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An Analysis of Newbery Awards: 1922-1947

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OUACHITA BAPTIST UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

AN ANALYSIS OF
NEWBERY AWARDS
1922-1947

SUBMITTED TO
MRS. DOROTHY CHAPEL
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
HONORS SPECIAL STUDIES 4810

Pam Estes

The intent of this project has been to focus on reading the Newbery award winners from 1922-1947 and to analyze and compare the books.

In 1921, at the American Library Association meeting, Mr. Frederic Melcher proposed an annual award to be given in the name of John Newbery, the first publisher of children's books.¹ Newbery had encouraged the best authors to write specifically for children; thus the award would be given to books that had made a contribution to children's literature.²

The award is determined by a select committee of American Library Association members according to the following criteria:

The author shall be a citizen or a resident of the United States. Someone living here temporarily is not eligible. His contribution shall be an original and creative piece of work. It shall be the "most distinguished contribution to American literature for children," original in conception, fine in workmanship and artistically true. Reprints and compilations are not eligible for consideration. The book need not be written solely for children. The judgment of the voting librarians shall decide whether a book is a 'contribution to the literature for children.' The Committee of Award considers only the books of one calendar year, and does not pass judgment on an author's previous work or other work during that year outside the volume that may be named.³

¹Lee Kingman, editor, Newbery & Caldercott Medal Books 1956-1965, (Boston, Horn Book, Inc., 1965), p. 1.

²Edna Johnson and Carrie E. Scott, editors, Anthology of Children's Literature, (Boston, Houghton-Mifflin Co., 1935), page 859.

³Ibid., page 859.

The first award went to Henrik W. Van Loon's Story of Mankind in 1922. This work is for adult's reading although paradoxically it is a strong contribution to children's literature. Yet the vocabulary is not above the level of the junior high student. The scope and theme of the history is also comprehensible for this age group. The book, illustrated by the author, follows the upward climb of man from prehistory through cultures, revolutions, and the Great War. His viewpoint is fascinating; it is fantastic how he draws all the facts together in an interesting, coherent story.

Hugh Lofting's second Doolittle story, The Voyage of Doctor Doolittle, won the 1923 award. His delightful story is a fantasy-type adventure told from the retrospective view of the now grown ten year old who went with Doolittle. The plot, action, and description are solidly strong. Perhaps the characters themselves contribute the most to the story. Every animal has personality, and the humans match each other for uniqueness. The language is simple while at the same time colorful; short chapters break the story for younger readers. It is an entertaining and humorous story above all else.

In 1924 the committee chose The Dark Frigate by Charles B. Hawes. A thrilling sea adventure written in very un-American stilted language, this story has a weak ending; yet there is action of the physically violent nature and beautiful description. The basic plot believable.

Didacticism is not rampant.

The 1925 award went to a book of South American folk tales by Charles J. Finger. Easy to read, the nineteen stories in Tales from Silver Lands emphasize goodness and beauty. The author ties the stories together with personal experiences. These fascinating stories also focus on strength and wisdom, generally seen as coexisting virtues. These stories would probably be interesting even to listening audiences.

Shen of the Sea by A. B. Chrisman, which won in 1926, also was a collection of stories. These are set in China. The author uses the Chinese words and gives English equivalents. There is no connecting material; the stories are autonomous. They are picturesque and culturally enlightening. Stories are simple with slight Chinese didacticism.

William R. James' Smoky received the award in 1927. A story in the traditions of Black Beauty and the American western, Smoky is written in cowboy substandard lingo. James creates empathy for the cowhorse with vivid characterizations of Smoky and the people. Easy to read and of interest to almost all youngsters, the plot is realistic.

The story of a pigeon's life won the 1928 award for D. G. Mukerji. Gay-Neck is a story packed with insights on Indian culture. As in Smoky, there is a correlation drawn between human-animal relationships and success. The plot has several complications which result from the

geographically ~~7~~ locations.

