



Right now in Seattle there are fifteen exhausted, excited, and inscrutable folk, members of the 2013 Newbery Committee, who, after a year of intensive reading and examining of all eligible books, spent the last few days in seclusion to debate, discuss, listen, consider, vote, and decide on the 2013 Newbery Medal and Honor books. Having served on the 2008 Newbery Committee, I have some idea of what they've just gone through and what they have still to enjoy.

Say tomorrow morning when very, very early they will gather at the American Library Association's press room to call the medal and honor winners to inform them of their awards. Next will come the drama of the ALA's Youth Media Awards announcements where they will listen to the sounds of delight, excitement, happiness, and shock when their decisions are revealed. As always, the response will range from those ecstatic that their favorites were acknowledged to those stunned that theirs were not.

Wanting to help those who care so passionately about children's books to better understand the Newbery Award I offer this top ten list to clear up some possible misconceptions.

10. Popular! Not. Often through word-of-mouth and, these days, through social media, certain beloved titles are passionately admired and advocated as Newbery front-runners. The dismay when they are not recognized can be great. I've been there — standing open-mouthed when a well-known book I

loved, one that I thought surely would be honored, was not. But it is important to know that the rules the members of the committee are required to follow clearly state that the award is "...not for didactic content or popularity." That is, the committee cannot take into consideration a book's crowd-pleasing aspects. And so if tomorrow one or more of this year's especially well-loved books (you know which they are!) are honored, their popularity will not have been one of the reasons. And if they are not, don't feel sad — these books will unquestionably continue to be honored by all of those who love and admire them.

9. What About the Children? Related to popularity is the question of child-friendliness, especially if a winner doesn't seem to be the sort of book that appears to be a sure-thing for many kids. In such cases the question often arises — do those involved adequately consider the intended audience of young readers? Rest assured that they do. The criteria state: "Committee members must consider excellence of presentation for a child audience." When I was on the committee I found it incredibly helpful to read titles aloud to my fourth grade class and was constantly giving others to students in my school of different ages to get their impressions. I also consulted with our school psychologist, my teacher and librarian colleagues, and many others regarding the child appeal of various titles.

8. Fifteen Individuals Who we are, our experiences, our families, our friends, and our tastes all factor into our responses to a particular book. What I might dearly love, my best friend may hate. And vice versa. Which is why, every year, the committee consists of fifteen passionate readers who come from all over the country with different tastes, experiences, and backgrounds. This year's committee is a group of committed, caring, and hardworking individuals who have just come together in all their delightful differences to

decide on one book to win. Whether we agree or disagree with their decision, it is important to recognize and respect the work they did.

7. Only the One The committee is not allowed to consider any book from another year. This means, if a book under consideration is a sequel, the committee may only look at that book, not the previous ones. Nor can a committee consider an author's body of work. Only the book of that year will be considered. When I was on the committee we gave honors to three former Newbery honorees: Christopher Paul Curtis (Elijah of Buxton), Jacqueline Woodson (Feathers), and Gary D. Schmidt (The Wednesday Wars). All three have significant bodies of work, but we only considered the books they'd written that year.

6. All Ages The criteria state that "Children are defined as persons of ages up to and including fourteen, and books for this entire age range are to be considered." What this means is that while the committee is looking at books for different ages they are not charged to find a book that the largest range of ages can read. And so they may select a book that is perfect for an almost-fifteen-year-old, but not at all for a-just-turned-ten-year-old. While middle grade readers seem to be a significant audience for Newbery winners the award is not specifically for them.

5. Genre Challenge The committee is charged to "...consider all forms of writing — fiction, non-fiction, and poetry." And so, not only are they comparing picture books with middle grade titles and even young adult (when it is for a thirteen or fourteen year-old), but every sort of genre too. This can be challenging indeed. The questions are complex. How do you consider the structure of a nonfiction text alongside a fantasy book? Is plot the same? Character? What about documentation? How much is demanded of a child audience? Should it then also be expected of a work of historical fiction? How

to compare a concept picture book with beautiful, but minimal text with an ornate 300 page adventure for older readers? The committee grapples with this all.

4. Thinking about Literature Each committee member nominated seven books which were the ones they focused on during their recent deliberations in a very carefully and thoughtfully structured process (that felt to me when I did it like being on a trial jury). They arrived well prepared to discuss and draw out and explain just what made these particular titles the "... most distinguished contribution to American literature for children" and used all their critical facilities to consider:

- Interpretation of the theme or concept
- Presentation of information including accuracy, clarity, and organization
- Development of a plot
- Delineation of characters
- Delineation of a setting
- Appropriateness of style.

To get a taste of what they did I suggest perusing SLJ's Heavy Medal blog run by Newbery veterans Nina Lindsay and Jonathan Hunt with the caveat that, as certainly happened for the real committee in secret, their careful examination of different titles highlight critical issues, positive as well as negative and this may not be easy reading when it is about a book you love.

3. Art and Design The criteria state that:

The committee is to make its decision primarily on the text. Other components of a book, such as illustrations, overall design of the book, etc., may be considered when they make the book less effective.

With more and more creators integrating text, design, and art, this is can

be tough. For example, when I was on the committee I found it frustrating to be so limited in my consideration of Brian Selznick's illustrations for The Invention of Hugo Cabret. It will be interesting to see if one day a graphic novel is recognized, but it seems to me that as long as the art cannot be equally considered positively with the text that it will be a challenge for that to happen.

2. The Matters of Honors Sometimes there are quite a few honor titles, sometimes there very few. With the latter, it is hard not to wonder. Did the committee feel there were only one or two really good books that year? Not necessarily. After all, remember that each member of the committee nominated seven books that he or she felt were award worthy. So rest assured that the individuals on the committee felt there were many worthy books whatever the number of honors they decided upon.

1. The Impossibility of Perfection The Newbery Award was created to honor the best work of American children's literature and every year it does so...sort of. That is, a particular group of fifteen people decide on one great work. A different group of fifteen might well decide on a different great work. As would a third or fourth group. And so the concept of "best" has to be recognized as what that year's committee thought of as best at that point in time.

And so tomorrow, let's be happy! Whether yours or my personal favorites get selected, let's cheer those who do get the nod. As much as a celebration of individual excellence, the Newbery is a celebration of all the wonderful works for children created every year. May there be many more!

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