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## Everlasting: Memories and Vignettes of the Newbery

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# Everlasting:

## Memories and Vignettes of the Newbery

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**B**eside my bed is a hope chest that was made by my great uncle as a gift for my great grandmother. Inside are linens that have been passed down through three generations of women, beaded sweaters my father brought back for my mother from his tour of duty in Vietnam, and an original of the South Dakota state flag my grandmother designed while working at the South Dakota Department of History. On top of the hope chest are THE BOOKS. Each book is signed by the author, with their personal gratitude reflected in the words.

*Thank you for giving me the biggest honor of my life.* —Gennifer Choldenko

*For Heather, as you too watch for the eye of the whale!* —Gary Schmidt

*For Heather, with thanks and appreciation.* —Russell Freedman

*For Heather and Jamie. Stars are kira-kira/Fireflies are kira-kira/And I'm sure Jamie is VERY kira-kira!* —Cynthia Kadohata

These are the books selected by the 2005 Newbery Committee. Three are Honor Books, chosen as outstanding examples of literature for children ages 0–14. One is “the most distinguished contribution,” the Newbery Medal recipient.

Everyone who knows anything about awarding the Newbery Medal knows that more reading is required in a year's time than seems humanly possible. When I told my brother that I would be considering about 450 books he said, “But that's impossible! That's more than a book a day!” And, at times, it did seem impossible indeed. But when you accept a responsibility of such magnitude and prestige you are consumed by a level of undaunted

determination. Your personal life is over, and all you do is read and re-read books. Is it worth it? Of course! Are you glad when it's over? Of course! Would you do it again? Of course!

Immediately after the announcement of the 2005 Newbery Medal winner I wrote an article for *Children and Libraries* about that year and how it affected my personal life. “Forty Hundred Books: A Single Mother's Year With the Newbery” is in their Summer/Fall edition of 2005, and it offers a month-by-month journal of the challenges and rewards of being a member of the committee while still trying to have a life with my daughter, Jamie.

So when I was asked to write this article I wondered what was left to be said. I reflected back on the past 18 months and realized two things. First, serving on this committee was not only a professional goal for the 27 years I have been a librarian, but also a tremendous learning experience. Second, there are vignettes that replay in my mind's eye, brief moments that are forever remembered. Here, then, are the top five learnings and memories that I believe could help someone appreciate the everlasting significance of being a member of a Newbery (or Caldecott) committee.

### **Learning #1: The Process Is More Than the Reading**

Reading the books is the easy part. What takes the time is taking notes, critically analyzing the books according to the criteria established by ALSC, researching historical data or factual discrepancies, and recording all this. Plus you often have to reread titles in order to compare and reconsider. Two fat notebooks went with me to ALA Mid-Winter in Boston, full of notes, reviews and my comments. As a result, the books I read that year are literally burned into my heart and I feel a personal attachment to each title I reviewed. All of this



work was similarly done by the other fourteen members, which means our discussions were careful and thorough analyses of the criteria.

### **Learning #2: Nonfiction Is Worth Reading!**

I am a voracious reader, but, before my experience with the Newbery, the only nonfiction I read was anything related to my passion for all things African. But during 2004 I read some outstanding nonfiction that significantly widened my narrow focus. I was deeply moved by the dramatic mystery of *The Race to Save the Lord God Bird* by Phillip Hoose, and surprisingly intrigued by the discoveries of Sy Montgomery in his book *The Tarantula Scientist*. I learned about pyramids, Cesar Chavez, and certainly more about the Revolutionary War than I would normally consume in a year. And, of course, I was enchanted by the grace and power of one woman in *The Voice That Challenged a Nation: Marian Anderson and the Struggle for Equal Rights* by Russell Freedman. Now I pursue reading quality nonfiction, and am continually impressed at how it has improved from the days of glorifying biographies and factual essays with no thought to creativity or artistic display.

### **Learning #3: Consensus Is Not About Majority Rule**

Think about it. Fifteen well-read, well-prepared adults, all of whom are passionate about children's literature. They each have their personal likes and dislikes, and they are to come to agreement about the ONE title that is the most distinguished above all others published that year. Yikes! I fully credit our chair, Susan Faust, with guiding all of us toward consensus by reminding us frequently about two important qualities we needed in order to achieve agreement. First, keep an open mind. Second, listen, truly listen, to what oth-



Newberry committee with 2005 Newbery Medal winner Cynthia Kadohata (front row, fifth from the left).

ers are saying. There was more than one title that changed its status in my mind as I absorbed what others shared. "I hadn't thought about that," was spoken by several of us, as well as, "Now that you mention it, I can see..." Yes, there were some titles that each of us was willing to, in Susan's words, "throw ourselves across the table" to defend. Of course, that's what made the final discussions as we approached balloting so energizing and important. But we always maintained a professional respect for each other's opinion, and we listened, truly listened, to what was said. It made all the difference, and led us toward making the selection we all supported.

