

### Erica Lewis 3.5 Synthesis and Reflection

Being an avid reader and a teacher, I have heard of both the Newbery Award and the Caldecott Awards before but had never dug deeply into their significance or expectations for winners. The books that have been awarded one of these two awards are both insightful and interesting. Many of the books are well known books while other choices for winners are very obscure. Looking at the criteria for the winners it sometimes is easier to see why they chose a book over another. It is not just popularity that plays a part in deciding a winner; it has to deal with multiple layers of prestige as well.

I had initially assumed that all the Newbery and Caldecott Award winners would be books I had heard of but this was not the case. In fact, many of the books listed were unknown to me. Books written in the last few years that won the Caldecott Award were very unfamiliar to me because I do not have a need to read children's picture books. I was surprised at first that I had not heard of many of the books but realized that it might have been because I do not have small children and hear more about young adult novels from my high school students that are popular. These books include *The Harry Potter Series* and *The Twilight Novels*. I highly doubt that most of my high school students are reading Newbery winner's for the fun of it.

This exact result brings up an important question as to the validity of the committee choosing the winner for the Newbery Award. There are a many popular books that have won the award but there are also many more honorary books that have lasted for generations. The sheer idea that the committee choosing winners does not solely look at popularity really shocked me as a reader. I assumed that popularity would play a key role but it did not. Rather the committee has a set of criteria that a potential winner should meet. It does state that the book does not need to meet all the qualities but that it should meet most of them and show a level of excellence. The committee is asked to therefore find novels that meet this excellence standard rather than the popularity standard. Knowing the criteria that a book was expected to meet actually put into light a few of the choices they had made for winners and why some books only received honorary awards. The criteria expected authors to show competence in writing, have style and structure, while having a complete plot.

What I realized is that when I love a book it might be for totally different reasons that go unnoticed to the committee. As a reader, I am naturally drawn to books I can relate to. I like the idea that a character might have a similar personality or that they have experienced an action or event that I too have experienced. This is something that the committee does not look into when deciding a winner. This is where the committee and I differ. I want a book that is captivating and moves me emotionally or that is light and fun to read. I sometimes might even choose to reread a favorite book because I enjoyed it so much. I believe that the key word to my book reading experience is enjoyable. If a book tends to be an enjoyable experience, no matter how poorly written it might be I still find it to be a good book. This I think goes back to our initial statement about what makes a good book the "best" to us as individuals. I do not necessarily have set criteria on what I consider the "best" book that I always follow like the Newbery committee must do but I know in my eyes what constitutes a "best" book.

Some of the books that were winners were barely well known because they might be popular or considered the "best" book by many other people. As a teacher, we are asked to teach things like metaphor, motive, plot, and summary through readings. Sometimes a book that might be less than interesting demonstrates the exact qualities you

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are trying to teach. This happens especially in English classrooms but even sometimes in my history classrooms as well. You want to utilize a book that has those concrete ideas, concepts, or themes you are trying to convey to your students. This is much harder to do with a book that does not show as an example of what you want the students to learn. Yet, I do not think it is unacceptable to demonstrate how an honorary book might have been a winner had the author changed a few things about the book. It is also important to show enjoyable books in the classroom so that students are not turned off to reading.

This is one of the biggest concerns I have being a reader and a teacher. I believe that the criteria expected for the Newbery Award is too strict in deciding what books should and should not be winners. I believe that the award should expand its categories to include various ranges of children's books including a picture book, easy reader, middle range, and young adult Newbery Awards. This would eliminate the problem that many people have when deciding the winner. It is hard to compare an amazing picture book with an amazing young adult book because the books are based on such different purposes but are judged on the same literary criteria. A picture book is not going to have the same literary excellence that a chapter book for children might experience. The only problem is that this idea might step on the toes of the Caldecott Award when giving a potential Newbery Award to a picture book. I think though that having many different categories included in the Newbery will help the award gain more prestige that it might have lost over the last recent years and also that it would make more people aware of various good books out there. Many people, especially teachers, go out to buy the Newbery winner each year and if there were multiple winners in various categories then more people, especially children, would be exposed to more books; therefore encouraging more reading.

Another way to encourage more reading among children would be to emphasize some of those secondary awards that are lesser known to the Caldecott and Newbery Awards. Some of these books are just as rich and exciting as the winners of the most known awards. The secondary awards are usually awarded to specific criteria of novels. Some are awarded to historical fiction, authors of various backgrounds, and books that promote peace and unity. The couple books I looked at were interesting to me and I would have read them as a child. I had not heard about these different awards until being asked to research them for class. Had I known about their existence prior, I most likely would have utilized their works in my history classes. I think many of the books would have been great to allow children to read for extra credit, or read excerpts from to learn different perspectives of historical events. As a teacher, these secondary awards seem to be very useful in describing events that took place in the past. I missed many opportunities to use these books in my previous year because I had only heard of books that had won the Newbery Award. I also think that many of the children's books that are winners of the secondary awards could be useful for students who are visual learners in my classroom. Even though I teach high school students the books can provide an alternative way of teaching historical events to the students rather than just reading about it in a textbook. With the right discussions and activities the picture books and young historical fiction books could be of good use to me.

Overall, as a reader I learned that despite the popularity of a name, an award can be lacking in the things that I believe make a book best, including playing to my experiences and emotions. Sometimes, that same award might not be the best book to

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use in the classroom and secondary awards should be considered as well in order to utilize the best options to teach subject materials. Those secondary awards might be lesser known but they might be just as interesting or just as informational for student learning. Awards like the Newbery can definitely find room for improvement in order to tune children into reading again because so many things have replaced reading these days and children need the exposure to novels and picture books in order to enrich their learning experiences both inside and outside of school.