "What's the hardest part of being a committee member?"

"If you're on the Newbery committee, you probably read cover-to-cover over four hundred books over the course of a year. That's a lot. You basically give up your life. You don't go to birthdays, you don't go to the movies or your nephew's [second] birthday party."

I hear her chuckle through the phone as she recalls a memory. "There's a picture of me reading one book holding a book behind it. I used to joke that I read an entire book each night, but my husband would correct me by saying, "Actually, it was a little more than that." Every moment from the time I'd arrive home from work I'd be reading."

"Where do all the books come from?"

"The publishers, for one. Then, the committee coordinator would order any book requested."

That's an enormous number of books, four hundred in one year. I can hardly imagine it.

"Did you have a system for reading all of these books?"

“Well, first you read for yourself, then you read the field. Then, most of the way through the year, you connect with the committee and begin to read all the books nominated from the other committee members. It’s relentless. You have to read all the books.”

“Another challenge I have with the Newbery is that there is only one single gold star. Do you have any problem with there being One Winner?” I ask her.

“When a powerhouse publisher like Scholastic says, “This particular book is a Winner,” I think you should read that book. It’s been through a committee and we really put a lot of work into it. Not every committee member loveslovesloves the one winner, but that’s why there are Honor books.”

“Was that lack of unity a challenging aspect of the committee work for you?”

“I think that with any kind of committee, you find that you love something that other people don’t. And you remember that it is ultimately the committee’s decision. The opinions of other people are a surprise. Sometimes they find the same book you do, other times they don’t. You might *love* a book and find out that no one else even had it on their list. It’s important to remember that over most of the year, you’re reading all these books in seclusion. No Facebook, no Twitter, no anything. Some people write for Kirkus because that’s anonymous. Then you bring these books to the committee and they are all discussed.”

Lisa has been really kind in offering her thoughts and, even though my breath is now visible in the car, I warm to her willingness to talk. “What was your favorite part of sitting on the Newbery committee?”

“I loved the books. When you’re on the committee, first you read the books, then you read the reviews. The reviews often gave me another perspective on the books, or some new insight. After reading them I might say to myself, ‘This is a concern that may come up on the

committee, so then I'll have an answer for that.' I also like to discuss books, so I enjoyed doing that with fourteen other people who read like crazy, just like I do. It's nice to be in a room full of people that are that passionate about books. And one of the best parts of the job that doesn't get discussed: you get to read the new Kate DiCamillo book right as it comes out. This new, wonderful book is just going to show up at your door. I didn't have to go looking for any of the books I read. I like to read new authors, and their books showed up too."

"Was getting to be on the committee for the Newbery a big life goal or did it follow from your professional work?"

"I put in an application as a member of the ALA for children's literature. I was elected, and when they asked if I wanted to be on the committee, I said yes. I was a member of that committee and after a while, after people get to know you, you get put on the ballot for the Newbery committee and [the] membership votes. The Newbery ballot goes out in February. You might inform people that you're on the ballot, but there's no campaigning."

"If there's no campaigning, then you have to work to become a known commodity, right?"

"Yep."

"So, how'd you go about doing that?"

"I was a K-8 librarian for a long time. But beyond that, I published reviews with my name on it, I participated on listservs where people asked reference questions, work like that. But bear in mind, you submit an application for years before you get selected for election. It starts with an interest survey for the smaller roles: 'Are you willing to serve on the Children's committee?' And you have to be willing to serve on a variety of committees."

“How did you perceive the ALA's efforts to get a ‘well-rounded’ committee to judge the books?”

“Half of the committee is appointed, the other half goes through the nominating committee, there’s the presidential candidate, the Newbery candidate, the Geisel candidate. They call you up and say: “If we put you on the ballot, would you like to serve?”

“Are these readers people from all over the US?” I asked.

“Oh, yes. It’s probably international. But you have to read in English.”

Lisa has mentioned the Honor books, but there’s really only one book that gets a big gold seal plastered on its cover.

“Did you struggle with the idea of picking one ‘Most Distinguished’ book?”

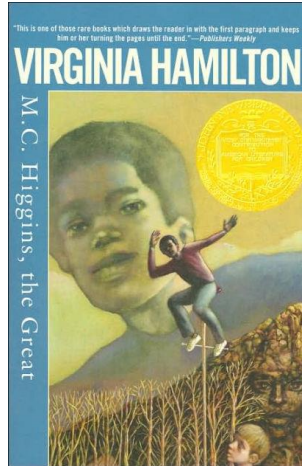
“No problem with that: by that time you’ve done all this reading, you’re ready for One Winner. There’s a notables list, and I’ve served on that committee too. (Laughs) If you’re a librarian, you know that the Newbery is just *one* book. The Notables list is a separate committee. The Newbery and Caldecott are on that list, because they are notable, but there are many others.”

I glance at my watch and realize that my prep period is coming to a close. Five minutes left for one more question and then I have to hoof it back into school to be ready for my next reading group.

“Is there a topic that I missed that you’d like sound off on?”

“Well, I thought it was interesting that there was more than one person who thought a graphic novel should have won. And that’s what makes the discussion so rich; we’re comparing the book against the other books published that year. Some years there are two honor books and some years there are five. The only way you could make the comparisons is to see what the committee decided upon for that year. And the whole test of time thing: You can look at the list

and say, Huh, what are the books [that] are holding up over time? Why is *Mr. Popper's Penguins* the Honor when the other book that won is not as good? What about *The Matchlock Gun*? It's so racist."



1975 M.C. Higgins, the Great

Author: Virginia Hamilton
Cover artist: Leo and Diane Dillon
Country: United States
Language: English
Genre: Children's novel
Publisher: Simon Pulse
Publication date: 1974
Pages: 278 pp
ISBN: 0-241-89214-7

Story Overview

M.C. struggled over car bodies and dragged himself up his pole. His arms flexed too tight. He could feel them hurting as he trembled and jumped. Finally, he pulled himself up on the bicycle seat. In a moment he swept the pole out in its long, delicate arc.

Bend my pole so it won't ever straighten out again.

The hill rushed to meet him. A sudden gust of wind made the trees moan before it died. The pole swayed and bowed in an arc of light.

—*M.C. Higgins, the Great*, p.42

M.C. Higgins spends a lot of time up on that pole. He sways and circles, all the while pedaling furiously and taking in the scene around him, from his treetop vantage point, the entire surrounding Appalachian hill country visible. In one scene, he even pulls a handstand, putting one hand on each side of the seat, and slowly pushing himself up, feet first and vertical. On the page, this moment is charged with danger: he's upside down forty feet above the ground with nothing to break his fall.

The pole is a wonderfully surreal image, and one of dozens throughout the invented Appalachian world. Among the other oddities are the red-haired, six-fingered farm neighbors, the Killburns, a traveling ethnomusicologist (and obvious stand in for Alan Lomax), John K. Lewis, and then there's Sarah Mountain herself, a vast spoil heap covered in walking paths and a remnant of the destructive forces of hilltop destruction. The sides of Sarah Mountain are sliding, threatening to destroy the Higgins' family land. Chronicling a few short days in the mountains of Appalachia as it encroached upon by mining interests, we are delivered into the surreal Higgins family's and surrounding families' customs. Though the story takes place over approximately three days, it is a classic Bildungsroman with the young teen M.C. Higgins at its tumultuous center.

What Makes This Book Unique?

Packed with classic novels such as *Bridge to Terabithia* (1978), *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (1977), *Julie of the Wolves* (1973), *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* (1972), the 1970s were a great decade for children's literature, and, in many ways, represent the Golden Decade of the Newbery. Even within this well-respected group of books, *M.C. Higgins, the Great* stands apart. Virginia Hamilton's surrealist journey is one of the most inventive and fascinating books I've ever read.

Beginning in the days of slavery, the inhabitants of Sarah mountain have a strong connection to the place. And it's here that the young teenage protagonist, Mayo Cornelius Higgins, is forced to make a major life choice: Is he ready to leave? There are many dangers (like the spoil heap) but the Alan Lomax character James offers a way out: M.C.'s mama just needs to sing as good as she always does, get recorded, and they'll all be famous and move to the

big city. At first, M.C. doesn't realize that James is just roaming the countryside as a personal collector; he believes that James is going to make his mother, Banina, famous by recording her voice and will turn her into a professional singer.

