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## Newbery Award-Winning Books and Gifted Readers

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NEWBERRY AWARD-WINNING BOOKS AND GIFTED READERS

by

Jennifer Dreyer

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for graduation with Honors in the Education

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Laurie Croft  
Thesis Mentor

Spring 2017

All requirements for graduation with Honors in the  
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Laurie Croft  
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Newbery Award-Winning Books and Gifted Readers  
Jennifer Dreyer  
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Abstract

This paper explores whether or not Newbery award-winning books, recognized for contributions to children's literature in general, are likely to challenge and engage gifted readers. Children who demonstrate exceptional abilities in reading comprehension and perform beyond others their age need literature that will challenge their comprehension and enhance their advanced vocabulary. The Newbery books generally are written for upper elementary students and above, so the language of the texts themselves should align with the ability of a gifted reader. By examining the research related to what books are best for gifted readers, as well as the characteristics of books selected as Newbery-award winners, it would be more apparent whether the characteristics of Newbery books align with the needs of gifted readers. This exploration can help classroom teachers better serve gifted readers by understanding the needs of these students, as well as the literature that serves as an appropriate match, encouraging children to become life-long readers.

### Newbery Books and Gifted Readers

This paper explores whether or not the books that win the John Newbery Medal, recognized for contributions to children's literature in general, are likely to challenge and engage gifted readers in the early grades, defined as grades Pre-Kindergarten through grade 2. Although not all gifted students are gifted readers, and some gifted readers may not be overlooked by gifted programs, children who demonstrate exceptional abilities in reading comprehension and perform beyond others their age need literature that will challenge their comprehension and enhance their advanced vocabulary. The Newbery books generally are written for older elementary students and above, so the language of the texts themselves should align with the ability of a precocious gifted reader in the early years of elementary school. Teachers, however, are more familiar with texts for struggling readers, and they may not consider the needs of their advanced readers. Teachers may think that gifted readers just need bigger books instead of more cognitively challenging texts.

I wanted to examine the characteristics of gifted readers. Also, I wanted to see what kind of books are best for gifted readers, in terms of challenging their reading skills, as well as engaging them in the stories. By examining the research related to what books are best for gifted readers, I would be able to analyze the characteristics of Newbery books and determine if they aligned with the needs of gifted readers. I will explore research related to what genres seem to best fit the needs of gifted readers, although any genre can appeal to gifted readers if they have a passion for the subject. Additionally, understanding the selection process for the Newbery awards, as well as the Honor books, will contribute to my analysis of the books themselves. Most

elementary teachers are familiar with the Newbery award, but they may not understand the process by which the books are designated as prestigious literature.

I will analyze books that have won the Newbery Medal written over the past decade, reading each for basic literary elements. After reading each book, I will read the variety of book reviews written about each work when it was published. Comparing the research about literature appropriate for gifted readers with the texts and available reviews for Newbery books will provide a better understanding of whether or not these books are appropriate recommendations for gifted readers.

My hope is that teachers will recognize the needs that gifted readers have and how to meet those needs in an appropriate manner. If teachers are aware of the needs of gifted readers and aware of the best literature available for children, the more likely they are to suggest these books and other award-winning books to students. An appropriate match between students and literature will encourage students to become life-long readers. Teachers need to differentiate their curriculum to match the needs of each student; awareness of appropriate resources can help them achieve this goal.

### **Literature Review**

For years, award-winning books have been recognized as the stars of the literary world. Although there are over 6,000 books published each year, only one is given the honor of being named the winner of the John Newbery Medal (Hill, White, & Brodie, 2001). This winner achieves fame and usually fortune by being showcased in libraries, bookstores, and classrooms, however; award-winning books are often not appropriate for gifted readers (Hauser & Nelson, 1988). As Hauser and Nelson stated, “Many books that receive this award do not intellectually

challenge the gifted reader in language, story, or literary quality, however popular they may be” (p. 9).

