

MY SERENDIPITOUS CAREER IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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RESUMEN

La autora demuestra la importancia que tuvo en su momento ser pionera en un tipo de compilación bibliográfica hasta entonces inexistente en la década de 1980 debido a que las críticas venían de diferentes disciplinas: fue ella quien reunió por vez primera toda la crítica disponible sobre la literatura infantil y juvenil. Reflexiona sobre el valor de los premios en la creación e ilustración de la LIJ y las controversias que pueden suscitar los resultados.

ABSTRACT

The author shows how important it was to be a pioneer in a kind of bibliography compilation non-existent in the 1980's due to criticism coming from different disciplines. It was her the one who gather: all the criticism on children's literature that was available at that time. She talks about the importance of awards to children's authors and illustrators, as wells as the controversies that might arise due to results.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Crítica dentro de la LIJ, premios en la LIJ, análisis literarios en la LIJ, enseñanza de la LIJ en la Universidad, bibliotecaria de escuela, diversidad en la literatura infantil, defensa de la LIJ.

KEY WORDS

Criticism on children's literature, awards to children's literature, literary analysis on children's literature, College teaching on children's literature, school librarian, diversity in children's literature, advocacy for children's literature.

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It would have been impossible to plan a career like mine, and it is amazing that it happened at all. It took me a very long time to decide what I wanted to be when I grew up, and perhaps that is why I ended up not growing up at all, but staying in the world of childhood through children's literature.

BIBLIOGRAPHER

In the late 1970s, having worked as a Vista Volunteer, a welfare worker, and a college teacher, and having gotten master's degrees in English-Education, English Literature, and Library Science, I was working as a reference librarian at Pennsylvania State University when it became my turn to compile a regular reference department bulletin that highlighted new books on a particular topic. As I looked through the card file of new arrivals, I noticed several publications relating to children's literature. In addition, I noticed that they came primarily from three different disciplines: education, literature, and library science. I discovered that there was no reference work or bibliography that pulled together significant scholarship and criticism across these fields. A search of periodical indexes most frequently led to very short reviews of particular children's books. However, there were increasing numbers of journals publishing lengthier, more scholarly essays, and Harvard University Press had just published *Fairy Tales and After: from Snow White to E.B. White* (1978) by Roger Sale. Furthermore, scholarly journals devoted to children's literature were beginning to appear, including *Children's Literature* (1975), *The Children's Literature Association Quarterly* (1976), and *The Lion and the Unicorn* (1977), all of which have continued to thrive into the twenty-first century. Someone, I thought, should put together a bibliography of the significant, worthwhile articles that were coming from the three disciplines. And this thought was immediately followed by another: who better than I, who had degrees in the three disciplines?

Several things happened in rapid succession that helped turn this inspiration into reality. (1) In the basement of Pattee Library at Penn State, the dean of literary bibliographers, Harrison T. Meserole, was at work editing the *World Shakespeare Bibliography*. "Go talk to him!" one of my librarian mentors urged. So

I did, and Professor Meserole thought the project was a splendid idea, and that I should be the one to do it. (2) Someone else handed me information about applying for grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities, and I began writing a grant application to compile a bibliography of criticism of children's literature. (3) The reference publisher, G.K. Hall sent me a telegram in response to the proposal I had sent them, offering me a book contract.

After two rounds of application over two years, I received a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. In the meantime, I had resigned from my library job at Penn State, had moved with my husband to Albuquerque, New Mexico, and had a second child. I worked on the bibliography for the years between 1982 and 1986, while staying home with my two young children. *Children's Literature: A Guide to the Criticism* was finally published by G. K. Hall in January of 1987.

COLLEGE TEACHER

In the meantime, I had begun to read all the wonderful children's authors whose work I had been reading about, and using my husband's privilege of one class per semester tuition-free, I began studying children's literature in the College of Education at the University of New Mexico with Richard Van Dongen, an excellent teacher, who encouraged me to publish articles and present at conferences.

In 1987, I began teaching the introductory class in children's literature in the College of Education (the only place children's literature was taught) at the University of New Mexico. I would continue to teach, one or two classes each semester for seventeen years, until the fall of 2004, when I decided the time had come to stop. I long hoped to update my bibliography, but times were changing, and print bibliographies were becoming a thing of the past. After three more applications and rejections by the National Endowment for the Humanities, I reluctantly gave up the idea of updating the bibliography.

SCHOLAR

I began presenting papers at the annual conferences of the Children's Literature Association and at other national and international conferences, and I also published articles in scholarly journals, and contributed essays to such reference works as the *The Saint James Guide to Children's Writers* (1999), *Little Women and the Feminist Imagination* (1999), *The Louisa May Alcott Encyclopedia* (2001), *The Cambridge Guide to Children's Books* (2001), and *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Children's Literature* (2006). Although I had attended two previous conferences, my very first presentation at a Children's Literature Association Conference was in 1991 in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, "The Child is Mother of the Woman: Heidi Revisited." For the next twelve years, I presented almost annually at this and other conferences, and many of those presentations turned into publications in refereed journals.

