

Cynthia Herman 5.1 Awards: Synthesis and Reflection

My thinking about children's book awards has made a complete turn around over the past several weeks. I had considered lists of award winning books to be a great resource to recommend to my students and to read myself. When I taught middle school, I found that I could recommend Newbery winners because they were at the right reading level. Teaching elementary aged children, I still wanted to recommend those books to my students, but I wasn't doing that because of the difficulty of the text. I hadn't really considered that there was a reason behind that, or really thought about the people and criteria behind choosing books to be an award winner, but after thinking critically about the award process, I'm realizing now why these things before weren't really meshing well for me about award winners.

One thing I've realized is that children's book awards are for *writers*. Award committees have a goal to encourage a certain type of writing for the American children's literature repertoire. As a teacher who believes in positive reinforcement, I think this is a great way to improve the quality of works being published for children. By maintaining a high standard for these awards, writers must continue to write increasingly better books each year. Awards are very subjective, so "better" might not be the correct term, but I would think authors want to improve their craft no matter what. As we researched different awards, we found that each award aims to recognize something in particular about children's book writers. We found that bridging the gap between cultures and backgrounds while showcasing heritage and tradition was important to many of the 'smaller' awards. The Newbery and Caldecott wish to award American authors and illustrators that are exceptional and distinguished. When we read *Charlotte's Web* and *The Secret of the Andes* we found that the language and style of the winner was more advanced and held much more symbolism than the runner up. It seems that the Newbery wants to encourage authors to write with a higher level of language, which as a consequence makes the book more difficult to read and changes the target audience to older kids.

Another thing I've realized is that children's book awards are for people who are spending money on books. When a book receives that medal to display on the cover it automatically finds its way to a more high traffic place in the bookstore. The bookstore orders more copies, displays cardboard cutouts of the characters and holds readings in store. When a book receives an award, it gains a tremendous amount of publicity. It is forever on a list of winners, a list that people will refer to when they want to purchase a "good" book. Awards drive book sales each year. Adults are typically the ones who purchase books; so to award a book that would appeal to an adult reader would be a good strategy to increase sales as well. I feel

that the Newbery committee wants to please the people buying books, the adults. In our discussion of the Newbery award, we mentioned that reading, or rereading a winner as an adult made us appreciate the book more than when we were children/young adults. Since the books hold a great deal of symbolism and deal with more adult appropriate themes, we can still relate to the twelve year old main character even as an adult. When I've read the ur-Newberry books as an adult, I felt nostalgic for growing up, tough as it may be. I related to the main character that was finding out who they really were, and who they were going to be as an adult. It was mentioned in the Washington Post article that the books are driven to young adults or adults who like to read young adult literature. I do enjoy reading young adult literature, so the Newbery award winners list would be a good list for me to refer to when choosing books for myself, but I don't think I'll refer to it when looking for books to use in my classroom.

Award committees, in my opinion, have good intentions to bring diversity to American children's literature, but they aren't really changing the way children choose books. We reported to each other about the awards given to groups of authors in the second week. I gleaned from that discussion that award committees want kids to read to find out more about different cultures and people who are different than them. I think that is a great intention to have for the committees and it is a goal I have as a teacher, to have my students read to study about other cultures. I want my students to be more socially aware, more wide-awake about the world around them, and I think children's literature is a great way to achieve that. I appreciate those award committees for wanting to encourage authors to continue writing quality multicultural literature for children. When we had to read some of those books that won the multicultural awards I found myself genuinely enjoying those books. They were books I probably wouldn't have picked up had they not been on a list of award winners. These are awards I feel I can support and appreciate.

When we read Newbery award books and researched the award, I found myself disappointed about how the winners aren't really breaking the mold for children's literature. I felt sort of duped with how the same 'type' of books are winning, like I've been tricked into reading the same book with different characters playing the part year after year. Another time I felt deceived about the Newbery was reading the Washington Post article and responses. They confirmed for me that the Newbery winners tend to be aimed for middle school readers, and lately they tend to deal with tough stuff like death and divorce and homelessness. I appreciate that children need to be exposed to some of that stuff, but when a *children's* book award advertises itself as such, I feel it should either narrow the age range for the award, or have different categories for winners. As a person who puts books into kids' hands, I thought I could trust that a book winning an award for children's

literature would be okay for my kids to read. I realize I may have been naïve, but I also feel the award committee should be a little clearer about who should be reading the books that win their award.

In the first week, when we shared what was our 'best' book, many of us mentioned the use of illustrations being a factor in why a book was a favorite. I noticed, a few weeks later, that many of the books on the Caldecott list were books that I really liked growing up, and continue to cherish as an adult. Many of those books are ones I might consider 'classics.' Those books are geared more for my 8-9 year old student, but my students want to read more chapter books than picture books. *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* is groundbreaking in my opinion with how he incorporated illustrations into the text of the chapter book. It was crafted in a way I haven't seen before and reminded me somewhat of wordless picture books and how intriguing they can be to their readers. Besides the Caldecott winners, my students aren't selecting books based on their award status. They're choosing books that appeal to them regardless of what a committee of grown ups think.

I want a list of *good* books, specifically novels that are quality literature, that will change my students' minds about the world and that are appealing to children, not young adults. I'm glad to find that after completing this module I can turn to the winners of the smaller, culture-specific awards for ideas of books to use in my classroom. I hung on to a few of the books from the Orbis Pictus Award list that I had borrowed from the library since we're studying nonfiction in my class right now. Those awards and their winners will hopefully be a growing part of my personal classroom library.

My mind is still on the move with how I feel about the awards for children's literature. I'm thinking that's the point of this module though, to get us thinking critically about the awards in general and to steer future decisions regarding award winning books. I need to consider the source when using an award to drive my book selections. I need to follow my gut when picking books for my classroom. I need to expand my own reading toward books that have not won awards, or to books that have won the Sydney Taylor, Michael Printz, Coretta Scott Kin, Pura Belpre, Schneider Family and Orbis Pictus awards. I don't really need to rely on a list of books somebody else put together if I know my students well and I know what makes a good book for each particular student. It's a tough job for those committees to select a title that will be considered 'best' by a wide array of people. That's why we all said in our discussions and read in the articles that there will always be people who disagree with the awards and their winners and that's okay. I think having awards are a good start to getting children to read quality literature and these awards will improve the craft and diversity of American children's literature overall.