Though M.C. Higgins hardly sits still, constantly rambling unsupervised throughout the holler, this isn't an adventure story. Rather, we are immersed in the small world Hamilton has created. When M.C. goes swimming, we walk with him down to the water's edge; we look at his reflection in the water by his side. We're suspended in the closely-observed, almost minute-to-minute thoughts and actions of the teenage protagonist; there's no rising action to speak of, but that doesn't mean it is boring. The narrative force and the strange characters that inhabit it make each interaction important, symbolic. We may not be sure what Hamilton is driving at, but we're compelled to find out more.

The short timeline of the story is packed with minor events: M.C. and his buddy run the trails and check rabbit traps, the Higgins kids go swimming, M.C. chases an elusive girl, one slightly older than he, and he sits upon his pole. But what is happening underneath it all is the shift in life: we're watching, kind of in 'real time,' a boy leaving the vestiges of his childhood and becoming a man. He's forced to decide whether he will stay on the land, with its dangers but its comforts, or venture out into the unknown, living off the spoils of his mother's successes.

What The Author Has Achieved

In reading the Newbery winners, I have been careful to wait until I've completed a book before learning about the author; the prose should stand alone, I believe. But halfway through the story, M.C. decides to take a new friend on a swim from one small pond to another through a large, submerged pipe. The tube is ten feet below the surface and they run out of air halfway.

Panic sets in and it's here that M.C. goes Zen calm and says to himself, "Be M.C. Higgins, the great," and somehow pulls them both through to safety. It's such a strange moment to be used as the title for the whole story, I immediately set the book down and turned to my computer; I had to learn more about the person who had invented such a strange and compelling world. And the more I found out about Virginia Hamilton, the more in awe I became and the more I wanted to learn about her.

Born in Yellow Springs, Ohio (pop. 3,487), Virginia Hamilton grew up in the same area in which her family has held land since 1850. She was encouraged to read and was awarded a full scholarship to Antioch, a liberal school with design-your-own-majors, required participation in the school cooperatives, and narrative evaluations. It's a college that changes people's lives, and it was at the top of my list when I pursued my own collegiate path. Though I couldn't find reference to her college experience, I wonder what influence it had on her as a writer.

Hamilton went on to attend Ohio State and The New School, eventually moving to New York City. She married a school teacher. They had two children and moved back to Ohio. Nothing out of the ordinary there.

But that move back to Ohio ended up being a big one. Hamilton and her husband built a house that was "massive, made of redwood and glass, and has no windows, only sliding glass doors and clerestory lights." It was here that she started writing in earnest and her remarkable career flourished. First came *Zeely*, published in 1967. It won the American Library Association's Notable Book, a major achievement for a first book. And the cascade began.

Over the next few decades in her self-described "castle," Hamilton would go on to published forty-one books, win the National Book Award, the Newbery Medal, and the MacArthur 'Genius' Award.

In 1975, *M.C. Higgins, the Great* won three top prizes: the Newbery Medal, the National Book Award, and the Boston Globe–Horn Book Award. It was the first book to do so.

As a reader for a literary journal, there is one question that I ask myself when considering a piece for publication: A week from now, do you think you will remember anything about or from this story? With *M.C. Higgins, the Great*, there are many things that lodge in the memory, from the surreal family farmers we meet halfway through the book to the strange flagpole-chair contraption upon which M.C. sits. And he doesn't just sit and gaze when he's up there; he leans this way and that, letting the pole bend deeply. Or, most disconcerting, that swim from one pond to another through a culvert deeply submerged. It's a swim in complete darkness and deep underwater. We follow along, watching silently as M.C.'s lungs threaten to collapse in the blackness. I still get chills thinking about it. And I remember it all.

Style

The entire story, all 278 pages of it, take place over the course of two and a half days. It's an exercise in self-restraint, in detail of scene, in all kinds of challenging writerly aims.

So, what to make of all the surreal imagery? Is it a unified symbology, or are the disparate images intended to give the reader a collage from which to make their own understanding? We will never know. Not because Virginia Hamilton is no longer alive, but because she worked from another place of knowing. She wrote down the story as she channeled it, as one bound truth. Were the images presented intended to distill a better understanding of family, or the black experience in America, of the great, wild feeling of being young and alive? Again, we will never know.

Hamilton sums up the quirky and surreal nature of her writing best, in remembering a conversation with her editor:

“But what about the [M.C.’s 40-foot pole with a bicycle seat attached at the top] pole?” the editor asked.

“What about it?” Hamilton replied.

“What’s it a symbol of?”

“It’s just . . . what the kid sits on?” Hamilton asked tentatively.

The editor was insistent. “But why doesn’t he just sit on the mountain, or on the porch; why a 40-foot pole on the side of the mountain?”

“Well, it’s not his mountain,” Hamilton responded, getting annoyed, “it’s Sarah’s, but the pole belongs to him and that’s why he sits on it.”

How Do Others See the Newbery Award?

The Wild Rumpus

It was a beautiful late summer day in Minneapolis when I pulled up in front of the local children's bookstore, *The Wild Rumpus*. There was nothing remarkable about the large red apartment building in which it occupied the lower corner. A casual restaurant on one side spilled out to the sidewalk, a coffee shop farther down, low apartments across the street. The block was tree-lined and quiet. A large green awning announced the store. But for those details, it was hard to tell what was happening through the large front picture window.

It was not until I stood directly under the awning out of the glare of the sunny street that I noticed the large picture window was opaque because it was filled with books. But there was something strange at the entrance as well: inscribed in the regular front door was the shape of a smaller door. A kid-sized door, complete with its own knob and window, on its own hinges cut into the adult door. As I registered that this accommodation was to better suit *Wild Rumpus'* clientele, I smiled. It was the first indication that I was entering a unique bookstore and was in for a ride. As I stepped in from the sidewalk, the green canopy of boughs above the street reminding me that things are alive and flourishing here, and, as I reach for the door handle, I secretly hoped not just the outside door. Towards the end of our conversation I would learn that Wild Rumpus wasn't just a great bookstore for kids in the Twin Cities: it earned Publisher's Weekly award for Best Bookstore in the Nation, a first for a children's bookstore.

The owner, Collette Morgan, kindly agreed to meet with me on pretty light grounds; a mutual friend suggested I speak with her, and in an email I stated simply that I was on a quest to read all the Newbery award books and was curious about the award from her bookseller's perspective.

After approaching the counter, a clerk let me know that Collette would be a few minutes so I took the time to peruse the shelves. I looked up to find a canoe hanging upside down, floating across the white 'ice' of the ceiling paint, trailed by a river of blue. It was here that the chicken found me.

The store was substantial, with many sections and shelves to peruse. I poked around for the young adult section, looking for any evidence of Newberys. There were a scattered few, but I was struck more by how many non-award-winning books that looked equally fascinating resided on the shelves; cover illustrations telling of colorful, swashbuckling adventures jumped out. I bent down to look at a lower shelf and turned, noticing a jet black form smaller than a dog but bigger than a rabbit moving towards me. Was it alive? A toy robot? It took me a second to register that it was a curious chicken. In a bookstore. The chicken stood still, taking me in with that strange way chickens do, cocking its head as it gathered information. I'd heard somewhere that if you just walked away, chickens would follow you anywhere, so I tried it. I stood up and began walking toward the front door. The chicken followed. As we walked, we came across other animals; cats, ferrets, chinchillas, even a Mexican Fire Leg Tarantula. This bookstore was as much about creative inspiration as it was about literature. I could see why kids loved this place.

We completed a full circuit of the store, our funny little parade of two, before Collette found me. She beamed and extended her hand. "I see you've made a friend!" She made direct

eye contact. This, combined with her wavy chin-length blonde hair, rolled up sleeves, and a forearm tattoo, gives the impression that she was no-nonsense. As we talked, her hands generally sat in her lap, but occasionally she sighed, or threw them into the air to make a deliberate point, as if to say, “I really can’t be bothered.” If I didn’t know she was a bookseller, I would have pegged her for a tour manager of a rock band, or the owner of a busy youth hostel.

“OK, before we talk, I need coffee,” she said right after we trade greetings. Her demeanor projected directness and straight-talking, but as we conversed I got the feeling that she actually loved the nonsense, that her exterior allowed her to move through her work effectively. As a bookseller you have to be able to shut down sales pitches on a dime to be able to lose yourself in the great stories before you.

The sun shone brightly as we stepped out the front door. Collette sought a cup of coffee, and mission accomplished, we stepped over to a shaded park bench to talk.

Having walked through a front door-within-a-door and then been followed around a store by a chicken, I realized that there was a lot I didn’t know about this unique bookstore, so that started my inquiry: Tell me about Wild Rumpus.