In 1929 The Trumpeter of Krakow by Eric P. Kelly won the coveted award. Set in Poland with an engrossing plot, it is based on history and the author's imaginative vision. Understandable moral and philosophical implications do not hinder the action. The story is appealing because of characters, realism, and language.

A girl's story, Hitty: Her First Hundred Years was voted the most distinguished contribution for 1930. Rachel L. Field uses an unusual first person form to tell the various adventures of a doll. Through her eyes we see several girls, their families and values, and some rather contrived situations. Although primarily a book interesting to girls, boys would probably enjoy it, too.

In 1931 Elizabeth Coatsworth won with The Cat who Went to Heaven. One of the shortest books ever to win, this is also one of the most universal. Although it has a Buddhist slant, the character is a forgiving God. (Dependent on illustrations, it is possible that it would have won the Caldecott had it been in existence.) The ending seems completely uncontrived and natural.

In 1932 the winning book was Laura Adams Armer's exquisite beautiful The Waterless Mountains. Interweaving anthropological fact with Navaho legend, Armer tells through her story universal truths. The Indian is revealed as a person; with a constant sense of beauty and high religious ideals,

the hero matures in pilgrimage. This book is of reality and of engrossing personality.

Elizabeth Forman Lewis won in 1933 with the book Young Fu of the Upper Yangtse. Set in a Chinese city, this story follows a boy growing up into rights and responsibilities. Chinese culture is well represented; the built-in problems of generation gaps, marriage, and trade are not avoided. The book has fairly simple language, an excellent glossary, and an appendix.

Finally, in 1934, a biography was given the award. Invincible Louisa is written to show not just fact but also to show why to Louisa May Alcott's character and writings. Cornelia L. Meigs is able to reveal the beauty that came through the fire of sorrows for Miss Alcott. Primarily of interest to girls, this biography is fairly honest in the portrait of Louisa May Alcott.

In 1935 the Newbery award went to Monica Shannon for Dobry. Although a "slow starter" this book is a realistic narrative. Without any violence or badness, the story has nonetheless colorful action. The plot is complimented by grandfather's storytelling and by Bulgarian customs. Again in this book there is emphasis on wisdom, goodness, and, especially for the maturing Dobry, beauty.

Caddie Woodlawn by Carol R. Brink received the award in 1936. Focusing on a personable 12-year-old tomboy, the book touches on human relationships, roles, and self under-

standing. There is a strong American feeling in the Old World inheritance conflict. Compositely the plot is well constructed and believable. The vocabulary is clear and strong.

In 1937 still another story about a girl was given the award. Ruth Sawyer's Roller Skates, set in New York City, relates the adventures of an "orphaned" ten-year-old. There are clashes with vandals, the teacher, and Aunt Emily, as well as escapades with Peter and little Trinket. Death is confronted, and from the acceptance of reality comes the maturing character of not only child but also adults. The book states clearly the opinion that children should be allowed freedom and equality.

In 1938 the committee chose The White Stag by Kate Seredy. White Stag traces with fictitious history the heritage of Attila the Hun. These people are portrayed, not as vicious barbarians, but rather as religious, dedicated individuals who move west following the Stag in search of their Promised Land. In beautiful graphic language, Seredy gives strong character to the Magyar race.

Elizabeth Enright's story of a spunky active nine-and-a-half-year-old received the award in 1939. Thimble Summer covers the short span of "school's out" to the end of the fair before school begins again. Set within the environs of a Minnesota farm community, the plot revolves on relationships with family and friends.

Then in 1940 a biography once more was awarded "the most distinguished contribution." Daniel Boone by James H. Daugherty is beautifully illustrated and entertaining while remaining factual. The author slights Boone's adoption by the Indians. However, he ably presents the armed conflicts without using bloody language.