Teachers may assume that gifted students are synonymous with gifted readers; however, the two terms are not interchangeable. There is a wide variety of definitions of gifted readers. It is widely accepted that gifted readers are students who read at least two grade levels above their age placed grade; similarly, it is typical of a gifted reader to read quickly and with high levels of comprehension and advanced language skills (Wood, 2008). Additionally, gifted readers are often recognized by their intense concentration while reading and comprehending text, and by their creativity in their interaction with text (Vosslamber, 2002). To gifted readers, reading is a passion. It is both an escape and a way to expand their generally above-average vocabulary. Books give these readers the opportunity to take advantage of their precocious speech characteristics in terms of understanding, use, and decoding of word treatment (Hauser & Nelson, 1988). Gifted readers demonstrate higher levels of reading than peers, larger vocabularies, better comprehension, longer attention spans, and complex thinking (Vosslamber, 2002), all of which are important when finding appropriate literature for gifted readers.

This is not to suggest that every trait associated with gifted readers is a positive one. There are many characteristics related that are unfortunate but often reported. Among these characteristics are boredom, self-criticism, and disengagement (Moore, 2005; Ford, Tyson, Howard & Harris III, 2000). Students, however, may be bored because they are not being challenged by the literature, from subject matter to the text itself; many gifted readers do not live up to their potential because the reading journey fails to engage them. Gifted readers can also suffer from uncomfortable feelings about their above-average abilities because they feel like they do not fit in. Moreover, that uncomfortable feeling can result from the perfectionism that

characterizes some gifted students. When a challenge does present itself, these students can be unfamiliar with the struggle to understand because everything previously has come easily to them. These perfectionist tendencies result in self-criticism about their own skills. Students may lose self-confidence and the motivation for learning, resulting in underachievement (Wood, 2008). Unfortunately, almost one in five gifted students has negative thoughts with respect to reading (Job & Coleman, 2016).

Gifted readers should be encouraged to read high-quality literature that aligns with their abilities as well as interests. Studies show that gifted readers seem to consume literature in terms of reading late into the night, finding refuge in libraries and reading almost twice as many books compared to average readers (Vosslamber, 2002; Hauser & Nelson, 1998). Educators would benefit from information about addressing the needs of gifted readers. Most educators are taught to focus on struggling readers rather than gifted ones (Wood, 2008), but teachers need to become aware of the needs of gifted readers and then support the selection of books that are appropriate for their abilities, if not their grades in school. As well, Wood noted (2008), “There is an important difference between assigning challenging literature and teaching students how to read challenging literature” (p. 20). Teachers need to find text suited for gifted readers and then provide activities that effectively develop their talents. While average and struggling, readers are often aided in the book process selection, gifted readers are left on their own, or even denied access to the books that would challenge them (Hauser & Nelson, 1998).

Quality literature for gifted readers shares characteristics that need to be taken into consideration. A book is more than just text. It is a journey. Great books have the power to “tempt, stretch, and motivate the child’s imagination in ways that will affect him emotionally while also evoking a powerful intellectual response that motivates him to pursue and prefer



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quality literature” (Hauser & Nelson, 1998, p. 12). Checklist (Table 1) to help determine if a book is appropriate for a gifted reader include:

Table: Checklist

Question	Yes	No, why not?
Does the book include strong characters that are relatable/admirable/or in other ways a role model? (Haslam-Odoardi, 2010)		
Is the book a cognitive challenge, including multiple language components? (Hauser & Nelson, 1998)		
Do the language components encompass such things as literary devices (Haslam-Odoardi, 2010), flashbacks, variation in characterization (Hauser & Nelson, 1998), and challenging vocabulary (Vosslamber, 2002)?		
Does the text have a plot that encourages thinking deeply and reflecting on the world? (Haslam-Odoard, 2010)		
Does the text aid its readers in better understanding peers and events that happen in the world around them? (Hauser & Nelson, 1998)		
Does the text encourage readers to look for more information elsewhere?		
Does the text allow the reader to become a part of the adventure?		
Does the text challenge the gifted reader to ask questions?		

### **Benefits of Literary Genres**

In considering the above, it is also critical to also examine literary genres, and the differing contributions they make to readers. Gifted readers need to be exposed to all genres; however, some may better align with the needs of gifted readers because of content, text complexities, and elements of the narrative.

