

"What is commonly called *literary history* is actually a record of choices."

--Louise Bernikow

Beginning this course, I knew little about what criteria is needed for a book to be considered a classic, or to win a prestigious award, such as the Newbery or Caldecott Award. As a matter of fact, I rarely even thought about the books I read and enjoyed as a child, and the books I read to my students now that I am a teacher. When choosing books to read in my classroom, I usually go by popular demand. What my students enjoy reading, and what I enjoy reading. Usually these books are not the same, but rarely do I ever choose books based on its "status" decided by literary critics, scholars and librarians. Although I like to be familiar with the books that make national headlines, I usually only read them once they can no longer be avoided, and rarely do I let these critiques impact my choices. This is not usually the case though. Most people read books that are readily available in their school or library. They read the books that are being adapted by movie producers and popularized by our society.

The "choices" Bernikow refers to in the above quote directly impact the literary history of children's literature. These choices are partly opinions, made by literary critics and scholars, librarians, and teachers. Depending on the award, the criteria for nominating a book is very diverse. In week two of this course, we learned about some of the children's book awards out there. Sydney Taylor, Coretta Scott King, and The Schneider Family are a few of these awards. The criteria for these awards are much more diverse, having to do with different religions, cultures, and abilities. I found it interesting that books are being given these awards, yet they were still nearly impossible to find in libraries and book stores (and not because they were sold out). The choices librarians and book store owners make to purchase these books, make them readily available, and essentially promote them also contributes to our "literary history". By neglecting certain books, and promoting others, we are selectively changing "literary history". The impact that this has on young children is profound. It is important as teachers to read a wide variety of books, not just those given

the prestigious awards, or the ones our students find most entertaining, because these books are often the ones written for a specific culture with a specific agenda in mind.

During week three of the course we looked closely at the process of qualifying a book for a Newbery. While the criteria are rather strict, it is far from a perfect system. In fact, as Martha Parravano pointed out in the “Horn Book Magazine Article, “Alive and Vigerous: Questioning the Newbery”, the process is rather flawed. She describes this flaw as the “Ur-Newbery” pattern. She says, “It's fiction, with an older (twelve-ish) protagonist who is nevertheless not an adolescent (not preoccupied with adolescent concerns). The main character can be either male or female, but most often male (for though twice as many women as men have won Newberys, the female authors write about boys as well as girls, while the male authors, if they feature a single main character, write almost exclusively about boys). He (or she) must face some adversity, must struggle against himself, or someone close to him, or with some idea or stricture, to find the right form of self-expression, the best way to be human; and if along the way he can have adventures that occur against a background of sweeping events and perhaps even face a threat to his own or his family's survival, all the better. So many Newbery books fit that mold.” (Parravano, 4). The status a Newbery Award gives a book almost guarantees its recognition. Librarians and book stores around the world instantly stock their shelves with these books. So the choices award committee members, like the Newbery Committee, make directly impact the “literary history” of the books we read.

While these awards guarantee recognition and fame, it does not guarantee absolute popularity. Just because a book has been given a Newbery or Caldecott award, does not mean the book will be enjoyed by all children or adults. So again more choices are needed to signify “literary history”. It was particularly interesting when we compared a Newbery Award to a classic. As a child, *Charlotte's Web* was one of my favorite books. I have enjoyed the many movies that have been made, and I love reading this book year after year to my students. I was surprised to learn that *The Secret of the Andes* was given the Newbery Award over *Charlotte's Web*, but then again, *The Secret of the Andes* fits the pattern of Newbery winners much better than *Charlotte's Web*. It has a male protagonist who

embarks on an adventure, struggling against himself, nature and certain ideologies. Along the way, he overcomes this conflict and returns home. The themes and messages behind *The Secret of the Andes* were much more in depth and teach children about the world much more than *Charlotte's Web*. After looking at the criteria of both an award winner and a classic, it now makes much more sense that the books were identified the way they were. When looking across time at these books, I realize that although awards do impact "literary history", other choices, made by the readers, are also needed.

In week six, we learned what it means for a book to be considered a "classic". We wrote down the books we considered "classics" and noticed that many of us mentioned the same books. While some of these books were award winners, many of them were not. We then later went on to identify the criteria for qualifying a classic, and again noticed many similarities in our choices. Our class repeatedly mentioned a universal theme, books becoming a part of our everyday culture, and the book must stand the test of time, as common criteria. So while it is important for a book to be distinguished by a prestigious award, based on the choices of literary critiques, it is equally important for a book to be identified and enjoyed by its readers. The choices we make (as readers) to read a book year after year also contributes to our "literary history".