In 1941 the winning book was Call It Courage by Armstrong Sperry. The story is about a fifteen-year-old boy who, as chief's son, should be a leader among his peers, yet who is afraid of the sea. In fast hard action he overcomes fear to claim his name, Stout Heart. Call It Courage is a book of independence and self-reliance. It is excellently plotted and written.

The Matchlock Gun won in 1942 for author Walter D. Edmonds. A simple story with the moral that obedience assures success. The New York Dutch characters are painted briefly. Because of the multitude of bright pictures and the simple words, this story seems geared for the younger reader.

1943 added Adam of the Road to the prestigious list of Newbery award books. Elizabeth Janet Gray Vining makes the search for dog and parent exciting in this story of a young minstrel's adventures. A great story, it holds the reader's attention without didacticism or contrivances. The life of medieval minstrels is tied with pieces of history.

Esther Forbes' story set in the American Revolutionary era, Johnny Tremain, received the 1944 award. Focusing on not merely political developments and social conflicts but primarily on an orphaned boy becoming a man, the book has a plot that follows naturally from the well-developed characterizations. For the most part the language is easy, but the tone of the book and Johnny's age make it more suitable for older readers.

Rabbit Hill by Robert Lawson won in 1945. Both in text and illustration, Lawson portrays the beautiful aspects of people and animals co-existing. The plot is simple enough, but the religious ending makes the book a classic. Still it is a book with humor and verisimilitude.

Lois Lenski received the award in 1946 for Strawberry Girl. In the foreward she states her purpose in writing is: "to present vivid, sympathetic pictures of the real life of different Americans against authentic backgrounds." In the story of Florida crackers, she accomplishes all of the above.

Finally, the 1947 Newbery went to Miss Hickory by Carolyn S. Bailey. The tale of an applewood and hickory nut doll told from her vantage point is unique from Hitty because animals converse with Miss Hickory, and this plot is accomplished virtually without humans. Just an unassuming story with entertainment as purpose and not moralizing, it is of most interest to girls around eight.

COMPARATIVE TABLE

Year	Locale	Duration	Focused Character
1923	England & S. Am	1 year	male
1924	England	5years	male
1925	South America	-----	male
1926	China	-----	male
1927	U.S. (W.)	10-15 years	horse
1928	India & France	5 years	bird
1929	Poland	1 year	male
1930	U.S (E.)	100 years	female
1931	India	1 month	cat
1932	U.S. (W.)	6 months	male
1933	China	18 months	male
1934	U.S. (E.) & Eur.	85 years	female
1935	Bulgaria	1 year	male
1936	U.S. (W.)	1 year	female
1937	U.S. (E.)	1 year	female
1938	Hungary	3 generations	male
1939	U.S. (W.)	3 months	female
1940	U.S. (W.)	100 years	male
1941	Polynesia	3 months	male
1942	U.S. (E.)	1 day	male
1943	England	18 months	male
1944	U.S. (E.)	18 months	male
1945	U.S. (E.)	10 months	rabbit
1946	U.S. (E.)	1 year	female
1947	U.S. (E.)	6 months	female

As the preceding table shows, the stories are set in many different places. Europe is the setting for all or part of eight books; the Asian area five; South America two; and the United States thirteen. Of the thirteen set in the United States, eight are east of the Mississippi. The trend went toward U.S. locales only after 1940.

Time span within the stories ranges from less than a day in The Matchlock Gun to Hitty's one hundred years. The average for all stories is 14 years.

Although women outnumber men as authors 14 to 12, of the focused characters 14 are male, 7 are female, and 4 are animals.

None of the books are excessively physically violent; there are several that have no physical confrontations at all. They are: 1930-32, 1934-35, 1939, and 1947.

The first award book is completely different from all the others. The 1934 and 1940 books are biographies. The 1925 and 1926 books are story collections. Four are animal stories. Two are about dolls. The books from 1924, 1929, 1938, 1942-44 depend on an historical situation.

In conclusion, no trend can be pinpointed except the one toward American settings. Years after the awards were given, these books remain worthy contributions to children's literature.