#### **Biography**

Beyond knowing details about a specific person, it is also vital to take into account the events that molded them, the peers that surrounded them, and the historical perspective of that person (Hauser & Nelson, 1998). Biographies provide more than just facts; they also provide the opportunity for students to compare themselves to someone and to look up to a role model. This comparison can allow gifted students to see that everyone faces challenges, and that these generally provide the most growth. Biographies generally highlight unique individuals, just like gifted readers themselves. When gifted readers open a biographical text, they have the opportunity to learn about someone else's life, as well as about themselves, in a non-threatening and engaging manner.

#### **Historical Fiction**

Although in a narrative form, historical fiction presents history along with characters and plot. Historical characters and plot often elaborate on situations ideal for gifted readers, allowing them to gain the knowledge learned from that time-period and those events and helping them bridge the gap between social studies and literature. Cross-cutting curriculum can challenge a student to apply their background knowledge and revisit past learning (Polette, 2000). Well-crafted historical fiction can be an excellent option for gifted readers.

### **Classic Literature**

These are books that have stood the test of time, and just like award-winning books, their messages remain relevant through the ages. Classic novels can be particularly appropriate for gifted students because the tales highlight places, people, and events that readers have long enjoyed (Polette, 2000). With classic literature, gifted readers can be introduced to customs and beliefs from previous times as well as challenged to compare those times with the current age and their own lives. Often, classic literature possesses challenging vocabulary, providing gifted readers with a manageable obstacle on their comprehension journey. As well, with reviews of and commentaries about classics available online, it is not difficult to craft activities to continue to challenge the student outside of the reading process.

### **Fantasy/ Fairy Tale**

The benefits of this genre are the creative characterizations and settings it provides students. Fantasy can inspire gifted readers with unfamiliar worlds to explore (Hauser & Nelson, 1998). The genre of fantasy is often full of mysterious elements, from magic to complex and unusual characters, which encourages students to predict outcomes. Fantasy does have its drawbacks. For example, it may not challenge the student because, according to Hauser and Nelson (1988), “characters are frequently prototypes, themes are explicit, plots are predictable, and good usually triumphs over evil” (p.21). These elements may fail to challenge gifted readers to grow beyond both comfort and predictability. It is important to keep in mind that not all genres will challenge students both academically and creatively, so it is important to include a diverse mix of both to ensure the growth of gifted readers.

**Poetry**

Poetry provides gifted readers with complexity of vocabulary, an interesting format, and possible hidden syntax. Gifted readers tend to enjoy poetry in terms of a way to communicate (Polette, 2000). In addition to those benefits, readers are also given the opportunity to explore complex content in an accessible manner and be mesmerized by the imagery. For gifted readers, poetry provides multiple challenges, especially in terms of a concept given by Hauser and Nelson (1988): “poetry that utilizes concise, figurative language places intellectual demands on readers by requiring them to separate layers of meanings and piecing together a new interpretation before they reach full understanding” (p.20). This sort of complexity usually requires multiple re-reading, as well as close reading strategies to get the full picture. Although it is vital to challenge students, the poem needs to be appropriate for the specific student (p.20-21). Not every student is going to reach the same conclusions after reading a poem due to the experiences the individual reader brings. Poetry can also introduce other experiences or draw on the past to enable growth throughout. Thus, poetry is a strong genre to introduce and teach gifted reader.

**Wordless Picture**

Lukehart (2011) explained that wordless picture books “enrich the aesthetic lives and literacy skills of ‘mainstream’ and ‘gifted’ children as well, since they require visual decoding, original thinking, language production, an understanding of multiple viewpoints, and the interpretation of meaning” (p.50). Sometimes a lack of structure can challenge a student just as much as structured text. Wordless picture books require gifted readers to interact with the material in creative ways, and they can to challenge students just beginning to show signs of giftedness in reading, as well as for students who want a new challenge. Wordless picture books

can be used in activities that require students to write their own stories, look deeper into the illustrations, and ultimately, take a step back from heavy text literature. However, wordless picture books would be covered under the Caldecott award-winning books, not the Newbury.