“Well,” Collette said, smiling. “Wild Rumpus is twenty-five years old, and it really started when the bookstore I worked for went under. I was hired as the children’s book buyer, and when it went under, the owner offered me pick of the children’s section. I bought for him, and I already knew what was there. So, without an actual location, I started with an idea and a garage full of books. At first, I thought it’d be the world’s longest yard sale. My husband owned the [current Wild Rumpus] building, with a yarn shop on one side and a salon called *Super Hair* on the other. We decided to go for it, gutted the place and hired an architect friend on the strength of fact that he had a treehouse in his backyard.”

Just with this snippet of history, I could tell it would be fun to chat with Collette on a range of topics. But I was here to talk about the Newbery, and since I was in the presence of an expert, I couldn't help but ask questions about the state of children's literature in general. After talking with Newbery committee member Lisa Von Drasek, I wanted to see where my perspective from the classroom were limited, whether she considered the Newbery timeless, and what children's lit might look like in the future.

When I started teaching in 1999, *Harry Potter* was new on the scene, and this book, along with *Holes* by Louis Sachar, felt like missives straight from the future of children's fiction. The teacher resource room at my school was filled with class sets of novels, but their torn covers were of the Beverly Cleary universe decades in the past.

But now *Harry Potter* has graduated, and the author has claimed we have reached the end of his saga. *Holes* is already a footnote. So, what is the state of children's books?

Collette leaned back on the bench, happy to sound off. "Super Strong," she said, pulling a smile. "And the emphasis is on *books*. It's actual books that are moving off our shelves. Kids don't like to read on devices."

I read somewhere that the rise of the Kindle and other e-books was exaggerated, that reading on tablets was a hassle. And here it was confirmed.

"It's a different kind of learning that happens when reading on a device versus a book. I think from parent's point of view; our culture is oversaturated with screens and 'screen time.'" So, for those that didn't grow up staring at the screen of a phone, the book has become more of an object to be respected, simply because it is so different from the screens they use every day. In that way it becomes more precious, maybe more of a luxury even. You have to set aside a time to

engage with a book, but then that decision takes on its own kind of importance, as if to say, by reading this book is you are giving yourself your own personal experience.”

My conversation with Janet Spaulding, book buyer for all of Indianapolis Public Libraries was very informative, but the sheer scale of her purchases was mind-boggling. I wanted to hear from Collette what it is like to purchase books on her much smaller, highly personalized scale. She doesn't need to worry if she's got a copy of every important children's book; she gets to personalize and curate a unique collection, one that draws in customers. So I asked, “What does it take to be a good Children's book buyer?”

“Operating with the mind a nine-year-old. Being delighted and astonished in the same way as a child would be. I'm no longer that age, but that mindset, that awareness is still there.” Collette paused, sweeping her bangs across her forehead.

“You need curiosity, penchant for trivia, a love of all kinds of knowledge. And from there you have to recognize that they are independent thinkers. We have the same sections as in an adult store, for example, just geared to a different way of thinking.”

“What do people get ‘wrong’ about knowing kids’ books?”

“They don't understand that a children's book needs to stand alone as a story. The problems come when an author writes ‘down’ to a kid. If you condescend, you'll lose them. But it's got to be tight. It comes down to a good story, and thoroughly researched writing. There was a big flap on the PEN award in the last couple months. There was immediate backlash; he had stuck in quotes on his book from long dead authors.”

“This talking down to kids is something that I see happening in Newbery winners sometimes,” I said. “Kids can smell it when a writer is writing for other adults.” Collette nodded. “What do you think about the Newbery?” I asked.

“It’s an important award for us, but we never know what they are going to choose. Since the voting is done by librarians, we don’t always think the same way. *Good Masters! Sweet Ladies!* [2008] is the perfect example of a book by a librarian for librarians. The language is archaic, and kids aren’t bamboozled by it like adults. We booksellers went” (and here Collette throws up her hands) “*What?! Are you kidding me?* It’s important to remember that these books are not new to us, we’ve been selling them for six months before the announcement, so we’re already aware of the books when they get awarded.”

“Have you noticed that the quality of the books has changed over the years?”

“Yes. In the last ten years the idea of a Librarian has changed, and the titles have become more commercially viable. Things are definitely changing. Now when I think of the Newbery winners, in recent years the selections have been Right On. Back in the ’60s and ’70s you would say a book was ‘Classic’ because it won the Newbery, but these were not books a kid would pick up. Kids today aren’t going to pick up *Trumpeter of Krakow* [1929].”

She was right. The *Trumpeter of Krakow* is itself almost a hundred years old, and pre-Enlightenment in Eastern Europe is not a ‘hot’ time for young readers. We both chuckled at the thought.

“What are some new trends?”

“Graphic novels are a new trend, the Brian Selznick books are very popular (*Adventures of Hugo Cabret*, *Frindle*, etc.). That was a departure for publishers. In fact, more graphic novels are showing up in juvenile and YA, and they keep getting better. Publishers are looking for new talent and discovering great talent. Check out *The Reign of Talgemier*.”

“That’s interesting,” I said. “A Newbery committee member mentioned the rise of graphic novels. How did you feel about the recent picture-book winner, *Last Stop on Market Street*?”

“That was a huge departure, but it was awesome, it’s a story of several layers, just not as many words as some of the other winners. Any time they’re looking at illustrated books is a departure.”

“You mentioned having copies of the Newbery winner on your shelves prior to the announcement, what are some other ways that the Newbery announcement plays out in your world?”

Collette’s eyes got big. “Well, we wait anxiously, frantically scribbling out every award right as they are announced so we can get orders in immediately. There is no doubt that they will be completely Sold Out that day. We know a lot about books, but they keep the winners so secret we just can’t predict them.”

“What happens after a book wins?”

“Well, initially these books get a huge bump, Newbery definitely brings them more recognition for the general public. It has a high esteem. It gets a little lost in the shuffle, but it still has that recognition.”

“What do you mean by ‘lost in the shuffle?’”

“The Newberys are a known quantity, mostly by parents. The gold seal gives it validity. But the award means nothing to the kids, though. Kids just want a good book to read.”

“Why don’t you stock all the Newberys if you know they sell?”

“There are just so many books to choose from. The Newbery is helpful as an initial sorting criterion, but I get all sorts of books coming my way. The books we buy come from over

a hundred sellers. For example, from Harper Collins I just got seventy-five Advance Reader copies. That's just one publisher. I'll get over a hundred from Random House and seventy-five more from Scholastic. So, if I have a Newbery title on the shelf that hasn't moved in six months, I won't keep it there. I just have too much coming in."

"What gets a Newbery moving off the shelf?"

"When they are well-told, masterfully written, they stick around. And usually they are up against twenty other books that are of the same caliber. There's so much out there that is just incredible. Generally, we get a 10 percent bump on that book when the winner is announced in the winter. Doesn't mean it's going to be a classic, though."

When Collette said there were twenty other great books lined up against the latest Newbery, I knew exactly what she meant. I'd never seen so many books for young adult readers out there. There are series featuring animals with powers, robots with powers, zombies with powers, and then all of those things and more, without powers. Totally ridiculous. So I asked: "Would you call this a renaissance?"

"No, the quandary isn't that there are so many exceptional books, but that there are so many *mediocre* books. It makes my job harder because I have to weed through all the muck. So, when it comes to the awards, I'm never surprised who is up for the awards. Everyone nominated is already some of our best sellers. I think it has to do with librarians and media specialists. They are so much more in tune with what the kids want. I mean, what *School Library Journal* wants is not what kids want, but the role of the librarian has changed. Libraries will become simply museums of books if they only buy what's 'good.'"

"Are there awards you pay attention to?"

“I pay most attention to the Newbery, Caldecott, and the Printz [*Michael L. Printz Award* for best book written for teens]. They tend to be more edgy, experimental, definitely more forward thinking. I pay attention to the Coretta Scott King Award, especially now that there is such an emphasis on diversity, and that becomes more and more important and relevant. There’s the Schneiderman Family Award for books on disabilities.”

I was still curious about book trends. “What’s a book style that is coming to an end?”

“Well, we’re finally done with vampires.” She sighs, but with relief. “Also, I’m done with books that have covers of women in long dresses with long hair flowing in the wind. Those books hit, and they just kept coming. It was annoying on our end, but I understand why: publishers tend to see something that sells, and then they replicate it.”

“What’s on the grow?”

“The more I see computer-generated art, the more I appreciate traditional art that is done by hand. There’s more and more of a divide between these two kinds of children’s book illustrations.”

