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

--Louise Bernikow

THEORY:

Louise's Bernikow's quote highlights the controversy behind award selection in children's literature. These award-winning books are chosen by a committee whose background knowledge and experiences contribute to their selection of the eligible children's books of that year. Many exceptional books are lost in history as a result of the opinion of small groups of people. Therefore these famous award-winning books have a special place in literary history because of the choices made by the award selection committee. Not every award-winning book may have educational merit to every reader. These texts were chosen for a reason, but should they be the only books highly regarded by educators? Many classic children's books like *Peter Pan*, *Little Women*, and *Charlotte's Web* have won no awards, and yet they are regarded as classics. Do we need to redefine the classics, or reevaluate our usage of award-winning books? Both are essential in the reading and using these books in today's classrooms.

In children's literature, there are a variety of awards to honor different types of authors, illustrators, as well as the content of the book. The most famous awards in children's literature, The Newbery Award and The Caldecott Award highlight outstanding children's literature by United States authors. The Newbery Award focuses on the content of the book, while the Caldecott Award honors illustrations. These awards do not have stipulations about the type of characters, themes, or the race, gender, age, sexuality, etc. of the author. They are intended to represent the best of all the books published in a given year in the United States. There are other awards that focus on a specific type of book or author, which are intended to highlight specific cultures, authors, and groups. The focus of their book is to honor books and authors who best represent their group. For example: The Printz Award honors books

where the target audience is young adults, ages 12-18. Therefore it would seem that all of these awards bring attention to everyone, but this is not the case.

Even with all of the different groups being acknowledged, awards that focusing on gender equality are missing. It is essential that every young reader make a connection between themselves and characters presented in the book. There are no awards that honor women writers or books that highlight the empowerment of women. As I stated previously in my Midterm Paper, “My group had originally discussed that we did find a gender gap were books were typically targeted towards girls because they are thought of enjoying reading more than boys.” Of the six Newbery Award books I read, 4 out of the 6 books main characters were young girls, and these young girls followed the gender roles. Can the selection committee be faulted for highlighting the stereotype? By understanding that individuals chose these books based on their beliefs, values, and experiences, I can understand why books in the past were chosen. During the 1940’s when women typically stayed at home doing most of the cooking and cleaning, I can understand why *Strawberry Girl’s* main character, Birdie spends a significant of amount time helping her mother around the house. This is essential to keep in mind while reading award-winning books because they may contain stereotypes and groups could be portrayed in a negative way due to what was acceptable during that time period. Award-winning books reflect what is accepted and believed at the time not necessary what reflects today’s values, but what makes all of these books “winners?”

Many individuals feel a “winning” book means it is also a “classic book in children’s literature, but this is not the case. A “winning” book must stand out from the other books published in that year, and it needs to be memorable. The goal is that winning books published many years ago are still read by individuals today making them a “classic” book, but I have found not many “winning” books are considered “classics”. “Classic” books transcend time because their storylines, values, and characters are relatable to today’s readers even though they were published 20 or even 100 years ago. For example, *Charlotte’s Web* by E.B. White published in 1952 is known as a “classic” children’s book not only to myself, but also to 9 other individuals in this class. I considered this book a classic because “a classic

friendship is highlighted through the actions of the animals.” In this book the characters are relatable, and the value of friendship is applicable to every time period. That same year the Newbery Award-winning book *Secret of the Andes* by Ann Nolan Clark was published. This book highlighted a young boy’s courage to find who he was and what he desired most. The characters in this book did not show a lot of emotion, and the characters are not as relatable to the masses. Most children have seen a pig or a spider, but a boy walking across the Andes Mountains with a llama may be difficult for young readers to imagine. The *Secret of the Andes* won because it highlighted the bravery of the young boy and the unique plot, but this is not a classic because the literary elements do appeal to every reader. Both the words “Winner” and “Classic” can appeal to a book, but they are not interchangeable and do they mean the same thing. Not every “winning” book is a “classic” and not every “classic” book is a “winner.”

PRACTICE:

Every student in my classroom brings a unique set of morals, experiences, and interests. By taking this into consideration, the books that are presented to my middle school students must reflect their varied reading interests. Award-winning books and classic books will play a role in my classroom, but how I present them to the class has been changed due to this course. I have read books with my students that have won awards, but we did not spend time after we read the book thinking about why it was chosen. It was a winning book therefore it had literary merit, and it was the best book we could have chosen to read. Now this will no longer be the case. Previously when I would tell my students we are reading a classic book, many were hesitant and told me it was too hard or boring. They do not understand the language or culture behind these books that were written so long ago. For modern students to appreciate a book written in the past, discussions must be had about the time period of when the book was written or the time period of the setting of the book. In this course studying the requirements of awards and analyzing classic literature has highlighted what changes I need to make when teaching children’s literature.