### **Nonfiction**

For a genre that is reportedly read less than four minutes a day (Job & Coleman,2016), nonfiction is meaningful for gifted students in a variety of ways. Nonfiction challenges students by requiring complex thinking; as well, it encourages exploring the unknown and builds academic vocabulary in a meaningful manner (Hauser & Nelson, 1988; Job & Coleman, 2016). Nonfiction encourages the questioning side of students and often presents unknown information which challenges students appropriately. The engagement students can get from non-fiction, when they are taught correctly how to read non-fiction, can be applied to many subject areas. Additionally, non-fiction is extremely cross-curricular, which provides students to be challenged in other content areas as well.

### **Picture Books**

Picture books for gifted readers often have to display more sophistication than they might for average readers; they need to extend the thinking and imagination of students, while also encouraging problem-solving and creation of ideas. The picture books accessible today often are wonderful starts for gifted readers because they focus on topics students are interested in, pique their interest, and require complex thinking processes (Hauser & Nelson, 1988). Although somewhat overlooked because they are perceived as ‘not being challenging,’ picture books have a place in the hands of gifted readers.

**Humorous Texts**

These texts are fantastic for gifted readers in terms of the versatility they offer. Most humorous texts include parody, satire, and irony, which challenge the readers to use higher-level thinking processes to get the full meaning (Serafini & Coles, 2015). Additionally, for students who might be overextended and stressed (Kaplan & Geoffroy, 1993), these novels can decrease anxiety and increase enjoyment of reading. The characteristics of humorous texts can clearly address the needs of gifted readers, while also giving them a chance to enjoy the reading and not even realize the thought processes at work.

**Fiction**

Clearly, fiction has its place in the hands of gifted readers. Not only does it develop the academic skills of students, it also contributes to the overall growth and skill sets needed for gifted readers in terms of exploring unknown belief systems (Hauser & Nelson, 1988). The work should be high-quality literature, with a strong plot, insightful characters, and engaging and unexpected twists. In terms of characters, it is important that the characters are not only relatable, but also complex in their thoughts, actions, and reactions. This way, readers can learn more about themselves through the characters; they can try to predict what might happen next and personally develop by seeing the changes a character undergoes throughout the novel. True gifted readers can take one step further and try to predict what minor characters are doing, as well. The plot should reveal events that are not too predictable that force readers to think about what is occurring. With appropriate fiction, the reader should feel part of the story, but if the story is too simple, it is not the best fit for gifted readers. “Fictional works containing unidimensional characters, hackneyed plots, simplistic structures, cliché-ridden language, and stale overworked themes are often available but are clearly inadequate since such material offers

only a bland, passionless, intellectual encounter” (Baskin & Harris, 1980, p.2). Instead, high-quality fiction will allow readers to continue to expand their knowledge and broaden their experiences.

### **Multicultural Literature**

The appeal of this genre is multifaceted and appropriate for all students, not just gifted readers. Through multicultural literature, students are exposed to different cultures, diversity, and problem-solving ideas (Ford, Tyson, Howard & Harris, 2000). Through this, readers are exposed to the surrounding environment, as well as cultures they have never even heard of, and they become aware of the ideas they hold about culture. In a big picture sort of way, multicultural literature encourages to think about the way things unfold for a wide variety of people in the world; when students are given opportunities to focus on differences around them, they develop greater empathy and understanding. Gifted students need multicultural literature to complete the array of genres that are relevant to them.

### **Newbery-Award Winning Literature**

In order to consider the value of Newbery award-winning books for gifted readers, it is important to have some background knowledge of the award and its history. The John Newbery Medal is awarded to one children’s book that was published in the previous year (Hill, White & Brodie, 2001). The American Library Association established a committee to select the winner, giving the first medal in 1922 for a book published the previous year. The purpose of the medal, according to the American Library Association is: “To encourage original creative work in the field of books for children. To emphasize to the public that contributions to the literature for children deserve similar recognition to poetry, plays, or novels” (American Library Association,2017). To accomplish this, each committee member reads new children’s

publications, looking for several factors, participates in book discussion at meetings for committee members only, then submits a written ballot. The criteria they discuss is as follows, as listed on the official website of the Newbery Medal:

- 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
- Considered as a contribution to American literature. (American Library Association,2017)

For the most part, the stamp of the Newbery Medal ensures a publication will be relevant for quite a few years and read nationwide.