LISTSERVE PARTICIPANT AND AWARD COMMITTEE MEMBER

It was through my participation in the Child_lit and CCBC listserve discussion groups, beginning in late 1993 or early 1994, that I honed my discussion and writing skills, and found colleagues with whom to exchange ideas. Through the listserve discussions I met many wonderful children's literature enthusiasts, some of whom have become lifelong friends. Because of comments I made on the Childlit Listserve, one day I received the invitation that is every librarian's dream – to serve on the Newbery or Caldecott Award Committee. An email from Steve Herb, President-Elect of the Association of Library Services for Children of the American Library Association began with words something like these: "So often you find just the right words to express your thoughts. I need to appoint people ... but you have to be a member...!" Wow! I wrote back that I had kept up my membership in ALA and ALSC, although I had not been to a conference in 15 years, and that I would love to be on either the Newbery or Caldecott Committee. He wrote back, that he would appoint me to something, but then I heard nothing for a very long time. It was nearly Christmas time, before I got the letter appointing

me to the 1997 Caldecott Award Committee. I headed off to the conference in Washington, D.C. in January 1996, taking my twelve-year old daughter along. I knew no one, and as my appointment had come so late, the conference hotels were filled. I found a room on my own in a small hotel, and connected with some colleagues from my Penn State days, and with new acquaintances from the listserves. I did not know then that during subsequent conferences I would be invited by publishers to rounds of parties and receptions. That would happen in San Francisco in June, and it was a thrilling experience.

Serving on the Caldecott Award Committee that first time, was one of the most exciting and rewarding experiences of my life. The UPS man would arrive with box after box of books, which I would excitedly open, sorting them into piles of ones I absolutely had to read, a middle pile, and a pile of those that didn't look so good.

Serving on the committee was an extremely intense experience. Everything that goes on in the committee is confidential, but I can say that I would never again look at books in the same way. The top contenders were read over and over again, thought about deeply, and one favorite was weighed against another. There were fifteen highly qualified, articulate, and opinionated experts on that committee, and sometimes those opinions differed greatly. Nevertheless, I was absolutely thrilled when my favorite of that year's books, Paul Zelinsky's *Rapunzel*, was the 2007 Caldecott winner.

I thought that when my term was over, I would, like Cinderella, retreat to my chimney corner, and my year of glamour and excitement would be over for good. But I ended up serving on several other award committees, including the newly established Siebert Award for Nonfiction, the Caldecott committee again, this time as an elected member, and finally on the Newbery Award Committee, to which I was also elected. I also served on the Children's Literature Association's Phoenix Award Committee, and was the founding chair of the new Phoenix Picture Book Award Committee. All of these were wonderful experiences, yet, nothing ever quite equaled that first Caldecott term when I was Cinderella at the ball, plucked out of obscurity to mingle with the bright lights of contemporary children's books.

AWARDS: PROS AND CONS

No matter which book is selected for the Newbery or Caldecott, there will be naysayers and those who are disappointed in the choice. The committees work very hard, and consider the books in much greater depth than the average reader. No one will ever know what goes on inside the closed committee meetings. It is true that some award-winning books become more popular than others, and some seem to have been more timely than timeless. Nevertheless, all of the award-winning books have certain qualities of excellence. Quality, not popularity governs the committees' choices. Committee members know that their choices will not please everyone.

The fact that Ann Nolan Clark's little-known *Secret of the Andes* won over a book that has become a beloved and acclaimed classic: E.B. White's *Charlotte's Web*, is often cited as an example of the failure of awards to select the very best. No one will ever know what determined that committee's choice. In retrospect it may seem that the choice was a mistake. Yet, without the award, even fewer children would have read or experienced *The Secret of the Andes*, which is a very different, and very lovely multicultural book that requires some stretching on the part of the reader. Even today, there are adults who cannot reconcile themselves to the treatment of death in *Charlotte's Web*, and there may have been members with similar views on that committee. Any winner naturally attracts scrutiny, and the winner with which no one finds fault is exceedingly rare.

Do awards bring attention to only a few books, leaving others to languish unrecognized? To some extent, yes, but all cannot be number one. There is also the question of what makes a good book for whom, and for what purpose? There are many books that fit the needs of a particular child or a particular occasion, or tie in with a particular topic. Some books are excellent for some occasions or for some children, or some purposes. This diversity is part of the reason for the proliferation of awards.

Is this a good thing? I say yes. Awards help focus attention on children's books and reading, and anything that encourages interest in children's books is a good thing.

SCHOOL LIBRARIAN

My final role has been as an elementary school librarian. For ten years I was the half-time librarian at a school with kindergarten through sixth grade. I went to work in the school library as my own children entered their teen-aged years, and I began to miss the contact with children's minds and energies. I truly loved sharing books with children of various ages. I brought my experience as a college teacher, as a critic and scholar, and as a participant on award committees to this work, which challenged me, perhaps more than any other of my roles, and which was also one of the most rewarding. In working with children and books on a daily basis, I finally felt in touch with what all the bibliography, scholarship, literary analysis, and teacher preparation is really for, getting children and books together and helping them become lovers of books, of literature, and of knowledge. The whole world is contained within a library, especially within a small elementary school library, where there are books of all kinds and on every topic at levels suitable for children.

The more time I spent with children and books, the less important keeping up with scholarship became to me, yet all of my experiences have informed each other. My career seems to have progressed in a backwards fashion, from criticism and bibliography to the books themselves, from scholarship to teaching teachers, and finally from the university to the elementary school. Thus, I end, as I began, in childhood.

I wish to thank Alejandra for inviting us to share our experiences once more.

I also want to add, that the life and career I have described was possible only because I had a husband who encouraged me and supported me lovingly and financially through all of these undertakings.

Based on the Presentation at the ChLA conference in Charlotte, NC, in June 2009, and revised in July 2013.