“Just to get back to the Newberys, do you have any problems with the contents of Newberys? Some of the language is controversial; the recent winner, *The Higher Power of Lucky*, has the word “scrotum” right there on page one.”

Collette scrunched her face in displeasure. “Honestly, I find the idea of singling out the word “scrotum” very nit-picky. I find those arguments to be very tenuous. I think it’s important to remember: kids are not fragile flowers. They know a lot about the world, they just might not have the language for it. They are more connected to technology than I am, for example.”

With all the spurting blood and pretty horrific violence I’d come across in Newbery books, I found myself challenged by her assertion, but I did agree that kids are not fragile

flowers when it came to coarse language. But the *Slave Dancer*, for example was filled with raw violence, not something from which a third grader has the emotional distance to discuss the book. Collette continued:

“No offence, but it seems the people critical of this language are misguided. Sometimes I wonder, are they living in the same world than I am? I mean, more important than controversial language is, in my mind, cultural appropriation. If I’m going to sell a book that talks about Native American culture, I need to make sure I’m getting voices from the people who actually have native American connections. You need to have the street cred to write about your topic.” She pauses, as if anticipating my thoughts. “I will say, what causes controversy in the schools is different than the world of the book buyer.”

“Do you have other thoughts about the Newbery Award?”

“Ok, here’s how I really feel about awards: Awards are so subjective, you can’t say to any kid “This certain book won a big award, *so you will like it.*” You have to come at it from all angles. I mean, we have a chicken in the store, right? Just having an award splashed on the cover really doesn’t mean anything to the kid who is already interested in the book. So, I wouldn’t, as a person buying books for the public, I wouldn’t say anyone *needs* to read them. Or tell a kid that this is the best book of the year.”

“That leads me to my last question: Is the Newbery really the best book of the year?”

“No.” Collette smiled kindly at me, as though she wanted to call me “Sweetie” and pat my knee for my naivete. “It’s not.”

As if to soften the blow, she added, “At least not in my world.”

The Scholastician

Off the top of my head, I can probably name thirty Scholastic books on my classroom library bookshelf without even getting out of my chair. They're easy to identify; a distinctive red rectangle anchors the base of the spine, a bold white "S" prominent within. The design has the look of a publishing logo crafted by a marketing firm. It grabs eyeballs.

Strange thing is, though I've purchased literally hundreds of their books, I know almost nothing about the company itself. I haven't had to do any investigating; every single month a stack of monthly Book Club fliers finds its way to my school mailbox. Having taught in numerous schools in multiple states, it's no longer surprising that the Scholastic Book Club always—somehow—knows where I am. This provides a little comfort: In case of emergency, or if I go missing, contact Scholastic Books for my whereabouts.

Other than the book clubs, countless cheap paperbacks have sat on the shelves of my classroom libraries over the years, and twice annually the library is transformed into a sales showroom for the Scholastic Book Fair. Monday morning there's coffee and donuts for teachers to preview the goods and then for the rest of week kids are excited and constantly asking if they can get a pass to go down to the sale.

For the Newbery project, I've reached out to Scholastic a few times trying to connect with someone who can offer insight into their book buying and publishing process works and what role Newbery books play in their titles, but my inquiries came back empty-handed. Until I met Drew.

Drew Seplinga is the friend of a friend of a friend, and we've met over various dinner parties and drinks with mutual friends around South Minneapolis. Drew is the current book

buyer for The Wild Rumpus bookstore and has had some great leads on learning about the Newbery.

“Well, first off, you should talk with my boss,” she said, referring to Collette, the owner of Wild Rumpus. “And I’ll see if there’s anyone else I can come up with.”

Only a couple weeks later and there I was sitting down with Collette. After that, I made sure to pursue all Drew’s other suggestions. I never thought to ask her about Scholastic; one night while we chatted at a gathering, it came up that she had lived in New York.

“What did you do there?” I asked.

“I was a book buyer and editor for Scholastic Book Clubs,” she replied casually.

“Really?” I said, “This is so great, I have been trying to connect with someone who has that exact experience.” Right then and there we decided on a time to meet up and she agreed to discuss her experience further.

Drew lives a couple of neighborhoods over from my own in South Minneapolis, a sea of single-family homes from the early mid-century when manufacturing jobs could support a family. Her house is yellow stucco, with a wide variety of plantings in the front yard. There’s hay between them and labeled sticks announcing, “Thai Basil,” and “Corn.” It’s one of those houses where the yard isn’t organized into neat rows, but you can tell the owner has some great ideas.

Drew invited me to sit at the kitchen table, a large round wooden disc covered with jigsaw puzzles and interesting books. I noticed the *People’s History of the United States* by Howard Zinn and thumb through it while she poured dogfood into a bowl for her pets’ evening meal.

Drew sat down and immediately said, “Alright, let’s do this.” She has light brown curly hair and a gap tooth. She has the look of a charming tomboy.

I took a pencil and a clipboard out of my bag with a sheet of questions on it.

“Okay, we’re getting serious!” Drew said jokingly, not realizing that I was very eager to learn more about inner-workings of the publisher Scholastic.

“You good to just jump right in?” I asked. Drew nodded.

“So, what did you do at Scholastic?” I asked.

“Bought manuscripts for Scholastic to publish in the school market.” She said.

“How big is that place?” I asked, just to get a sense of the scale. “As a teacher I’ve been surrounded by Scholastic books my entire career, but do I think they’re big just because I’m in their market?”

“No, they’re big,” she said. “There’s got to be a couple thousand employees that work in the three buildings at the NY offices alone.” She paused. “But a better way to put it: until recently, Scholastic was the biggest publisher of children’s books in the world.”

“What happened?” I asked.

“Well, Random House bought Penguin and they combined into a single company in 2013. They’re bigger than Scholastic only because two giant publishers combined into one mammoth company.”

“As a book buyer, can you explain the how Scholastic works? I’ve noticed that there’s Scholastic book clubs through the mail and then there’s the on-site Book Fairs.”

Drew paused again. “I thought we were going to talk about the Newbery Award.”

“Yes, we definitely are; I just wanted to get a little background on Scholastic for context.” What I didn’t say was that I hoped she was going to connect some dots about previous topics I had explored in my Newbery search.

I started to describe my monthly bundle of book club fliers that come from Scholastic and the multiple book fairs, but Drew had talked about this before.

“Well, for starters, the Clubs and Fairs are two separate things. The Clubs initiate larger buys because they have the larger quantities. And the Book Fairs kind of tag onto the club orders; whatever’s popular and selling through the Clubs will sell at the Fairs too.”

“Which leads me to my next question: How is it possible that cheap Scholastic books are profitable?”

“Well, except in special circumstances, everything has to be marked up five times, so even if something was selling for two to three dollars, they’re being printed for one fifth of that. The Clubs and Fairs are really carrying the rest of the company, because they have such a huge margin on their products.”

“Scholastic doesn’t do hardcovers?” I asked.

“Yeah, but they do paper over board, so there’s no jacket. It’s all cost reduction.”

Drew offered tea and while she got up to turn on the kettle, we kept talking.

“Did you like working for Scholastic?”

“Yes, absolutely. I loved it. I still stop by the offices in SoHo any time I am in New York.”

Just out of curiosity I asked, “What was the biggest selling book you bought the rights to?”

“Well, I’m the one who bought *Percy Jackson*,” she replied, her smile bigger this time.

She might as well have said The King James Bible. In the elementary world, Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson* books are ubiquitous. And I don't say that lightly. There are millions of these books around. Just like when *Harry Potter* hit big, copies of this book are everywhere in an elementary school. And, unlike the simplemindedness of *Captain Underpants*, it is clear why: *Percy Jackson* books are a quirky mix of present-day adventure story and Greek mythology, featuring the dorky male protagonist, Percy Jackson. It doesn't sound as if it would light the house on fire, but for the right kids, it definitely does.

In response to her statement that she bought the *Percy Jackson* rights for Scholastic, I was shocked. All I could get out was: "Really?!"

Drew smiled even bigger. "Yeah, I first read *Percy Jackson: The Lightning Thief* as an unpublished manuscript. I remember trying to convince the Scholastic people: "No, I know it sounds dorky, but you have to trust me, it's a really good adventure story and kids are going to love it!" I remember people being doubtful about it, with the mythology. I was in the conference room pitching it to all my co-workers. People were skeptical but because it wasn't a well-known author, it wasn't a high-risk situation. They appreciated my perspective, so it was more like trust; they trusted me, and they just went with it."