### **Methodology**

Due to its distinguished reputation, the John Newbery Medal suggests the value of an award winner to gifted readers. Through a review of the eleven Newbery award-winning books over the decade spanning 2006 - 2016, an analysis can compare each book's literary elements, in terms of the criteria listed above, and its fit for a gifted reader in the early elementary years. The review of each book was completed with the Newbery checklist in mind, in Table 1: Checklist. Each book had previously been unread. The books were written for students in upper elementary school and above (e.g., grades 3 through 5 and above); the focus of this research is whether or not these books would be appropriate for gifted readers in the lower grades (e.g., Pre-kindergarten through grade 2).



**John Newbery Medal Winners*****Last Stop on Market Street* (Matt de la Peña, 2015) – Multicultural Literature**

This text features many of the qualities important to challenge a young gifted reader. The main character, CJ, and his grandmother, Nana are very admirable. According to the author, de la Peña (2016), he wanted "to write a book featuring diverse characters in a storyline that wasn't focused (at least overtly) on diversity" (p. 59). In many ways, Nana is a positive role model, and the diversity featured throughout is important as an example of well-crafted multicultural literature. In terms of language components, the author uses wonderful imagery throughout, describing, for example, "And in the darkness, the rhythm lifted CJ out of the bus, out of the busy city. He saw sunset colors swirling over crashing waves... CJs chest grew full and he was lost in the sound and the sound gave him the feeling of magic" (de la Peña, 2015). Readers can experience how CJ feels throughout the book. In addition to text, the book has wonderful illustrations, and according to Barthelme (2015), "Robinson's bright, simple, multicultural figures, with their rounded heads, boxy bodies, and friendly expressions, contrast nicely with de la Pena's lyrical language, establishing a unique tone that reflects both CJ's wonder and his nana's wisdom" (de la Peña, 2015, p. 46), which demonstrates how the text and illustrations work together to encourage readers to take time to explore and enjoy each aspect. The text reflects current conditions in American society and includes diversity throughout with the use of various ages, ethnicities, tattooed people, and people with disabilities. Additionally, the book's messages are very applicable to any reader, for example, discussing beauty everywhere in the world (p. 22), the importance of "giving back" (p. 21), and talking about treasuring what you have (p. 7). Readers can apply the text to their own lives. After reading, they will definitely have

questions about society, inequality, and being their better selves (Bigelow & Buehler 2016).

Overall, this book is definitely recommended for young gifted readers.

***The Crossover* (Kwame Alexander, 2014) -Poetry**

Upon beginning this text, I had not read a book like it. However, I was unable to put it down, and I could imagine a young reader having a similar experience. The story features twin boys, middle-school basketball players in a poetry form. The story is told from Josh's point of view and explains his thoughts, actions, and surroundings. There are many literary components that work very well. The passages "vary from free verse to rhyme, and occasionally there are chapters where Josh breaks into a thorough definition of a phrase or word" (Crossover 2017). Additionally, the novel is broken into five chapters which are cleverly named for the components of a basketball game, starting with Warm-up. Another component is the basketball rules throughout the book which provide advice and encourage reflection. One example of this is "Basketball rule #3 Never let anyone lower your goals. Others expectations of you are determined by their limitations of life. The sky is your limit, sons. Always shoot for the sun and you will shine" (Alexander, 2014, p. 66). Readers will be motivated by the text and the story is very applicable to normal student life, in terms of family and friendships. Some of the topics covered are a bit serious, such as death, family conflict, boys first interest in girls, sports, and having to work for one's aspirations, but they are addressed in an appropriate manner. The content is very relatable, and I could see gifted readers wanting to ask questions and think about their own goals. I would suggest this text because it explores a student's passion to excel in basketball, even as he and his twin are growing up.

