

Slippery Slopes and Proliferating Prizes

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LEAVE A COMMENT

I'm sure that nearly every reader of this magazine is in favor of supporting a more diverse children's literature that is in tune with the increasingly multi-ethnic environment in which we and our children live. I am equally convinced, though, that ALA's sponsorship of three awards in which a book's eligibility is determined by the race or ethnicity of its creators is a mistake. For the Coretta Scott King, the Pura Belpré, and the (announced but as yet unnamed) Asian American awards, the creator's biography — ethnic credentials, if you will — predetermines the book's validity. I am convinced that this is wrong. It is the wrong way to bring more kinds of books to more kinds of readers; it is wrong in that it does not evaluate literature in its own terms but by extraneous standards; it is wrong because it is a very slippery slope down which we are already tumbling; and finally it is wrong because even as ALA sponsors more and more such awards, we have not openly discussed and debated their merits. Let's start now.

How can you question the Coretta Scott King Awards, I hear you protesting. Haven't they been a success? Well, yes and no. In one sense the CSK has worked very well. When it was first envisioned by Mabel McKissack, Glyndon Greer, and John Carroll in 1969, no black artist or author had won major recognition from ALA (Ama Bontemps's *Story of the Negro*, a 1949 Newbery Honor Book, aside), and there were relatively few African Americans working in the field. Things were not a great deal better by 1982 when ALA recognized the award, although by that time two black authors, Virginia Hamilton and Mildred Taylor, had won the Newbery, and Leo and Diane Dillon (an interracial team) had secured two Caldecotts.

Fast-forward to 2000, eighteen years into ALA's involvement with the CSK, and another African-American author, Christopher Paul Curtis, had won the Newbery, while Walter Dean Myers had won the first-ever Michael L. Printz Award for YA books. There is a steadily growing group of African-American artists that every important publisher, large and small, seeks to publish. In addition, there are small presses — and even the entire Jump at the Sun imprint at Hyperion — that are devoted to advancing the presence of African-American culture in children's books.

Though this rise in African-American creators and books cannot be linked solely to the CSK, I do not doubt that the recognition offered by the award, not to mention the passion and enthusiasm of the annual award ceremony, have had positive effects. And in the particular case of African Americans you could say that

early years. I recall hearing senior publishing people say such things as "blacks don't buy books" or "black books only sell to schools and libraries." In such an environment, it was probably necessary to force publishers, reviewers, and librarians to see how talented black artists and authors were, and to help launch careers that then took off on their own. When combined with Black History Month, the Coretta Scott King Awards created a sales channel that previously had not existed.

For those who have been ignored, denied their due place as creators, as readers, as a public, there is a pure existential value in being acknowledged. There is real power in saying, We are here, we do count, we have something to say. The more frequently and powerfully this point is made, the more new artists are likely to join the field.

But there is an undertow beneath this swell of success. By insisting on testing the racial identity of its winners, the CSK shifts its focus from literature to biography. Who you are, which box or boxes you check on the census form, comes first. Your community, your ethnicity, comes before your talent. And as long as the prize is essentially a community honoring and encouraging its own, it is not clear how the rest of the public is meant to react.

The danger, which to some degree has become the reality, is that this kind of rule balkanizes literature. There is less pressure on the general population to read, understand, appreciate, and develop a fine critical eye for African-American literature if a librarian can always think, "I don't have to read those books carefully. The Coretta Scott King Award takes care of that."

An even worse attitude that is all-too-often the outcome of a balkanized award system is, "I don't have any African-American kids in my library, so I don't need to buy books by or about African Americans." As myopic a judgment as that is, the rules for CSK invite it, because they set down a racial standard which others can put to their own uses. If you have to be black to win the award, do you have to be black to appreciate the winning book? The implication that only blacks can write well about blacks sets up the implication that only they can read well

<http://www.hbook.com/2001/05/choosing-books/horr-book-magazine/slippery-slopes-proliferating-prizes/#>

about them, too.

The danger in every award that sets limits on the kinds of people, or types of book, that can win it is that it diminishes the pressure on the larger awards, the Newbery and the Caldecott, to live up to their charge to seek the most distinguished children's books of the year.