### **Learning #4: The Newbery Medal Encourages Discussion**

When *Kira-Kira* was announced to the hundreds of librarians, publishers, and booksellers breathlessly waiting at the press announcement there was a brief moment of stunned silence before the loud applause. We knew that would happen. This book was not widely discussed or publicized. It was a quiet treasure, a gem worth discovering. One previous Newbery chair commented to us, "You really did your homework. Congratulations!" What





The Committee with 2005 Newbery Honor Book author Gennifer Choldenko (front row, center).

she meant was we went beyond the obvious, which is sometimes necessary. And it also meant that not everyone was going to agree with us. At first I was hesitant to read the listservs following the announcement, because I didn't want to read any adverse criticism. But I did read them, and what I found was a variety of comments, all of which I had felt myself before being part of the process. Some thought we should have chosen their favorite. Some thought the Newbery should focus more on books for younger readers. Some thought the story was too quiet. Some thought it was time for a particular author to have won. Some thought it just wasn't what they would have chosen. Amid all these comments would be recommendations of other titles, thoughts about the award, and observations about the changes in the world of publishing children's books. Can you think of anything better than people all over the world sharing their thoughts about children's literature?

**Learning #5: The Thrill Never Ends**

I have had the great honor of sharing my experience with a variety of audiences. Each time I speak, whether it is a pre-

sentation to students in a classroom, or to adults at an educational conference, I never cease to be thrilled and amazed that I was given this opportunity. I also love the chance to increase people's knowledge about the Newbery Medal, the meticulous process that is followed, and the challenges it brings to committee members. "I had no idea," is what most people say. They thought it is a democratic vote for what should be a popular title, but they learn that popularity or marketability has absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with it. And I learn that I am ever so lucky.

And now for the vignettes, brief scenes that play and replay whenever I want to relive what made it all worthwhile.

Returning to my office after a two-week vacation in July, halfway through the year of the Newbery, and discovering that every inch of desk, table and floor is covered with boxes and bags of books. Panic!

Arriving for ALA Mid-Winter without any delays and with my luggage. In Boston. In January. A miracle!

Grabbing a hotel employee from the hall to have him take a photo of all of us and the four winning titles immediately after our balloting was completed. I'm sure he had no idea why we were all so giddy. That photo is one of my favorites because it's just us, after hours and hours and hours of discussion, and we're happy and relieved and PROUD!

Visiting the booth for Atheneum Books on Sunday morning after making our selection, thinking, "I know something you don't know." I reached up to touch their display copy of *Kira-Kira*, and my hand was shaking with so much secret excitement that I knocked it over, which made all the rest of the books carefully lined up on that shelf fall over, like dominoes. Boom boom boom boom boom boom. Kind of prophetic, don't you think?

All fifteen of us, jittery with coffee and no sleep, crammed into a tiny cubicle,





Newbery Honor Book authors Gary Schmidt (front row, third from left) and Russell Freedman (to Gary's left) celebrate with the Committee.

very early Monday morning to call the authors. Mr. Freedman was such a gentleman and so very kind. We thought Ms. Choldenko was going to hyperventilate with all her gasps of joy, and Ms. Kadohata's appreciation was well worth the three phone calls Susan made before finally getting through to her at the ridiculous pre-dawn hour in California. My fondest memory is the lucky fact that Mr. Schmidt was on his way into Boston to teach a class so he came to the press conference where we gathered around him like groupies. Shameless adoration!

The incredibly thoughtful gifts. There are too many to list here, so I will mention only two. Marsha, one of the committee members, gave each of us the word *kira-kira* handwritten in Japanese calligraphy on linen-like paper. And from author Cynthia, we received a teacup handmade in Japan.

During the Awards Banquet, sitting at the table with Caitlyn Dlouhy, editor of *Kira-Kira*, and George Miyamoto, Ms. Kadohata's partner. Watching the tearful pride and love on their faces as Cynthia gave her acceptance speech was just like it should always be, when someone we deeply care for receives just what she deserves.

Even though the time of the Newbery for me is long gone it continues to shine and glitter for me, just as the stars and butterflies did for Katie in *Kira-Kira*.

I shall always be grateful for the nomination and election that brought me such a professional honor and such an important personal journey.

#### **2005 Newbery Award Site**

<http://www.ala.org/ala/alsc/awardsscholarships/literaryawds/newberymedal/newberyhonors/05NewberyMedalHonorBks.htm>

#### **2005 Newbery Medal Winner**

*Kira-Kira*

by Cynthia Kadohata  
(Atheneum Books for Young Readers/Simon & Schuster)

#### **2005 Newbery Honor Books**

*Al Capone Does My Shirts*

by Jennifer Choldenko

*The Voice that Challenged a Nation:  
Marian Anderson and the Struggle for  
Equal Rights*

by Russell Freedman

*Lizzie Bright and the Buckminster Boy*

by Gary D. Schmidt