***Flora & Ulysses: The Illuminated Adventures (Kate DiCamillo, 2013) - Fantasy***

Gifted readers would really enjoy this fantasy novel. The book includes incredible vocabulary, many humorous situations, and text that makes it fun to follow along. Readers will be able to identify with Flora and the chaos that characterizes her family, identify with her friendship with William, and enjoy the book itself. As Cooper (2013) states, "... [Kate DiCamillo] is a master storyteller, and not just because she creates characters who dance off the pages and plots, whether epic or small, that never fail to engage and delight readers" (p.74). The text is recommended for grades three through six, but it would be appropriate for younger gifted readers. Although smoking is referenced, the content is appropriate for lower elementary students. Main character Flora uses an impressive vocabulary and repeatedly shares facts that could spark the interest of a gifted student. For example, the author writes that, "This, Flora knew from Terrible Things Can Happen to You! was magical thinking or mental causation. According to Terrible Things! it was a dangerous way to think. It was dangerous to allow yourself to believe that what you said directly influenced the universe" (DiCamillo, 2013, p. 199). Flora's thoughts are relevant to other children, and advice is offered appropriately. The language is complex enough to challenge gifted readers, and the comic style makes the novel approachable. The plot is easy to follow; however, the text covers topics important to readers in a non-threatening manner. The novel discusses concepts like "loss, abandonment, acceptance of difference, loneliness, love, overcoming fears and the complexity of relationships" (Ritter, 2013, p.91). The topics are addressed in a manner that a variety of readers could enjoy the story and want to read more. The plot includes interesting facts scattered throughout, so it is easy to imagine that gifted readers would find a variety of topics they want to know more about after completing this novel.

The *Flora & Ulysses* connects to today's society and features beliefs that would interest readers: "'The truth,' said William Spiver, 'is a slippery thing. I doubt that you will ever get The Truth. You may get to a version of the truth. But The Truth? I doubt it very seriously' " (DiCamillo 2013, p. 221). One of the best features of the novel is the enjoyment that Flora gains from reading, and gifted readers could connect quickly and strive to be like Flora. This book would be an excellent addition in elementary classrooms today, and it definitely has merit for gifted readers.

***The One and Only Ivan* (K.A. Applegate, 2012)- Poetry**

This novel is another example of a high-quality poetry book for gifted students. While reading, I became extremely invested in the story. Even though the book is told from the point of view of a gorilla, he seems so realistic because he faces struggles similar to those faced by humans, such as identifying himself, keeping his promises, and wanting to be a good (Parravano, 2013). The novel is told through poetry, which provides an alternative to the typical use of language because not all sentences are complete. The writing sounds like speaking. The story includes flashbacks in Ivan's life, featuring his stories and the lessons he learned. For example, Ivan says, "Growing up gorilla is just like any other kind of growing up. You make mistakes. You play. You learn. You do it all over again. It was, for a while, a perfect life" (Applegate, 2012, p. 127). While I read, I thought many times about the treatment of animals in the United States, as well as some of the misconceptions people have about animals. Gifted readers could have a similar experience. "If ever a story was written that powerfully and elegantly increases children's empathy for animals in captivity, it is *The One and Only Ivan*" (Kaaland, 2013, p.51). Additionally, readers could identify with Ivan's curious nature. Ivan requests stories from Stella, the elephant, saying, "I like colorful tales with black beginnings and stormy middles and

cloudless blue-sky endings. But any story will do” (Applegate, 2012, p. 63). Not only will readers relate to the characters, but also, the plot is easy to follow and helps readers realize that not all stories are happy ones. After reading, gifted readers might want to continue by researching zoos, animals in captivity, their own friendships, and wanting to know more about various animals. This novel is highly recommended for gifted students, especially for lower elementary students.

***Dead End in Norvelt* (Jack Gantos, 2012)- Autobiographical**

Author Jack Gantos creates a wonderful autobiographical tale about a main character with his own name, which has the potential to be popular with gifted readers. Jack spends most of his summer grounded, which allows him to grow as a character. Some students may relate to his situation, but even if young elementary students have no experience with being grounded, they might relate to Jack’s helpful nature, as well as the fact that he does have faults. The book contains a variety of challenging components and would develop reading skills. "This is a richly layered semi-autobiographical tale, an ode to a time and place, to history and the power of reading" (Scheider, 2011, p.85). The semi-autobiographical nature of the book allows the author to introduce historical events, which makes readers want to know more. Additionally, the plot is mostly an adventure, and readers will want to predict what happens next. Readers are even introduced to obituaries that keep the plot moving; the author takes full advantage of comedy throughout, which is appealing to many gifted readers. In addition, *Dead End* motivates readers to incorporate history into their own lives when possible. When Jack must spend time indoors, he often reads historical books, which is a great example for students. Although the themes and ideas are interesting, the overall plot might be too complex for some lower elementary gifted students, compared to some of the other titles on the Newbery list.

