

# And the Winner Is...

ALA's Newbery and Caldecott Awards are given for children's books, but they carry grown-up clout—in fact, they may be the most coveted book prizes in all of publishing

By Shannon Maughan | Dec 02, 2011

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Early on Monday morning, January 23 (7:45 a.m. CST, to be exact), attendees at the ALA Midwinter Meeting at the Dallas Convention Center Theater will be buzzing with anticipation as the winners of the 2012 Youth Media Awards—including the storied Newbery and Caldecott Medals—are revealed. The announcement will be carried via a live webcast, and tweets, text messages, and phone calls will blast the news to the world at lightning speed. And all over the country, booksellers will hope and pray they have enough stock on hand to meet demand for the winners.

"No other award has the economic significance of the Newbery and Caldecott," says Anita Silvey, author, former publisher of children's books at Houghton Mifflin, and former editor-in-chief of the Horn Book. "As a publisher, I knew how important the awards were. You could have a book that eked out sales of 2,000 copies when it was published sell 100,000–200,000 in a year after winning the award." And the distinction of winning the awards helps to keep books in print, insuring cumulative sales over a longer period.



Back to Back Caldecotts for Eric Rohmann's work (in 2003), and Mordicai Gerstein's (in 2004), made newcomer Roaring Brook Press into a major player.

Newbery/Caldecott lore is filled with examples of such success, Silvey notes. When Bradbury Press won the 1974 Newbery Medal for Paula Fox's *The Slave Dancer*, and later the 1979 Caldecott award for Paul Goble's *The Girl Who Loved Horses*, "it gave the company an entirely different life," she says. When Roaring Brook Press—just two years into its creation—won back-to-back Caldecotts, in 2003 for Eric Rohmann's *My Friend Rabbit*, and in 2004 for *The Man Who Walked Between the Towers* by Mordicai Gerstein, the publisher almost instantly became a major player.

Indeed, at a time when book awards for adult literature are being questioned—for example, the recent controversy over the Man Booker Prize in the U.K.—the Newbery and Caldecott awards are widely known for selling books,

thousands, sometimes millions of them. And some 90 years after its founding, they may just be the most coveted book awards in publishing.

## History...

"When I was researching 100 Best Books for Children, the question that most interested me was, how do we get our literary, artistic classics in the U.S.?" Silvey says. "It became clear to me that about half of our literary classics get their start with an award seal on them. And since 1922, the Newbery and Caldecott have given us what's become the American canon for children's books."

The Newbery and Caldecott awards were the brainchild of Frederic G. Melcher (1879–1963), a bookseller from Massachusetts who would go on to become editor of *The Publishers' Weekly* in 1918. Early in his career, Melcher had established himself as a champion of children's books, cofounding Children's Book Week in 1919 to promote reading for young people. But when the Pulitzer Prizes debuted earlier that decade, Melcher lamented there was no category representing children's literature, spurring him to propose a Pulitzer Prize of sorts for children, which would be chosen by librarians, during the 1921 ALA annual meeting in Swampscott, Mass. According to an account of the proceedings in the book *Minders of Make-Believe* by children's book historian Leonard S. Marcus, the idea met with terrific enthusiasm.



Newbery/Caldecott founder and former 'Publishers Weekly' editor Frederic G. Melcher at his 'PW' desk.

Melcher proposed the award be named the John Newbery Medal—a nod to the 18th-century English bookseller and publisher who had become widely known for his belief that children's books should both entertain and educate their readers. Melcher personally paid to have the bronze medal designed and crafted by American sculptor René Paul Chambellan.

The inaugural Newbery—the first literary award for children's books in the world—was presented to Dr. Hendrik Willem van Loon's *The Story of Mankind* at the ALA annual meeting in June 1922. Since then, the medal has been given annually by the American Library Association's children's division, the Association of Library Service to Children, "for the most distinguished American children's book published the previous year."

