

Erin Benton

TE836

Final Paper

Before the participating in this course, awards and classics in children's literature were both things that I thought of as being "good" books because they had been given the designation of an award winner or that of a classic. Something given a title such as this must be a quality piece of literature. My thinking as far as what an award winner is or of what a classic is has evolved throughout these past six weeks, especially my idea of what constitutes an award-winning piece of literature. Reflecting on the quote from Louise Bernikow, "What is commonly called literary history is actually a record of choices," really embodies what I have learned and explored within this course. All of the awards we have explored are the result of choices that were made and the same goes for classics, books are considered classics based on choices made by a person or group of people.

Looking back to the first two weeks of the course when we began discussing different awards that are given in the world of children's literature, it was clear that while award winning books all have merit, the designation of which book is the winner comes to down to choice. It is the choice of whichever selection committee to decide which book is the winner for each year. While it is a choice, it is a choice made by professionals in the world of children's literature and members of social and ethnic groups that specific awards are representative of. For example, the committee for the Schneider Family Book Award needs to represent individuals from The Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC), the Young Adult Library Service Association (YALSA), and the Association of Specialized and Cooperative Library Agencies (ASCLA). The committee also needs to have one member who is either the children's or young adult librarian from the Library of Congress and members can serve only one year on the committee and all members need to have knowledge of book selection and disabilities (Benton/Giles discussion board 1.1b-Reporting the Awards). The book that is chosen as the winner of this award is chosen by a group of people who are educated in the selection of books and who have knowledge of what the award celebrates, which in this case is disability. While the selection process is subjective, it is the decision of a group and the group changes each year so that multiple perspectives are considered in the selection process.

Our assignment for week two was to read a selection of books that represented at least four of the awards that were presented in week one and to write a short analysis or critique. I chose to read books that were winners of the Schneider Family Book Award, Coretta Scott King Award, Prinz Award, Pure Belpre Award, and American Indian Youth Literature Award. While looking at these books and thinking of the criteria set for each award, we all needed to be critical of the choices made by others. In my own reflection on the books I chose, I did not agree with all of the books that were chosen as winners. One book that I read and reflected on was *The Pirate of Kindergarten* by George Ella Lyon, which is about a girl in kindergarten who has double vision until getting a vision screening and then getting glasses. This picture book was the winner of the Schneider Family Book Award, which is an award given to books that feature main character(s) that live with a disability. I did not agree with this book being a winner of this

award because I do not personally consider double vision to be a disability. Again though, a committee that is knowledgeable in book selection and those who know about disabilities selected the award and my critique is the opinion of one. So while I do not agree with all of the choices and decisions made regarding which books are designated as award winners, other made the decision and those books are now recorded in history as being “award winning.” Looking back at the quote from Bernikow, the lists of award winning books simply are an account of choices made by committees and we study these lists and these novels or picture books and so they are literary history.

From my Midterm paper, I discussed a “question that was brought up in our group discussion revolved around the individuals that are eligible to win awards such as the Coretta Scott King award and the American Indian Youth Literature award. The authors or illustrators that are eligible to win this award must be either African American for the Coretta Scott King award, a member of a tribe for the American Indian Youth Literature award, an Arab American for the Arab American Literature for Children and Young People award, a Latino for the Pura Belpre award, and so forth. The question was raised that possibly this stipulation on the author of the book could be too specific and may exclude otherwise qualified books for these awards. It was discussed that it could be possible for a person from another race who lived in, for example, a predominantly African American neighborhood and had the same experiences as their African American neighbors could write about that experience and have it be accurate and authentic, but they would not be eligible for the Coretta Scott King award because they are not an African American individual. This is an issue in the award process in which my opinion is undecided. While I understand both sides to the discussion, I cannot decide if I think “outsiders” should be eligible for awards designated for specific racial or ethnic groups because they were made to showcase the work of people from these groups who have been historically overlooked. Then again, just because someone is of a certain race or ethnicity does not necessarily mean that they can relate to the majority of others within their same racial or ethnic group.” This specificity in the award criteria is yet another choice made regarding the award process. The awards studied in the first few weeks represent a small sample of the awards given within the world of children’s literature but are awards that are very specific in their nature. While we did discuss some issues that we saw with the criteria or award process, it should not take away from the awards themselves. Individuals who may not be eligible for one of the ten awards studied in the first two weeks of class are eligible for other awards outside of these few.