Speaking as the first winner of the Robert F. Sibert Award for most distinguished informational book for children, I can attest to the mixed effects of receiving a special honor. On the one hand, I was very pleased not only to receive the committee's recognition but also to learn of all of the deserving books that were honored by the Sibert. And yet I could not help feeling sad that the only way we could be noticed was by a kind of admission of failure. It is only because members of the Newbery committees have historically been so averse to nonfiction that we needed the Sibert. Creating a new award is a concession that the other awards will never change.

Advocates of identity-based awards claim that if they select the best of their own literature, the surrounding world will appreciatively buy their selections so that all children grow up learning about all experiences. The problem is that if the award is *from* the community to the community, then it is up to the surrounding communities to decide if those experiences — which they are inherently excluded from completely understanding — are vitally important to them. If the award celebrates, instead, individuals who delve deeply into aspects of human experience, no literate, aware reader can afford not to read the books.

We should do everything in our power to encourage the growth of a more diverse literature, but not by predefining who will create it. We should do our best to encourage all readers to be receptive to every brand of literature. Which also means that we must be open to great art, no matter who creates it.

Oddly enough, the CSK committee rules admit this, in a backhanded way. A book is eligible even if only one of the creators is black. What sense does this make? Does the race of one

offer a kind of guarantee or validation of the other? That assumes the "authentic" part of the pair has some kind of power over the other, when there is no reason to believe this is so. If this ruling is not about the truth-value of the book, it is strictly a matter of affirmative action: a set number of places are reserved at the table for African Americans, and therefore only they can sit in them.

But here's the trap you get into if you take your stand on affirmative action: you have conceded that you are using identity not as a guarantee of quality but rather to serve a different end: that of advancing the careers of people who may have had difficulty cracking the heedless publishing world. This means that a question of literary deservedness, however softly whispered, will always attach itself to the winners of these awards.

The insistence on ethnic credentials for certain awards has an echo effect on the others. Can any of you who are reading this honestly tell me that if you were sitting in a room with an almost entirely white group of fellow judges (as it would probably be) and a book on a black, or Latino, or Asian-American theme by a writer not of that group came up for consideration, you would be willing to select it as a winner? While award committees did this with some regularity in the past (Newberys for *The Slave Dancer* and *Sunder*, for example), the social pressure against doing so increases every time ALA endorses another identity-based award. These awards cause both white writers and writers of color to suffer the imposition of nonliterary criteria on their craft.

Speaking as an editor now, when a manuscript or portfolio comes to me that is related to an experience that I don't know well, I wonder whether the author has it right. And I also think it would be great if I could find a person from a group that is not well represented in publishing to do the art or text for a book that deals with an aspect of his or her culture. That is good sense and good publishing. But that uncertainty should not be codified as a rule someone else sets for me. The challenge is for me to learn enough to determine the value of the text or art myself, to judge it on its merits. And if I have difficulty making that judgment, then it is up to me to grow, to learn, to expand my knowledge.

Expanding the knowledge base of librarians and reviewers is where I think ALA should be turning its efforts. It should focus on diversifying its membership and training its members to appreciate the art and experience of all cultures. The focus should not be on the identity of the creator, which does not tell you anything about the work, but rather on learning how to judge all manner of works on their own terms.

The logic of this position becomes all the clearer when you think about the rules for the Belpré. What does it mean to be Latino? The Belpré rules specify that the winner's heritage must "emanate from any of the Spanish-speaking cultures of the Western Hemisphere." That is somewhere between silly and offensive. For one, it excludes citizens of and émigrés from the largest country in Latin America, Brazil. Brazilians, who are now a major immigrant group in Miami, speak Portuguese, not Spanish. If you include Portuguese-speaking cultures, then New England Cape Verdeans as well as the whole mixed South Asian, black, Amerindian, Chinese, English, Caribbean population — which often has some Portuguese mixed in — are Latinos.

An even more troubling problem this rule poses comes from the role Spanish has played in Latin American history. For indigenous peoples who speak Quechua, or Mayan, or Yanomami, Spanish has been the language of oppression. As these peoples immigrate to America, we are telling them they have to learn the language they resisted in order to celebrate their own culture. If ALA insists on having this rule for the Belpré, it is honor-bound to create a new award for indigenous peoples. Otherwise it is in the curious position of supposedly encouraging diversity by rewarding the suppression of native cultures.