As the children's publishing industry grew, so did Melcher's fervor for encouraging and promoting it. In 1937, he put in motion a plan to endow an award for children's book illustration—a companion to the Newbery—named for 19th-century British illustrator Randolph Caldecott, whose books Melcher had long admired and collected. Once again, Melcher worked with ALA and sculptor Chambellan to introduce the Caldecott Medal, which, according to ALA, is "awarded to the artist of the most distinguished American Picture Book for Children published in the United States during the preceding year." The first Caldecott was presented to *Animals of the Bible: A Picture Book* by Helen Dean Fish, illustrated by Dorothy P. Lathrop, at the 1938 ALA annual convention.

The Newbery and Caldecott medals were significant from the start, says Marcus, for a few reasons. "Melcher didn't want there to be any taint of commercialism involved," he says. "The awards were about setting high standards for children's literature, and they were being selected by librarians. They were intended to help parents know what to buy for their children."

Second, Marcus notes, the awards recognized American books intended for American children. "Prior to that time, we looked to England and Europe for arts and culture," he says. "There was a nationalist impulse behind the awards." And third, the Newbery and Caldecott enticed "the best writers and artists in America" to work in the children's book field.

"They continue to be important today for at least two of those reasons," Marcus says. "Especially since the market has shifted to the retail side, the awards are indicators for people who don't know what they're looking for." He says. And because of the prestige the awards have accrued over the years, "they do serve as a magnet for talented writers and artists."

### Success

Silvey believes that Melcher was wise to establish the awards as something that both looked out for publishers and recognized the buying power of libraries. "[Melcher and ALA] could not have imagined that, in 1998, when *Holes* won the Newbery, it would sell 250,000 copies that first year, based on what they created in 1921." But that kind of success is exactly what the awards now routinely generate.

Marcus points to a few other examples of how the awards instantly changed the fortunes of the winner. "Where the Wild Things Are was Maurice Sendak's 57th book," says Marcus. "Winning the [1964] Caldecott put him on the national stage like nothing he did before. And the Caldecott is almost always transformative in the career of the person who wins it. Traditionally, it has almost guaranteed that winners will go on and be more experimental than they would otherwise."

Author Christopher Paul Curtis, who won a 1996 Newbery Honor for his first book, *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* and then won the 2000 Newbery Medal for *Bud, Not Buddy*, "came from nowhere," says Marcus. "He's one of those winning writers plucked out of total obscurity."

### WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE



### STORY AND PICTURES BY MAURICE SENDAK

Newbery winner 'Where the Wild Things Are' made Maurice Sendak into a sensation, but it was his 57th book.

The awards can be a boon for booksellers, too. "They certainly drive sales," says Margaret Neville, kids' room manager and buyer for the King's English Bookshop in Salt Lake City. On the big day, Neville says, "We have customers waiting to buy the winners. Some years it just takes luck whether we have them in stock. Of course, I'm always a little happier when the publisher has a lot on hand."

"We do a big display of the winners and honor books, and the awards definitely give the books a bump," says Beth Puffer, director and buyer at Bank Street Bookstore in New York City. Thanks to a large teacher and librarian clientele, Puffer says that many of her customers are more aware of the awards and what they mean than the general public might be. And the awards count for some built-in sales, too. "I have some local librarians who call and say 'give me one of everything' when they're announced," she adds.

### 'They Picked What?'

Much has certainly changed in the children's book world since the Roaring '20s (the number of books published, for starters), yet the Newbery and Caldecott awards have weathered the test of time—although not without the occasional controversy. With any award there's always the potential for discord over who wins and who doesn't make the cut, and there is continuous debate about how books are selected, who selects them, and how "popular" the books are. With the Newbery and Caldecott Awards, talk of various criteria—what the Newbery's age parameters should be, how one defines a picture book, what is meant by prior publication—also abounds.

"It's widely thought that Charlotte's Web, a 1953 Honor, didn't win because of the death of Charlotte," says Marcus, "and that wasn't a topic being discussed in children's books at the time." More recently, Marcus recalls "the flap over the use of the word 'scrotum' " in the 2007 Newbery winner *The Higher Power of Lucky* by Susan Patron. "It really pressed the buttons of a number of homeschoolers and people who didn't want a discussion of sexuality," he recalls.

