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

Foundations and institutions choose to create literary awards. They choose who to honor when naming and dedicating them. They choose what the criteria are for the awards, and how often they will be awarded. They choose who sits on the committees that review and honor books. These committee members choose which books to consider, or choose whose nominations will make it into the running. Each brings bias and taste and judgment to the table.

We choose to read the books who win. We choose to buy them. We choose to teach them. We make these choices.

I realize now that though the winning and honored books of these awards are deserving, the manner in which they are deemed deserving is subjective. So much choice goes into the outcomes of the award contests; different people could have steered things in different directions each time. There should be no obvious winners, but there are – books that win often have specific characteristics that make them winners, and other books that diverge from this (though wonderful!) may go unnoticed and unrewarded. It is all a matter of choice.

In this class I learned about awards that I didn't know existed, and was introduced to titles that were new to me as well. My team researched the Michael Printz Award, given yearly since 2000 to authors of young adult books. I was pleased to see an effort in the awards we focused on this week to praise authors of diversity – in writing, genre, ethnicity and age groups. I agreed with many of the selections, but thought some were obvious choices and wished I would have seen more books by newer and more innovative authors. The absence of any graphic novels or science fiction and fantasy bothered me, and I thought many of the winning books had subject material that was a bit too similar. I hated to think that there is a "formula" for writing a winning book, but as we delved deeper into investigating the award criteria and looked at the types of books that won, I realized that this was often the case. Perhaps there isn't really a way around

it; humans are creatures of habit and book awards are chosen by committees of humans. I wondered at the time if this may have been the case with Esperanza Rising; it was written by a Latina author about a Latina protagonist, but I didn't see anything different or "novel" about it. Though the outcome of the book does "affirm" what it means to be Latino, it didn't seem to "portray" this experience in a very accessible way. One of the criteria for the Laura Ingalls Wilder Medal was that the author had to have contributed a new trend or created a different kind of book. I liked that this selection process looked for something unique, therefore trying to avoid a "formula" for winning, though I wonder if in its search for something different, it began to reward the same types of deviations from the norm – therefore simply creating a different sameness. I believe that committees do a good job of choosing "good" literature for children, but perhaps need to change the nomination process a bit by making sure that there are books representing all genres in the pool of contenders, and by considering the reactions to these books by children. In my eyes, the most dangerous path the Newbery can travel is the formulaic one – I would hate to see that there is a certain kind of books that "fits" the Newbery Medal, and that others, though superb, may not stand a chance.

My team was able to talk authentically about our teaching experiences, what makes a "good book" and what our students like to read. It was helpful to come up with a common definition of what makes a book a "good one" before looking at the award winners – it helped me to apply the criteria when reading and writing about the books I chose from the lists of winners. We decided that good books are those that children can see themselves in on some level, deal with issues of identity (for adolescents and teens), and perhaps teach readers about lives different from their own. We also discussed that what adults see as "good books for children" are not always the same as what children themselves would choose, and that this element is often not recognized in the nomination and selection process for literary awards and medals for children's books. In doing this, I realized that books selection committees must do the same thing – define what a "good book" is, and apply this definition (collaboratively and independently) when choosing the winners. Other people may have chosen different criteria, and perhaps applied them differently.

One of the threads that came out early in our whole class discussions was about the relationship between sales and award winning books. Even more intriguing was thinking about how much curriculum is based on what books win awards – is it lazy to depend on these awards to guide what books we require students to read? Because of this question, I found it particularly pertinent to research the awards and apply the criteria ourselves to books that have won. I know that Esperanza Rising was chosen as an all-school book when I taught at Gardner Middle School in Lansing, MI because of its award status – rereading it while applying the criteria, as well as recalling my students’ reactions to the novel, was especially enlightening.

One of the most prestigious awards we researched and talked about was the Newbery Award. As a 9<sup>th</sup> grade teacher (and former middle school teacher), I have the most familiarity with this award. I know that many of the required and highly recommended texts we teach are Newbery Award winners, and it makes me wonder of the award status of these novels set them higher above others of equally (or higher) educational relevance when choosing the required texts for our district pacing guides. However, I do see value in the Newbery award. I think it both honors the value of literature written for young people, and helps to *give* value to these works as well. The Newbery, and awards like it, call attention to the fact that quality literature does not have to be written for adults.

Since the nominated books are reviewed by adults and the award is bestowed by adults, the elements of fine literature that adults apply to their own literature are often going to be found in the winners of the Newbery award. These “winning elements” may not be the same things that make a book popular to children, but may be things that adults find important for children to be exposed to. Because of this, there is the danger of a “formula” emerging in choosing the winner of the Newbery medal – our readings and team discussions highlight the trend of middle school fiction winning the award, and most winning books have a main character who is faced with issues of overcoming adversity and struggling with identity. It seems that committees have tried to break out of this rut, but have stepped right back into it in recent years. The Parrabano article highlights many of these problems with the Newbery award.