"Did you see anything from the sales?"

"What do you mean?" Drew asked.

"I mean, did you get any extra money as a result of handing Scholastic the proverbial Golden Goose?"

"Nope, that's just part of the job."

"Not even a half of quarter of a percent?"

“No.” Drew threw her head back, laughing. “Not even close. But my boss was really nice to me for a week after that.”

“OK, on to the Newbery Award. Were they important in the Scholastic world?”

“Of course,” she said, smiling. “They were a high priority for us to pick up.”

“In general, what role would you say award-winning books play in sales?”

“Well, it’s huge. It makes a huge difference in whether you’re going to buy a book if they’ve won an award. It influences whether we would buy and how much we’d pay for it. Newbery, Coretta Scott, Caldecott, King, or something like it, we were definitely going to get all of the Newberys, even if it was a book we had passed on in the past.”

“Did you ever say no to a Newbery?”

“Once a book has won the Newbery, even if we didn’t like that book, we throw in orders for it: we should have it. There were times that we read a book that we didn’t think was that great, but then, as soon as it won the Newbery, we bought it. We might have passed on it before and the award might have come totally out of left field. But there were other books we bought that we thought, ‘This could be a sneaker!’ and everybody didn’t think it was going to do anything and we had got it for a couple thousand dollars.”

Now that I’d heard more about Drew’s perspective, I was curious about hearing how the Newbery resonated with her work, just like it did with the bookstore owner and the library book-buyer. “You talked about the role Newbery plays in purchasing the books. Why do you think the Newbery award commands so much power?”

“I don’t know why exactly, but from my perspective it has a lot to do with the fact that it’s the most recognizable of the children’s book awards; it’s the one people have heard of the most, that they have seen the most, it has the longest history, and there’s books that people

recognize from their past that have won it. I just don't think there's any other award that people know of in the same way. And I do think the ALA people think it is unbiased, not biased towards a certain publisher. It's the one that everyone recognizes and knows."

When Drew said *everyone*, I was reminded of how anonymous the award can be among the general populace. "Which is interesting to me because when I talk about the Newbery Award, if I get even one degree outside people who work with children's literature"

"Nobody knows *anything* about it." She started laughing, having encountered the same experience.

"Yeah, nobody knows of it!" I threw my hands up in mock exasperation. "Occasionally someone will say, 'Is that the award for picture books?'" We both laughed.

Drew turned serious. "I guess if you're a teacher or you work with children's books you know of it. At school we're only selling to teachers. Teachers know about the Newbery."

"Yes, but even in schools it is not universally known. I work in a Low-Performing school, with reading scores right in the basement, and nobody there is teaching or talking about the Newbery books."

"Yeah, the books are leveled pretty high. Even if they're not long, they're dense."

"So, do you have your own interest or connection to the Newbery?"

"Well, it's always fun for me to try to guess which books will be on the list. It's often like throwing darts while wearing a blindfold. Sometimes I guess correctly and sometimes I don't, but it's fun to figure it out."

"You read a lot of books, so you have a much more informed perspective than other folks. Can you narrow it down to the top twenty?"

"One of them would at least get an honor, for sure."

“What are those qualities that make a book stand out enough to be a Newbery contender?”

“Usually it’s not a quality that is relatable to everyone. It’s got a little something different, a little esoteric quality. It’s not the book I’m going to recommend to every kid, especially kids who aren’t crazy about reading. It’s a book I’m going to recommend to a kid who *is* crazy about reading.”

Newbery winners tend to be books that can handle the complexity of multiple storylines or multiple characters that change, or multiple levels of symbolism. It’s a “special” book, as we would say. It’s not the book that’s for the mass market, that’s for sure.”

Another question I liked to hear about was where the Newbery is ranked in context of other literature awards. “Any awards you are aware of that would pique your interest as a book buyer?”

“Printz award, the Schneider Award, there’s a Theodore Dreiser Award, and an E.B. White award, National Book Award. But I would consider Newbery and Caldecott as definitely the royalty of the family. But if I were to rank them, I’d say the Coretta Scott King Award is great, but a little below them. And then come all the others.”

“That’s interesting,” I said. “That list is all American Library Association (ALA) awards.”

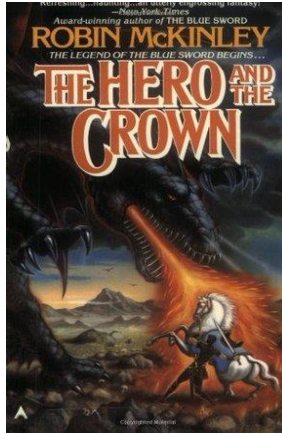
“Yeah, I’m aware of that,” Drew said, unsure of my point.

“Well, that’s a lot of different, prestigious awards. What is your impression of the ALA’s role in their kind of quasi literary taste-making?”

“Well, they have cornered the market. And they hold a lot of value. And it’s interesting because their awarding process is so mysterious ahead of time. They make it a mystery which books are even in the running for the Newbery. You can guess, but it’s all very secret.”

This piqued my curiosity. “How do insiders guess?”

“The whole time I’ve worked in children’s books, everyone says they have no idea and they will never be able to guess. And there is really nothing you can do. All you have to go on is the past winners. And the award winner can be a mystery too; sometimes it’s a book you’ve barely even heard of, other times it’s one you definitely could’ve guessed. Up until the time they announce it, it is a complete surprise. I do remember predicting that Kelly Barnhill’s book (*The Girl Who Drank the Moon*) was going to win, and it did! So, that one time I did get it right.”



1985 **The Hero and the Crown**

Author: Robin McKinley
Country: United States
Genre: Fantasy novel
Publisher: Greenwillow Books
Publication date: 1984
Media Type: Print (Hardback & Paperback)
Pages: 227 pp
ISBN: 0-441-32809-1

Story Overview

Swordplay! Dragons! Complicated maps of Ancient Lands! Get ready medieval fantasy lovers, *The Hero and the Crown* has it all! The second book in the *Damar* series (the first book, *The Blue Sword*, won the Newbery Honor in 1983), *The Hero and the Crown* features a teenaged female protagonist, Aerin, who is both brash and vulnerable.

Aerin's mother, a witch, cast a spell and seduced the King who, consequently, married her, convinced she would bear a son. When she bore a daughter, all love was lost, and the queen died of despair.

Thus, Aerin, a Princess, was brought into the world; motherless, half-witch, and shunned by many in the royal house. As she entered adolescence, Aerin found that she did have insight

into magical salves that protected her from fire and could be used in slaying dragons. With a well-trained steed, she sets off to do just that, starting local and then killing dragons kingdom-wide, eventually earning back the lost respect of the king and the royal house.

As Aerin comes to terms with the extent of her powers and developing intellect, she finds that her dragon-slaying plays an important role in the safety of the entire kingdom. Armed with a powerful sword, Aerin journeys to confront Agsded, a demented magician in possession of the powerful Hero's Crown mounting an attack that threatens the kingdom's safety.

This plot is a straightforward Hero's Journey but packed with interesting and complex characters and plenty of twists along the way. And while the elements presented might seem perfectly pitched for Dungeons and Dragons players (head's up D+D players, *it is*), *The Hero and the Crown* delivers on classic coming-of-age themes with an empowered female twist.

What Makes This Book Unique?

Those of you who have heard me speak before have been wondering when I was going to get around to talking about Girls Who Do Things; it's about the only thing I do talk about and it has begun to amuse me that queries about my availability as a speaker refer more and more often to the likelihood of my talking about strong female roles in literature.

—Robin McKinley, 1985 Newbery Acceptance Speech.

There are three factors that make this book outstanding:

The Writing

First, a word of caution. *The Hero and the Crown* is leveled for a ninth grader, almost halfway through their freshman year. The rating system most often used for teenage readers is termed Lexile, and *The Hero and the Crown* lands between 1050 and 1120, putting it well outside the category for “children.” Even precocious younger readers with extensive

vocabularies will find the interpersonal themes developed through inference a problem. And the sentences are long. On page fifteen alone, I counted seven semicolons. Here's an example:

Galanna had told her once that there was a Crown that kept mischief away from Damar, and that if Arlbeth had had it when he met Aerin's mother he would never have married her, and if he had found it any time since Aerin was born, Galanna would no longer have to put up with having her eyelashes cut off; exactly how the Crown performed its warding functions she did not describe.