Switching from the more specific awards from weeks one and two to the more broad awards we explored in weeks three and four, the concept of awards being choices was becoming more clear to me. Some of the books that were awarded the Newbery medal are not books that I personally would have chosen, but that is the opinion of one and not the opinion of many, which again supports the need for awards to be designated by a committee and not an individual. For example, one of the Newbery medal winning books that I read was *Invincible Louisa* by Cornelia Meigs and the Newbery medal winner from 1934. I did not enjoy this book and did not feel that it met the criteria for the award, but the award committee in 1934 did. I felt the same with the Caldecott Award as I did with the Newbery and the other awards we studied.

All of the awards are decided based on criteria that was chosen when the awards were founded. The winners are chosen by committees and are based on criteria that were the choice of others; awards are surrounded by choice in more than one way.

After studying the awards, we switched to looking at “classics.” The category of “classics” is broader than that of award winners. Award winners have specific committees and criteria used to select winners, but classics are not as clearly defined. Looking at the class list of classics, not each person chose the same books as classics. There were some similarities between the books selected by the class, such as that the books were popular when they were published are still read today. Also, a lot of books that were chosen as “classics” were not those that were award winners. In fact, many classic books are from the time periods before the adoption of awards in children’s literature. Some of the books selected by the class were older novels and others were newer, such as the *Harry Potter* series. While our class does not make the determination of what is considered a classic to all, this term is more dynamic and the meaning changes from person to person. As was seen on the whole class compilation of books, we all had our own idea of what a classic book is. In reading the classic that was chosen for the course, *Peter Pan*, I also saw that I do not necessarily like all titles that have been deemed classics by others. While I found the book to have important themes and can be relatable to modern times, I did not enjoy reading the book. We all make choices in what we read and what we consider to be a “good” book or a “classic” book. With literary history, much as with history in general, we learn about it because someone decided to record the choices of people from the past.

Using literature within the classroom is also surrounded by choice. When I compiled my list of classics in week 5, I thought a lot about the books I read as a student and those which were presented to me as being classics. Looking back now on my own time in the classroom, our teachers chose the selections in which we read that were “classics” or were presented to us as such. So much of what students learn relies on the choices made by their teachers. I do feel that award winners and classics definitely have a place in today’s classrooms, but I also feel that it is important that students are taught to read critically and are taught that just because someone else has decided that a book is “good” does not mean that they also need to feel the same way.

In my reading/viewing journal for *Peter Pan*, I discussed a few ideas for using classic books alongside their film adaptations. While many older award winners and classics are written in styles that are outdated and use language that students in today’s classrooms may not understand, a great deal of them have been made into modern film adaptations. Reading with students and helping them through texts that are difficult to read and then viewing one of the films to reinforce the themes of the novel is a great way to work these older texts into modern classrooms. Also, viewing the films after reading the text can be a great way to teach compare and contrast skills. Students often respond better to film and this piece can be used as an incentive for them to read the entire text. While this is generally easier with older students, such as middle school and high school, it can be done with elementary aged students with titles such as *Jumanji* or *The Polar Express* that have been turned into films.

As educational professionals, it is important that we expose our students to the literary history of our country. While teaching students about the great novels and picture books from the past, we also need to teach them about how to decide for themselves what makes a piece of literature “good” and that just because someone else has decided that a book is a classic or an award winner does not mean that they will necessarily like the book. Students should also know that there is value in reading books even when they do not like everything about the book, many books have important themes and messages for students that should not be overlooked because one does not enjoy the way it is written. When choosing books for our classrooms, teachers should be careful to choose works that are representative of the students in the classroom and also those that expose students to things that they may not come in to contact with otherwise. Literature can be a wonderful way to teach students about things unfamiliar to them, for example historical fiction texts can reinforce historical concepts learned within the classroom. Encourage students to make their own choices; what they decide may become part of literary history.