I recall talking in one of our group discussions about a time when I was in *Barnes and Noble* and saw a display called “Award Winners”. It was interesting to see after the readings and discussions in the class about award winners because my attention was called to the fact that the novels on one side were all Newbery Medal winners, and the picture books on the other side were Caldecott winners. It does seem that these two awards, specifically, have separated into two camps – each with their own “kind” of recognized literature. Seeing these books displayed at the bookstore also brought my thoughts back to something that we talked about in one of our team discussions – the increase in sales of Newbery award books (though this does not always ring true; consider the success over time of Charlotte’s Web versus Secret of the Andes, which is much less known and read today). I must say that I was surprised when reviewing the list of Newbery winners – I had read so many of them, and those that I hadn’t, I had most likely heard of. The award obviously does wonders for a book’s sales and popularity. The fact that so many Newbery books are still read and loved today tells me that overall, the selection committees choose great books deserving of the honor, but perhaps the award winning status has perpetuated a “this is quality so buy it!” mentality in shoppers and readers alike.

The most poignant exercise we did during the course of the class that best helped me to put the issue of classics and choice into perspective was simply coming up with five books that I deemed as classics and viewing the choices of others. I had read all but eight of the books on the class’s list – and most of the others I was familiar with in their film form. Even though there were quite a few that were named that others did not include on their list of classics, I was familiar with most of them, and agreed that they should have been included (except a few that I thought were too “new” perhaps, and therefore haven’t stood the test of time yet). Maybe I needed to rethink the age rule – there were many books on the list published within the last ten or fifteen years. But when I think “classic” I think “it’s been around and will be around”. Our group talked about the inventive nature of a book – it does something new or differently than others before it. Looking at the list, I do see some that have done that. I also see many books that have sequels or are part of a series.

I think when children today read most of these books it is because they are still heavily marketed, have seen a resurgence lately because of film rights, and because those of us from the preceding generations encourage children to read them now. Again, the choices of parents, teachers, publishers, directors and producers influence which books are deemed “classics”, and what the basic criteria for a “classic” is in the minds of each generation. The idea of what we, personally, think is a classic may be held by many others as well because most of the books have been around and read by more than one or two generations, and their popularity may dim at times but resurges cyclically. Looking at the list our class put together also suggests to me that the list of “classics” is ever-growing; as more books are published and more people grow up, more classics are born.

Personally, I know that the books I chose for my list of classics were based on those that I loved as a child and that, in retrospect, were valued by my parents and other adults in my life. I was given books for birthdays that the grownups around me thought I should read. Their definition of classic became mine on many levels because I was shown that these particular books had worth. I was given Little Women for my 9<sup>th</sup> birthday by my grandmother, who told me at the time that the book was a favorite of hers when she was young and that every young girl should have the book. I still have it and actually reread this same copy for this class. It is bound in navy blue leather with full color prints of oil painting illustrations on the front cover and interspersed throughout the text. It has a wine-colored ribbon bookmark and the edges of the pages are a deep gold. Its intricacy and beauty alone tell the buyer and the reader that it is something special – not only a classic, but an heirloom as well.

As a parent, I know that I stock the shelves with books that I loved as a child and that I deem as “must reads” – many of which are on my list of classics that I submitted for this class. Classics exist because their importance is handed down through generations.

Looking at the widely different reviews of Little Women also helped me to understand that the value of a “classic” (and whether or not it is seen as such by all) is not static. My responsibility was to read Brophy’s review of the novel and summarize her ideas for my group. Though reading the reviews and the summaries of my teammates brought insight into my thoughts on classics, it did not necessarily change my own

opinions. Brophy's view did not necessarily change my views of the novel because I already agreed with her on some points. I personally wouldn't want to read sentimental novels like Alcott's in rapid succession, but I agree that they have their place and are enjoyable if written eloquently. I think that Little Women is a piece of sentimentality, but I don't agree that it is somehow "less than literature." I think that it attracts sentimentalists and intellectuals (which are not necessarily exclusive) because it has something to offer on both levels. Perhaps Alcott's characters seem formulaic because others have chosen to use her formula, not because she used one that already existed in the first place. This made me think of the discussion we had in our team about both the criteria for awards and classics – we thought perhaps they should do something that hadn't been done before; they should be innovative.

Reading an award winner (Hatchet – Newbery Award) and a classic (Treasure Island) really got me thinking about the choices made regarding the evaluation of literature – I mean, overall, that is what we do when committees choose award winners and when we as a collective choose what stands through time and becomes a classic in the eyes of many. Comparing seemingly different types of books from different time periods was a great way to get thinking about themes and issues in literature as well. There was so much more to compare than I initially thought there would be! After discussing each book and also discussing their differences and similarities, Hatchet and Treasure Island helped me to see the choices that have been made recently when choosing a novel that stands out above the rest to win an award, and choices that have been made about what we deem as abiding and classic literature.