The fact that Spanish could be imposed on reluctant peoples points out the most obvious fact about it: it is a language that anyone can learn. It is the very definition of the kind of knowledge an outsider can attain. That is good from my point of view, but it completely undermines the idea that who you are should have anything to do with what you are capable of understanding and creating.

In high school my Spanish teacher, who was Japanese-American, introduced me to Neruda, Darío, and, most of all, García Lorca. Reading those poets deepened me and made me understand more about the world. This is what I think awards from ALA should honor: great creators like these poets who, using traditions they deeply understand, add to the imagery, vocabulary, rhythmic pulse, and psychological insight that is our human heritage.

The Spanish requirement is one problem with the Belpré, but the idea of being Latino itself is another. Once you are in, you are in. So an arch-conservative Miami Cuban could win for writing about being a militant Chicano organizer; an elegant Argentinean émigré could be honored for a novel about being a poor Central American farmer (even though in Latin America that same Argentinean would be the butt of jokes for seeing himself as too European); a member of a family that had lived in the Southwest for hundreds of years could be selected for writing about a Puerto Rican shuttling between New York and Ponce. The umbrella definition of being Latino — which has no precise meaning — allows that person total freedom to deal with any Latino topic, while a person who does not use that term to define him or herself, no matter how knowledgeable about the specific subject he or she writes about, is forever banned from winning the prize. How can a requirement that is both ludicrously capacious and blindly restrictive make any sense?

The worst problem with the Belpré, though, is simply that it was the second ALA prize to include an identity clause in its rules. Two points define a line, which then contains an infinite number of points. Once the principle of identity is confirmed as valid, every group has a right to claim it, as Asian Americans soon did, with their new prize, and indigenous Americans should. Who will bet how soon mixed-race authors, those with disabilities, Muslims (and thus Jews, which, of course, then means Christians), will demand awards of their own? How can ALA say no to any of them? It has abandoned the idea that literature speaks to all and for all and has instead embraced the intellectually passé 1980s Cultural Wars concept that art is defined by a community by its own rules and for its own purposes. Now, any community has a right to demand its announcement at Midwinter, its award, its share of the honor pie.

Fortunately, we have two models that can show us how awards could be handled better. One is an award that honors books entirely based on identity — but not that of the author, only the themes in the books. I am speaking of the Lambda Literary Awards given by the Lambda Literary Foundation for excellence in books about the gay and lesbian experience. The "Lammies" carefully split honorees between gay and lesbian topics, and have many categories

reflecting different types of books from young adult through academic. Their literature reflects an acute awareness of the differences among gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people. Yet nowhere do they specify anything about the sexual orientation, or even gender, of the author. The book wins, no matter who wrote it.

A second model is the award system of the Asian American Writers Workshop. It *does* pay attention to the ethnicity of the writer, and even has a category of award only for members of the workshop. I think that is perfectly right for them, as an advocacy group, to do. But they are not seeking an imprimatur from ALA. If a librarian reads over their awards list and decides that those are important books, fine. But that is the judgment of the individual librarian, not of a body that represents all librarians, and thus all readers and potential writers, across the country.

The more awards are defined by identity, the less relevant to the world-at-large they seem. I believe that ALA has been hasty in acceding to the demands of fervent advocacy groups without truly opening the issues to debate. So let's have it out. Let's discuss how best to foster the creation, reception, and dissemination of a truly diverse literature.

My suggestion is this: keep the CSK, Belpré, and Asian-American awards, but honor content alone, not identity. Use the very best judges and set the very highest standards for these awards — which may mean that all the winners turn out to be ethnically linked to their topics, but that will be a judgment based on merit, not an *a priori* assumption. Let those committees — who should have a deep knowledge of the cultures and literatures (as well as a knowledge of Culture and Literature) encompassed by the awards they are judging — struggle with judging a

work strictly on its own merits, not its author bio.

I believe this will do even more to foster the best new talent from all groups; it will increase sales of the books, which will no longer be seen as only of interest to one community or another; and it will be intellectually honest. What more can you ask of an award?

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