***Moon over Manifest* (Clare Vanderpool, 1995)-Historical Fiction**

This is another text suited for gifted readers, but not necessarily at the lower elementary level. This text possesses a lot of wonderful qualities of a historical fiction novel. For example, the reader never feels as though he has all the information he needs to solve the mysteries in this book (Lucas, p.174). The story moves between two different eras, and there are a lot of characters to keep track of. The content itself explores adult issues such as alcohol, being an orphan, murder, and immigration, which might overwhelm younger elementary children (Isaacs, 2010, p.63). The text can be challenging, but the words flow well. There is good dialogue, vocabulary, and imagery throughout (Isaacs, 2010). Additionally, the narrative shares important lessons: "Memories were like sunshine. They warmed you up and left a pleasant glow, but you couldn't hold them (Vanderpool, 2011, p. 74)" After reading *Moon over Manifest*, students would probably have questions about the settings the characters experienced, the themes explored in the book, and the history included in the novel. Despite the technical quality of the book, the content may be too mature to be given to young gifted readers.

***When You Reach Me* (Rebecca Stead, 2009)- Science Fiction**

Although some of the content in this science fiction novel is advanced, some lower elementary gifted readers would be interested. The main character, Miranda, experiences struggles but ultimately grows a lot throughout the novel. Many students could relate to the fact that Miranda is a latchkey child, having to hang out alone until parents come home. She does not have a father figure, and her family is not well off, so diverse gifted readers especially might see themselves in Miranda. Additionally, Miranda reads the same book over and over, something many gifted readers have experienced. The novel is characterized by appealing components. Miranda is involved in a mystery throughout the book, and gifted readers would enjoy pursuing

the answers. The language itself is complex and encompasses details like "multi-layering of the multiple mysteries...the vividness of the late-seventies Upper West Side Manhattan setting...genuine characters" (Stead, 2011). Like other novels on this list, the lessons offered through the text are applicable to children, no matter the age group. For example, Miranda shares that "Mom says each of us has a veil between ourselves and the rest of the world, like a bride wears on her wedding day, except this kind of veil is invisible. We walk around happily with these invisible veils hanging down over our faces. The world is kind of blurry, and we like it like that" (Stead, 2009, p. 71). Readers could relate to the atmosphere at school, the pressures of society, and the issues surrounding friendship, no matter the age level. The chapters are relatively short so readers are motivated by the progress they make. Additionally, gifted readers may want to know more about time-travel, game shows, and getting to know people in meaningful ways. After finishing the book, the mystery is not over so readers would be searching for more.

***The Graveyard Book* (Neil Gaiman, 2008)- Fantasy/ Science Fiction**

*The Graveyard Book* is the only Newbery Medal winner from the last decade that I would not recommend to young gifted readers. The beginning is quite violent and could be disturbing for younger elementary students due to its horror fiction language. The language is complex and will develop the skills of upper elementary students. The author includes metaphors, figurative language, and elaborate descriptions. The plot is clear, but there was little to draw me in. This might be because this book is targeted at a male audience, but books do not have genders. Additionally, I have not read books similar to this, so I may be biased due to my lack of knowledge of the "juvenile horror" books. The novel is divided into short stories, and the characters are interesting. The book, however, does not contain motivation for knowing more

about topics explored in the book, for thinking deeply about the issues that emerge in *The Graveyard Book*, or for identifying with themes. The book is more science-fiction than other Newbery books, and the Gaiman has achieved acclaim over the years “as a renowned author of science fiction, fantasy, graphic novels and comics aimed at adults” (Rich, 2009, p. C1). This book would be difficult to align with school curriculum because it has such a narrow focus; however, for students who enjoy ghost stories, it could work.