Students in my classroom have the opportunity to choose an independent reading book that they apply the literary elements and techniques we are studying in class. Sometimes my students have had difficulty choosing a book due to their interest level. Before I have found myself suggesting award-winning books saying, 'these were the best of that year so they must be great.' Now for a fact, I know this not necessary true. What about those wonderful books that didn't win? Is there a reason they are lost in children's history? For example, in the year 1986 the book *Sarah, Plain and Tall* by Patricia MacLachlan won Newbery Award, and the book *Dogsong* by Gary Paulson was an honor book. *Sarah, Plain and Tall* focused on a woman answering an ad to become a mother and wife to a family. This book does highlight important values like love, bravery, and family, but it highlights gender stereotypes and ideals of the time that does not connect to readers today. *Dogsong*, the honor book of that year, is about a young boy, Russel who is having trouble adjusting to the changes happening to his Eskimo village. He gets guidance from an elder and learns to live off the land with the elders dog team where he a finds a girl, Nancy, who ran away from her village because she was pregnant. For an award that highlights bravery in a character, what about what Russel and Nancy? Isn't he brave to go out on his own and find out about who is? This book could be lost in the history of children's literature because someone on the committee felt more of a connection to a woman moving to be a mother than a young boy trying to find himself.

This course has shown me that it is essential when students are reading books that are classics or award-winning that were written many years ago, that they understand the historical climate and beliefs of that time period. In the past certain ideals were acceptable and commonplace that modern readers may find distasteful. For example the 6th grade students at my school read excerpts from the classic *Peter Pan*. The family structure in this book of having a maid and a nanny is not commonplace for many students today unlike in 1911. The Indians in *Peter Pan* are portrayed in a stereotypical way that is offensive to the modern reader, calling them savage and redskins. As a class we would discuss that the book was written during a certain time period where they dehumanized groups of people in order to take advantage of them. This tactic has been used throughout history for example slavery and annexing land. Though some

elements are specific to that time period, classics contain elements that apply to a variety of readers regardless of the time, like the idea growing up found in *Peter Pan*. Discussing what remains the same and what time has done to our understanding of the book is essential studying any classic or award-winning book.

This quote makes me think about which type of book is the most valuable in the history of children's literature, "award-winning" or "classic." I feel classic literature has more of an impact on literary history. When asked to think about classic children's books, my classmates and myself listed wonderful titles that represented our childhood, and most of the books did not receive an award. Classic books do not just apply to one generation or group of people. Every child, teacher, parent, grandparent can read these books and learn something from them. By only reading award-winning books, my students would miss wonderful authors, story lines, and relatable characters. A small group of individuals choose award-winning books, but generations choose classics.

This does not mean that I want to get rid of every type of award for children's literature. I feel the most valuable awards are the ones that highlight a certain group, race, sexuality, etc. These showcase authors that honor a variety of different individuals like my students. In my paper, *Reading Winners and Applying the Criteria*, I discussed the book *Brown Girl Dreaming* by Jacqueline Woodson, won The Coretta Scott King Book Award. This book was also the Newbery Honor winner in 2015. As I previously stated, "This novel focuses on the author's childhood and her memories of her home, family, and friends. ...All dialogue is in italics, and it highlights how important words are to Jacqueline because she wants to be a writer to share her voice, the voice of equality. I agree that this book should have the award due to the focus on African American culture and her experience as an African American in the 1960's & 1970's." This book gave me a unique perspective and taught me many things about human relationships. This should not be lost in the history of the Newbery Award because the committee did not connect with this book. This year I am incorporating this book into my classroom not only as an example of literary devices used, but also as an example of the authors writing style in a memoir.

Overall this course has had me reevaluate how we award children's literature through the studying of awards and defining classics. Louise Bernikow's quote shows how groups of individuals chose books that will forever be in literary history. There are still books that have never won an award that generations of individuals consider classics; therefore classics have a significant place in literary history. I do not think awards should go away completely, and only the ones that honor specific groups of people should be showcased. Not only does this provide recognition to wonderful books and authors, but exposes readers to cultures that are unlike their own. Ending this course, I am going to change the way I use award-winning and classic books in my classroom. The history of children's literature is "actually a record of choices."

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