The adult reader, however, can rejoice: this book is filled with semi-colons! At first, I did find it irritating, to be honest, but as the rhythms of the author's voice became more ingrained, the story began to unfold on its own terms.

The writing is dense but not claustrophobic, and the layers of detail prove to be immersive rather than detractive. We watch as Aerin develops her fireproof salve and through the unsuccessful iterations laugh at her losses and begin to cheer her success. *She's getting closer!*, we say to the page. *She's actually going to do it!*, as she repels her first light flames.

It is Uniquely Feminist

Many Newbery winners preceding *The Hero and the Crown* featured a strong female protagonist. The first, *Invincible Louisa* (1934) is a nonfiction chronicle of Louisa May Alcott's journey as a writer. Miss Alcott is indeed headstrong and tenacious in her pursuit of a literary identity, but her success is always tempered by the wishes of her parents, specifically her father. And Alcott, as a child, then babysitter, and finally as a young lady in search of a man, is portrayed within the strict confines of her gender role.

There are only two similar titles that stick out for me: *The Island of the Blue Dolphins* (1961), and *Julie of the Wolves* (1973), which both have strong female central characters. The female lead in both stories is remarkable, enduring extended time alone, surviving only by

tenacity and ingenuity in response to a hostile natural world. The character of Aerin would fit neatly into this group as a trio, but McKinley had another motive, a purpose unique from these other two: *The Hero and the Crown* is offered as an introduction to feminism.

According to biographer Marilyn H. Karrenbrock, “McKinley's females do not simper; they do not betray their own nature to win a man's approval. But neither do they take love lightly or put their own desires before anything else. In McKinley's books, the romance, like the adventure, is based upon ideals of faithfulness, duty, and honor.”

In context, McKinley's accomplishment as a feminist document is remarkable. The year 1985 was a transitional time in feminism, halfway between two important waves. The Second Wave born of the 1960s, championing Equal Rights through the voices of Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem, and Angela Davis, was beginning to ebb, and yet the Third Wave, focused on intersectionality and identity, was yet to emerge. McKinley's heroine straddles both worlds. For the equality-seeking, Aerin offers a protagonist that can fight “just like the boys,” and finds success on her own terms. For the young girls in 1985 who began to branch off from the simple dynamic of power and equality, Aerin offered a model in which a reader might see an outsider struggling for identity as an outcast and live vicariously through her successful transformation.

It Transcends Genre

I'm generally not a big fan of Fantasy, just like I'm not a big fan of Westerns or other genre fiction. Every once in a while, though, a story comes along that not only works well enough that it transcends its own artifice. It happens in some classic tales: *Frankenstein*, *Moby Dick*, (even *Star Wars* those of '70s childhoods might argue), and I would include *The Hero and*

the Crown in this category. Just like other transcendent works in a particular category, *The Hero and The Crown* doesn't consciously appear to buck its genre; it revels in it.

In this case, the setting, (the ancient land of Damar) and the challenge of the protagonist (half-aristocrat, half-witch) obfuscate the fact that you're reading one A-plus excellent story of Second Wave Feminism come to life. It is a great story, not a diatribe, which makes its message all the more powerful. I didn't, in fact realize that that was author's intention until months after I'd finished the book and looked up reviews of the book. It's right there, front and center in her interviews.

What the Author has Achieved

I wished desperately for books like *Hero and the Crown* when I was young: books that didn't require me to be untrue to my gender if I wished to fantasize about having my sort of adventures, not about wearing long, trailing dresses and casting languorous looks into pools with rose petals floating in them as the setting sun glimmers through my translucent white fingers and I think about my lover who is off somewhere having interesting adventures.

—Robin McKinley, 1985 Newbery Acceptance Speech

As has been said, there are no new stories under the sun; it's just how you tell them.

That's the case here. As Aerin's accomplishments slaying dragons pile up and she sets her sights on the Big Bad Guy, the end of the book is telegraphed from a distance. But when their epic battle ensues, the conclusion feels fresh; if not startling, it's at least worthy of an audible cheer.

Most of the books I've read in this project have been pitched a little high for the elementary reader; as I've said before, even upper-elementary readers would struggle with the storytelling in most winners. But *Hero and the Crown* does something different. From the first page there's no mistaking this for a children's book. There's lots of action featuring hand-to-hand combat resulting in much death and violent mayhem. This book pulls no punches. You

realize that the author is not pandering to a child's perspective to get her point across. She's telling a damn good story in the language that fits.

And that may be why you haven't heard of this story: it's a fantasy tale in the most genre-conforming ways possible. There is a genealogy of names to memorize, palace intrigue and infighting that would lose younger readers in a heartbeat. But by putting in the effort here you will be greatly rewarded.

Why Does this Award Matter? (And to Whom)?

Final Stop: The Kerlan Collection

Perched high along the banks of the Mississippi River's only gorge, the E.L. Andersen Library offers spectacular views of the river. It is unassuming modern red brick building and it sits in the center of the University of Minnesota campus, surrounded by the student union and a large lecture hall. It's a bright blue sunny summer day when I pull up in front of this library on my scooter. I'm wearing shorts; it's summer and it's hot. Reflections of cloud forms shift and morph on the surface of the large, languid river. I soak in the beauty of the scene tempted to swim, but I have arrived at the final stop of my project and there are books waiting inside.

I'm here at the E.L. Anderson Library because it serves as home to the Kerlan Collection, a gathering of more than 100,000 children's books considered one of the world's great archives of children's literature.

Its founder and namesake, Dr. Irving Kerlan, sought examples of a wide range of literature for children, and I've lucked out: collecting Newbery winners was Kerlan's initial focus in starting the collection. Which brings us to why I'm here: it's the only source for some of the earliest Newbery books. I'll have a chance —finally—to read the books from the first decade and wrap up the project.

The Reading Room

As I've read through the Newbery winners one by one, I've begun a small collection myself. The pile of books grew, and eventually I decided to dedicate a particular shelf in my home office to the books.

For the most part, the books are easy to come by. Many of the titles I've picked up directly from school, when teachers replace old class sets of *Wrinkle in Time*, or *Bridge to Terabithia*. Or I find they'll show up in Little Libraries in the neighborhood, or at local library book sales.

But as you reach further back in time, they show up less frequently. Many books from the first two decades have disappeared completely. In that case, the only source is to purchase them used, online. Even then it can be tricky; they've become collectible and therefore, expensive. The cheapest copy I've found for *Daniel Boone* (1940), for example, is a dog-eared former library copy at almost forty dollars.

As a school teacher, I don't have the money to purchase rare, out of print Newberys, so, I looked for other ways that I might be able to read some of the hardest-to-find books. I had heard that a library at the University of Minnesota featured a large children's book collection. I ran it by Drew the Scholastician. "Do you know anything about the children's book library at the U of M?" I asked.

"Do you mean the Kerlan Collection?" She said.

"I've heard of a library, but I didn't know the name. Do you think they'll have Newberys?"

Drew went silent for a beat, then scrunched her eyebrows together. "You mean, you've never heard of the Kerlan Collection?"

Drew recommended a contact and I followed up on her lead immediately.

History of the Collection

The Kerlan Collection was established in the 1940s by University of Minnesota alumnus Dr. Irvin Kerlan (1912–1963), an authority on toxicity, and the chief of medical research for the U.S. Food and Drug Administration in Washington D.C. His job is interesting to note because it sits in direct counterpoint to his hobby, for which he is much better known.

Dr. Kerlan sought rare books, and upon acquiring a particular title, often a first edition, he would contact the authors directly to get his collectible copy of the books signed. As the collection grew, Kerlan organized exhibitions of these materials all around the world, an activity which is still ongoing.

At just thirty-seven years old, Dr. Kerlan arranged to have his collection installed at the University of Minnesota. This proved to be a wise choice, as his life was tragically ended in a traffic accident just fourteen years later.

Beyond just books, the collection includes original manuscripts, illustrations, and other production materials from 1,700 authors and illustrators. The books and book materials in the Collection are available for study by teachers, librarians, students, authors, illustrators, translators, and critics from Minnesota and around the world. They even let in Reading Specialists from local school districts.

Through the University of Minnesota library's webpage there are links to the Kerlan Collection, but it's not advertised in any way. The collection isn't something on display or that you can tour. As a result, it is not well known outside the research and library science community.

Referencing Drew's contact, I sent a message requesting to visit the reading room and to look over copies of the first two decades of Newbery winners. The very next day I receive a response from Caitlin Marineau, Assistant Curator. "I'll have those pulled and ready for your

visit,” she wrote back. “And I am attaching a document with more detailed procedures for your reference. Please let me know if you have any questions.”