In week nine, we started to evolve our thinking about the popularity of literature and the impact the time period has on a book. We did this by looking at the movie versions of *Little Women* and comparing them to the novel written by Louisa May Alcott. While looking closely at the novel, as well as two of the film adaptations, we identified the role the literary scholars and critiques play in the choices readers (and viewers) make. We also looked at "changing scholarship" by reading articles that have been written about *Little Women* across time. Literary critiques have viewed this book differently across time because their ideologies have changed. In 1869 when the book was first published it was considered "decidedly the best Christmas story which we have seen for a long time... the book is most originally written. It never gets commonplace or wearisome, though it deals with the most ordinary every-day life" (anonymous). By the 1950's-70's there is much more criticism of the book, but it still remains a best seller and children's classic due to its

popularity among young girls. By the late 1950's it was becoming more acceptable to disagree with the "little women" way of life. By 1968 scholarship for *Little Women* has changed drastically due to societal and cultural impacts. It is interesting that although the reviews of *Little Women* have changed throughout the years, the popularity of the book has pretty much stayed the same. The interest this book has had on literary scholars, who are intrigued by the themes and messages behind the story, as well as the similarities between the novel and the author's own life, is one of the main reasons this book continues to be a popular classic. If this is part of the reason it has stayed in the media and on the shelves as long as it has, we can conclude that these literary scholars and critiques contribute to a book's "classic" status. Therefore, they impact the choices readers make, and these choices impact the "literary history" of a novel.

This was also prevalent in week ten and eleven, when we compared *The Wind and the Willows* to *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of Nimh*. *The Wind and the Willows* is a classic. It is still read, and enjoyed today, more than 100 years after its publication. Multiple book, film and television adaptations have been made, giving it even more popularity. *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of Nimh*, written in 1971, was given the Newbery Award and therefore it is still very well known, especially in classrooms and libraries. After looking more closely at the themes and messages intended by the authors, as well as the time period these books were written in, I realize why these books gained such popularity. If they were written today, so many years later, when our political, moral, and ideological values are much different, these books may not have gained such a status. Therefore, the choices made by authors at specific times in history greatly impact the "literary history" in present time.

At the beginning of this course, I had no idea how many factors contribute to and influence a children's book's status. I naively attributed awards and classics to a book's popularity by children, not to societal and ideological factors, as well as critical analysis by scholars. I was also unaware of the hugely political nature of some of the prestigious children's book awards. I simply thought, if a book is well written, engaging and enjoyed by children it will be eligible for an award, and if the book continues to be popular year after year, then it will be recognized as a classic. Now that I have finished the course, I realize the

process is much more complicated. Many factors contribute to the choices literary critiques, scholars, librarians, teachers, and readers make about a book. These factors are constantly changing to meet the needs of our ever evolving cultural, political, and moral demands.

Our first assignment in this course was to describe our “best book”. While completing this assignment, I doubt if anyone had “awards” or “classics” in mind. We simply wrote about the book that had the biggest impact on our lives. We determined that this was mostly due to our connections we made to the books. We valued a book more as a child if we were able to identify with the characters, setting, or conflicts in the story. Since we come from diverse backgrounds, we had a vast list of books.

After looking closely at the books that are most well known and “popular”, whether they are award winners or classics, I notice a common thread. For the most part the books seem to target white, middle class, America. As teachers we have to be careful to select books that are diverse in nature. Although it is important to expose our students to books that have been given prestigious awards such as the Newbery and Caldecott, as well as books that are considered “classics”, we must also avoid choosing books that are mainly directed to white, middle class America, as many of these award winners and classics tend to do. It is our job as educators to expose our students to books that they can relate to, as well as books that will allow them to experience the life of someone very different from them. Our classrooms are becoming more multicultural and the books that are often most available in our libraries and books stores are not always representative of a large majority of our students. “What is commonly called *literary history* is actually a record of choices” means that the choices we have made in the past, as well as those we will make in the future, greatly impact the history of our literature. If we continue to make choices that directly appeal to a very small targeted audience, we will continue to promote an equally small group of books, leaving behind so many well written books, and essentially a very large population of children. It is our jobs as educators to promote books that may not be as easily accessible as the nationally recognized books. The *choices* we make as teachers will

impact the future of the literature our students read, and the books they consider “best books” as adults.