In 2008, Brian Selznick's illustrated novel *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* was awarded the Caldecott, which surprised many observers because it is not a traditionally formatted picture book. "It must have been like going off on an adventure for the committee to award something so unusual," says Marcus. As Silvey pointed out in her provocative 2009 *School Library Journal* article "Has the Newbery Lost Its Way?" librarians, teachers and book reviewers alike have criticized some of the winners since 2000 as being unappealing and not especially kid friendly.

But that's nothing new, says K.T. Horning, ALSC past-president and current director of the Cooperative Children's Book Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. "Looking at the early years of the Newbery, there is lots of criticism. In 1925, people were complaining that these were books kids don't want to read," she says. But in the end, she adds, "That's what Melcher wanted—that kind of discussion and exchange. People care about the awards. Even the harshest critics care very much, and Melcher wanted people to care about excellent books."

### Evolution

Still, even the experts have conflicting views on how the awards have evolved and how they might change in the future. "There is a common wisdom that the best children's books are timeless, but that doesn't seem true," Marcus notes. Some early Newbery winners, for example, include incidental racism. "Books that were once considered beyond reproach are a great illustration of how people's values change," he says.

Horning concurs. "Some of the Newbery books, especially those from the 1930s, haven't aged well," she says. On the Caldecott side, Marcus says, "What looked powerful and visually dramatic in its day may not appear that way now." And Horning notes that the 1952 Caldecott winner, *Finders Keepers* by William Lipkind, illustrated by Nicolas Mordvinoff, was controversial in its day because some people read Communist subtext into it.

Silvey and Marcus both believe that there is room for discussion about a variety of issues—for example, who is eligible to serve on committees, and what kinds of professional endeavors or personal relationships might constitute a conflict of interest for committee members. Silvey, for one, has expressed concern about a shrinking pool of boots-on-the-ground librarians serving on the selection committees.

"As ALSC has become smaller, it's only those in the upper levels of management who go to national conferences," she says. "That leaves out working librarians. But you lose them at the peril of the awards." However, at the same time, Skype visits and other efforts, she says, may be a way to include a broader spectrum of librarians in the committees' work.

As global publishing proliferates in the digital age, Horning suggests revisiting the definition of an "American or U.S. publication." Marcus says he would welcome reconsidering that issue, too. "Publishing is much more international than in the 1920s," he says. "That's why I would question the 'American' policy's applicability to our time. Why shouldn't non-Americans be eligible?"

Silvey, however, has a different view. "It's still difficult in the U.S. to publish beautiful books," she says. "The awards help make it possible for American editors and American authors and illustrators to do their best work. Other countries have ways to support artists that we do not. The true power of the awards would be lost if they didn't continue to support American authors and illustrators. I would rue the day that were to change."

The issues facing the Newbery and Caldecott committees will only become more complex. "We need to consider what we really mean by 'prior publication,'" says Steven Herb, affiliate professor of education at Penn State and chair of the 2012 Caldecott Medal committee. "Apps and book trailers on YouTube are now coming ahead of the books, and yet the rules stipulate that something can't have been published in another form." There's no controversy this year, he says. "But in another year or so there might be."

Herb, however, says he has full faith in the selection process. "The criteria are charmingly open," he says. "And they've worked for a very long time."

### **Making the Choice**

As this article goes to press, it's crunch time for Herb and the rest of the committee. "The people on my committee are very dedicated," he says, "and it's great to see how seriously they take it." He knows people outside the committee will be looking at their work just as seriously—with the advent of social media and new technology, the runup to the awards now includes increasingly lively forums for predictions, as well as mock award votes in schools, libraries, and bookstores across the country.

"The Midwinter announcement has become a really big deal," he says, although he sounds a wistful note for the days when "a thundering herd" would rush out of the auditorium room to get to the pay phones.

"But all the anticipation, the mock discussions—that's exactly what Frederic Melcher was hoping for," Horning adds. "I think he succeeded."

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