I enter the brick building and make my way along the quiet, grey-carpeted hallway directly to the check-in desk. There, I’m issued a locker for my book bag. Never having been to a research library before, I’m sure these procedures are routine, but I read through the Assistant Curator’s notes carefully (“Please note that coats, bags, and other personal items are not allowed in the Reading Room.”), so I’m not surprised. Other rules such as “Only pencils may be used for note taking; no ink pens of any type are allowed,” did raise eyebrows. Were folks notating their books in the margins? Or was something more dastardly afoot?

A student librarian ushers me to a room with two large glass doors and quietly indicates with her hand to enter. I step forward looking over the dozen or so tables deciding where to sit. The open glass door slides closed, and the librarian disappears. I stand there for a moment taking it all in.

A stillness pervades the reading room unlike any I’ve experienced. It’s not just quiet, it’s *silent*. Even with a half-dozen other people in the room, all paging through books, only occasionally is there any semblance of rustling. Flipping the pages of a rare book must be a form of Zen practice, I decide. Outside the large, shuttered windows the blue sky was filled with bird sounds and the hum of traffic. Inside I can see all the activity but hear none of it. I feel sealed in, almost claustrophobic.

The soft carpet and off-white walls are gentle, but I’m pretty sure I would go crazy in here for more than my allotted four hours; it’s so quiet I’m aware of the rhythms of my own breathing. I pick a seat near a window and look around at the other patrons; an older Asian

couple wearing white gloves, by turns nodding and indicating various pages in a book, a student librarian, bored, works tricks with a paperclip.

The arrival of a cart of books at my table focuses my thoughts. A new librarian leaves the cart at the end of my table, within arm's reach, then disappears.

Each book arrives wrapped in its own protective white library box tied in soft fabric like a present. I carefully untie the first box and slide Rachel Field's *Hitty, Her First Hundred Years* (1929) out slowly and carefully, admiring the cover.

Hitty traces the life of a doll through the ups and downs of a hundred years of owners, from eight-year-old girls to antique shops and back again. The cover design is phenomenal, a pattern of bright yellow and brown stars on a thick red background, the title in small font and the drawing of the face of the doll Hitty in the upper right corner. I open the front cover and there in scrolling letters is the author's signature. It is certainly not ancient compared to many texts, but in the context of this project it feels unique holding this ninety-year-old Newbery book in my hands, signed by Rachel Fields. It seems to contain a little bit of magic.

The Newbery has made such an impact since *Hitty* was published. Due to Frederic Melcher's stalwart support, the foundation was laid for an award rigorous in its pursuit of the best book of the year. Holding *Hitty* in my hands is tangible, physical proof that his mission was successful. Looking so deep into its past, I can't help but wonder about the future of the Newbery; from the proliferation of awards for children's literature to the increasing quality of contemporary books. Intelligent books from authors such as J.K. Rowling, Kate DiCamillo, and Neil Gaiman make a strong argument for a new Golden Age of literature for children.

From award-winning graphic novels (*The Invention of Hugo Cabret*, *American Born Chinese*, *This One Summer*, etc.), to fascinating multi-media works (*Skeleton Creek*), the line between story-telling through writing and illustrating is starting to blur. Case in point, Matt de la Pena's *Last Stop on Market Street* won both the Newbery gold medal, and the Caldecott award for illustration in 2016.

Not only is the landscape changing, but there are many forces competing for air in the children's literature ecosystem. I find myself engaged in an internal debate: Does the Newbery have what it takes to stay relevant?

The quick answer is No. Though the committee members with whom I spoke felt very strongly about preserving the mandate that the Newbery award honor the Most Distinguished, I find myself siding with Collette at Wild Rumpus bookstore: kids don't care if the book is the "best"; they only care whether they enjoy what they are reading or not. Parents and librarians are the ones who care if the book is "distinguished," and they are the ones that make the purchases. Scholastic Books, fully immersed in this dynamic, sets the markets in stone by printing and marketing the books *en masse*. The book industry is happy with the way things are. They're happy to perpetuate the importance of the Newbery books, unquestioningly.

Through the window, two birds swoop and soar, vying for what appears to be the carcass of a small rodent. In a mid-air collision the meal is half in each of their claws. They wheel and fly off to their respective nests. The critic withdraws, and I embrace the sympathetic: the Newbery has had a singular effect on literature for children. If the Newbery hadn't hewed so strictly to its core mission of elevating a book each year there would still be no money in it and the books would be just as bad. It would be *Captain Underpants* all the way down.

As I sit in a dreamy chair in the quietest room in which I've ever been in my entire life, my thoughts drift back to one of the questions that first drove my project: Is the Newbery award living up to its mandate? Is Newbery still the voice for literature for children?

While sitting in that soft chair, I flash back to one of my favorite books, *A Single Shard* (2002). It's a Korean folktale about a young boy who is charged with delivering entries from a local potter to a competition with the king in the capital city far away. While on the long, solitary trek to the king to show off his mentors' craftsmanship, thieves attack and the pottery is smashed. Instead of returning home, the boy salvages a shard of one of the destroyed artworks and continues his journey to the king.

Even with a wide range of complete ceramic pieces on show around him, the king examines the boy's shard with great interest, noting that its glaze and uniformity is of outstanding quality. Based on this sole fragment, he offers the potter the position as the court ceramicist. In many ways, this fictional journey is the same journey of the Newbery itself; both John Newbery and Frederic Melcher had big ideas but neither could have had the foresight to understand what they were putting out in the world, or what impact their ideas would have.

It's easy to look back and see that is what Newbery has done best; through the decades, we get a chronology of ideas in development, we get to see what was on people's minds in the 1920s, the 1960s, zooming in on different eras in history, analyzing the shape and the evolving narrative forms, plus, in many cases, getting a history lesson through the many biographies.

But one stubborn fact remains: the Newbery award never looks forward. No award does, by its nature. But is a historical marker all it should be?

The next book I open at the table is the first Newbery to win the gold medal, *The Story of Mankind* (1922) by Hendrik Willem van Loon. Because of its age, and it's hilariously out-of-date

history of human civilization, *The Story of Mankind* hasn't been reprinted often and is difficult to find.

The book itself is 492 numbered pages, but feels light, airy. I am struck by the low quality of the materials; the cover of the very first Newbery winner is printed on what appears to be the cheapest cardboard available;— thick but not substantial— and the cover illustration is in color, but a copy of many generations. As I flip through the pages, the details and colors of all the illustrations are soft and speak to a big run of copies. What would be a printed illustration in a nice book has clearly been cut and glued into place. Later I'll find out from a knowledgeable friend that printing illustrations and inserting them post-printing was common for books of this era, but I can't help but feel that the book in my hands feels cheap. Even with the explanation of book binding, I still find it remarkable that the first edition of the first Newbery gold medal book is one of the most insubstantial books I've ever held.

And then it hit me: *So, this is what Melcher was up against.* Championed by the American Library Association, the first Newbery had to be a very popular book. But the binding betrayed its meaning at the time; the status of the Newbery award wouldn't be conferred until decades later by dozens of titles and committees.

This first offering came straight out of the world of children's literature at the time: second-class, throw-away stories for a child. It was cheaply bound because there was no serious merit given to books for children at the time. Like John Newbery labored in the shadows of "true literature," so too did Frederic Melcher. Now that the current Newbery winner is announced on Public Radio across America and hardbound copies of gold-starred books have similar sticker prices to Melville and Faulkner, it's easy to forget what these two bookmen were up against. Had

each not been so completely dedicated to their mission, who knows what children's literature would be like today. Looking backwards in judgment is always easiest.

A Temporary Shelf

It's been a few weeks since I finished the last book and I feel a little unmoored. I've been on an almost exclusive diet of Newbery books for the last couple years and I realize now that I'd become used to the rhythms of their language. Not that there are similarities book to book, but rather that all the books undulate and move with an un-nameable unity. They're all books for kids, and in their own ways they work to uplift their protagonists. We the reader get to join in their journey to victory, to validation, to resolution. The fifth grader in me is still seeking that: to be able to say I made it out and you can too.

My sister's birthday is around the corner and I walk into a bookstore looking for a gift. Immediately it feels like a mistake; tables covered in colorful books, walls lined with more. As a voracious reader, the previous me would have loved the sight: So Many Stories! But now, more reflective, I felt safe in the fact that my literature choices were narrowed to a single category. But, more importantly, I felt protective of the hundred books I had marshaled together on my own, my flock. I want to reflect on them even more; I don't want to let them go.