***Good Masters! Sweet Ladies! Voices from a Medieval Village* (Laura Amy Schlitz, 2007) -  
Historical fiction**

This work of historical fiction is a wonderful challenge for gifted readers; however, my suggestion would be to wait until at least third grade to show a student this book. The book features 23 diverse characters with their own special personalities. With all these characters, students will admire individuals and specific characteristics. Additionally, the story is told through short poems, which is appealing to many gifted readers. The text includes couplets, blank verse, and prose, which allow for variety in the language components (Melgaard, 2008, p. 74). In addition to the textual excellence, the book includes a "pristine, elegant pen-and-ink illustrations in opulent colors make the book almost too visually appealing" (Baker, 2008, p.701). Although the poems are short, they relate to each other so readers have to continue to think about the connections between the characters and wonder about the historical world that is shared. According to Gallagher (2008), the "language is forceful and learning slips in on the sly" (p.37), which will contribute to young readers' search for more content related to the Middle Ages. Every few pages' features background information and additional facts, an appealing addition to the book. Gifted readers would be interested in trying to decode the text, the usage of



words, and content presented. Although this is a work that gifted readers would enjoy, some of the content might not be easily understood by the youngest readers.

***The Higher Power of Lucky* (Susan Patron, 2006)- Fiction**

*The Higher Power of Lucky* is highly recommended for gifted readers of any age. The main character, Lucky, goes through a variety of internal and external journeys in this fiction text. She is highly relatable to gifted readers in terms of being curious, somewhat of an outcast, creative, and willing to take risks. Even the supporting characters have their charms (Gershowitz, 2007). Additionally, the text is advanced in nature but still applicable to young readers. The text draws readers in with its creative ideas, such as when describing Lucky's thoughts: "She figured she had so many crevices and wrinkles, almost all of them filled with questions and anxious thoughts, that if you were to take her brain and flatten it out, it would cover a huge space, like maybe a king-sized brain" (Patron, 2007, p.6). I can foresee gifted readers immersing themselves into the story and enjoying characteristics such as the realistic vocabulary, descriptions, and conversations. Also, the plot covers a wide variety of topics such as "addiction, abandonment, and the quest for personal strength" (Whelan, 2007, p.16). The topics are addressed seriously, but the text includes honesty as well as humor. This novel inspires introspection and inspires questions after reading. Lucky shares admirable thoughts and could inspire gifted readers to share their own thoughts. "Lucky thought how strange it was that some small things turned out just right, which was rare for big important things to do" (Patron, 2007, p.127). This book is one of those small things that turned out right for gifted readers.

***Criss Cross* (Lynne Rae Perkins, 2015)- Young Adult (Fiction)**

Although a Nobel Medal winner, *Criss Cross* was difficult to envision as a good fit for a young gifted reader despite its young adult nature. The plot was difficult to follow, mirroring

some of the challenges of adolescence, and although one of the main characters is gifted himself, he was not always so recognized: "Everyone assumed that whoever was doing the sorting knew what they were doing. It was all done scientifically, with grades and test scores. Maybe it was some kind of tragedy that no one spotted who Lenny could be. Or maybe it wasn't. Lenny didn't need someone to tell him who he was" (Perkins, 2006, p. 63). Gifted readers might relate to questions of identification for special programs. As well, the book has strong language throughout; however, much of the content is aimed at those who are dealing with adolescence. The plot is intricate, including two stories being told at once during Chapter 22, and the use of German language and descriptive wording. The "part love story, part coming-of-age" aspect of this text makes it a strong option for older students (Criss, 2006, p.58). Overall, it is a nice story, but compared to other Newbery books, it might not inspire younger readers to relate to adventures or introspection.

### **Discussion**

After reading the above eleven books and analyzing them for their abilities to fit the needs of young gifted readers, it is clear that the designation of the John Newbery Medal does not automatically recommend the book to precocious readers. Many of these books fit the needs of gifted readers, and I would recommend some to lower-elementary gifted readers. All eleven books contained high-quality literary components, such as strong vocabulary, thoughtful lessons, and descriptive language. Some books, however, had more mature themes that would not be suitable for younger elementary students. The John Newbery Medal does identify high-quality literature that features literary components that can challenge gifted readers. The content of the books, however, need to be matched to the needs and characteristics of the specific students. While teachers should consider Newbery-award winning books to challenge their precocious

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younger readers, they will need to preview the content to ensure an appropriate match between book and reader.

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