There's always a push and pull when completing a big project. I felt it when I dipped my front bicycle tire in the Atlantic Ocean after riding across the country, and now, with the books finished, a small part of my identity has instantly calcified and become The Past.

But every day the magic of the project recedes a little. I've been surrounded by stories my entire life and I know that soon I'll be searching for new titles, new blood. New stories are out there, waiting to be read.

I'm seated at my desk in my office at home taking a break from organizing my bookshelf. The lowest shelf is the one I've dedicated to my Newbery collection. Finally, over the course of three years, I've picked up a copy of each title, all one hundred of them. They're all different heights and widths, some hardcover, some soft cover; on some, the spines are bleached by sun, their names faded, and on others bright colors jump announcing the title. Some bear the marks of teachers: *Bud, Not Buddy* (2000) has the reading level written in black Sharpie right on the spine; *Strawberry Girl* (1946) is almost illegible through the numerous library stickers of various colors that say, "Newbery Medal Winner" and "Children's Fiction."

There's no real reason that they should be shelved together; the books have no connection to each other. The committees that voted on them didn't interact and they took on their charge with the expertise and sophistication that they felt did the job right. They don't match thematically nor by genre. Only a simple gold sticker pulls them together.

I've been organizing them, and the books they replace, for a few hours, getting them all in chronological order, reliving each story as I put it in its rightful place on the shelf. Someday I may have to move them out: that shelf is prime real estate in the office library. I may have to put them in the spare bedroom, or down in the basement. But for now, as I sit, looking them over, all unruly heights and colors, all read many times by many readers, my thoughts return to the early days of the project.

I try to imagine what it was like when I didn't know what I would learn about this amazing, complicated prize, or where it would lead me. Of course, I imagined that along the way I'd become frustrated and have my mind blown, or maybe I'd root out some form of corruption among the judges or show how petty the award was or how undeserving some of the winning

books really were. But as I continued reading, something enchanting happened: I started falling in love with the books. And, even with all its problems, I see real value in the award.

The first couple of dozen books I read in quick succession and with a discerning eye and assembled a cosmology of the Newberys. The deeper I got, the more I learned about the stories and the history of the Newbery, the more adventures I found myself in. I didn't expect to sit in a silent reading room surrounded by signed first editions of some of the most famous works, or to interview the highly secretive Newbery committee members, or to become entranced by the quilt of their narratives, by their humor and honesty. I didn't expect to find lost treasures of impossible genius.

Though they are too hard to read for the kids I teach, the Newberys are almost without exception remarkable stories. They whisk you from the Andes, to medieval Spain, to the vast empty expanse of the Alaskan wilderness. They take you to fantastic realms to slay dragons, to travel through tesseract, and to parry with ancient Chinese devils. But most important of all are the guides. Young, insightful narrators lead us forward, showing vulnerability and insight along the way. That combination is magical.

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Appendix A: Newbery Gold Medal Winners

1922	Hendrik Willem van Loon	The Story of Mankind
1923	Hugh Lofting	The Voyages of Doctor Dolittle
1924	Charles Hawes	The Dark Frigate
1925	Charles Finger	Tales from Silver Lands
1926	Arthur Bowie Chrisman	Shen of the Sea
1926	Padraic Colum	The Voyagers
1927	Will James	Smoky the Cow Horse
1928	Dhan Gopal Mukerji	Gay Neck, the Story of a Pigeon
1929	Eric P. Kelly	The Trumpeter of Krakow 1462
1930	Rachel Field	Hitty, Her First Hundred Years
1931	Elizabeth Coatsworth	The Cat Who Went to Heaven
1932	Laura Adams Armer	Waterless Mountain
1933	Elizabeth Foreman Lewis	Young Fu of the Upper Yangtze
1934	Cornelia Meigs	Invincible Louisa
1935	Monica Shannon	Dobry
1936	Carol Ryrie Brink	Caddie Woodlawn
1937	Ruth Sawyer	Roller Skates
1938	Kate Seredy	The White Stag
1939	Elizabeth Enright	Thimble Summer
1940	James Daugherty	Daniel Boone
1941	Armstrong Sperry	Call It Courage
1942	Walter D. Edmonds	The Matchlock Gun

1943	Elizabeth Gray Vining	Adam of the Road
1944	Esther Forbes	Johnny Tremain
1945	Robert Lawson	Rabbit Hill
1946	Lois Lenski	Strawberry Girl
1947	Carolyn Sherwin Bailey	Miss Hickory
1948	William Pène du Bois	The Twenty-One Balloons
1949	Marguerite Henry	King of the Wind
1950	Marguerite de Angeli	The Door in the Wall
1951	Elizabeth Yates	Amos Fortune, Free Man
1952	Eleanor Estes	Ginger Pye
1953	Ann Nolan Clark	Secret of the Andes
1954	Joseph Krungold	...And Now Miguel
1955	Meindert DeJong	The Wheel on the School
1956	Jean Lee Latham	Carry On, Mr. Bowditch
1957	Virginia Sorensen	Miracles on Maple Hill
1958	Harold Keith	Rifles for Watie
1959	Elizabeth George Speare	The Witch of Blackbird Pond
1960	Joseph Krungold	Onion John
1961	Scott O'Dell	Island of the Blue Dolphins
1962	Elizabeth George Speare	The Bronze Bow
1963	Madeleine L'Engle	A Wrinkle in Time
1964	Emily Cheney Neville	It's Like This, Cat
1965	Maia Wojciechowska	Shadow of a Bull

1966	Elizabeth Borton de Treviño	I, Juan de Pareja
1967	Irene Hunt	Up a Road Slowly
1968	E. L. Konigsburg	From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler
1969	Lloyd Alexander	The High King
1970	William H. Armstrong	Souder
1971	Betsy Byars	Summer of the Swans
1972	Robert C. O'Brien	Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH
1973	Jean Craighead George	Julie of the Wolves
1974	Paula Fox	The Slave Dancer
1975	Virginia Hamilton	M. C. Higgins, the Great
1976	Susan Cooper	The Grey King
1977	Mildred Taylor	Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry
1978	Katherine Paterson	Bridge to Terabithia
1979	Ellen Raskin	The Westing Game
1980	Joan Blos	A Gathering of Days: A New England Girl's Journal
1981	Katherine Paterson	Jacob Have I Loved
1982	Nancy Willard	A Visit to William Blake's Inn
1983	Cynthia Voigt	Dacey's Song
1984	Beverly Cleary	Dear Mr. Henshaw
1985	Robin McKinley	The Hero and the Crown
1986	Patricia MacLachlan	Sarah, Plain and Tall
1987	Sid Fleischman	The Whipping Boy
1988	Russell Freedman	Lincoln: A Photobiography

1989	Paul Fleischman	Joyful Noise: Poems for Two Voices
1990	Lois Lowry	Number the Stars
1991	Jerry Spinelli	Maniac Magee
1992	Phyllis Reynolds Naylor	Shiloh
1993	Cynthia Rylant	Missing May
1994	Lois Lowry	The Giver
1995	Sharon Creech	Walk Two Moons
1996	Karen Cushman	The Midwife's Apprentice
1997	E. L. Konigsburg	The View from Saturday
1998	Karen Hesse	Out of the Dust
1999	Louis Sachar	Holes
2000	Christopher Paul Curtis	Bud, Not Buddy
2001	Richard Peck	A Year Down Yonder
2002	Linda Sue Park	A Single Shard
2003	Avi	Crispin: The Cross of Lead
2004	Kate DiCamillo	The Tale of Despereaux
2005	Cynthia Kadohata	Kira-Kira
2006	Lynne Rae Perkins	Criss Cross
2007	Susan Patron	The Higher Power of Lucky
2008	Laura Amy Schlitz	Good Masters! Sweet Ladies! Voices from a Medieval Village
2009	Neil Gaiman	The Graveyard Book
2010	Rebecca Stead	When You Reach Me
2011	Clare Vanderpool	Moon Over Manifest

2012	Jack Gantos	Dead End in Norvelt
2013	Katherine Applegate	The One and Only Ivan
2014	Kate DiCamillo	Flora & Ulysses: The Illuminated Adventure
2015	Kwame Alexander	The Crossover
2016	Matt de la Peña	Last Stop on Market Street
2017	Kelly Barnhill	The Girl Who Drank The Moon
2018	Erin Entrada Kelly	Hello, Universe
2019	Meg Medina	Merci Suárez Changes Gears