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Children's literature is a field that is constantly changing and always evolving into something different. One of the wonderful parts of literature is the way that people can interpret and respond to works differently as they filter it through their own lens. A personal connection of some type is essential for a positive response to a piece of literature. Therefore, literature allows people to open up their minds and their hearts to experience emotions through words on a page.

Louise Bernikow wrote, "What is commonly called literary history is actually a record of choices." Many scholars want to think of literary history as an objective and definite thing, but it is primarily a record of the cultural and personal factors which are present during a specific time period. No matter how books are evaluated, there is a subjective side of the process which causes personal choices and opinions to be involved.

People often equate awards with something worthy of value. Awards are given to something extraordinary that is worthy of high value. Usually awards involve a specific set of criteria and list of standards so that the choice is objective. Since the decision is objective and not arbitrary, respect is given to award-winning things as something that has exceeded a list of objective standards. However, children's literature awards are somewhat different.

Children's literature awards are not nearly as objective as they might first seem. Of course they do have the obligatory set of criteria; however they are often quite open-ended and not specific. The criteria used in children's literature awards seem to serve more as a general guideline rather than a set rule. The criteria help to steer an award's committee toward many

books rather than truly sorting through the masses of children's literature to determine what is qualified to be the best.

Before taking this course, I was one of the people who automatically assumed objective excellence in award winning children's literature. It seemed common sense that there must be a specific set of criteria guiding the designation of children's literature award winners. I had thought there was a group of English scholars somewhere who read all of the books published in a year and used the quality of literary elements to determine which one was best. In hindsight it seems slightly naïve to have thought that, but I believe that is the assumption of many Americans who do not consider themselves English scholars or of any value to the technical side of the field of children's literature. However, as I began to think more seriously I realized that clearly there must be a subjective side to the designation of high-quality literature as people allow themselves to personally relate with the story or words.

One such example of the subjectivity within children's literature awards is the Newbery medal which is given to the best children's book written in a particular year. This award is quite prestigious and considered to help determine books in many popular school curriculums. However, it is not nearly as commonly known that in actuality there are very few criteria for the Newbery medal. The criteria are generic and general, not leading the award committee towards any particular type of book.

However, it is interesting to consider that while the criteria for the Newbery medal are not specific, many of the award-winning books seem to be similar in their characters and plot. Why is it that many of the Newbery medal award-winning books seem to be similarly written? If an award is truly given to the best children's book of the year, then it certainly should be varied considering the variety within the large amount of children's books published in a certain

year. I think this is an excellent example of the idea of literary history as a series of choices. The Newbery committee must make choices based on personal opinion and the precedent of previously chosen Newbery-winning books. It is possible that using the precedent of previously chosen winners could account for the similarity of Newbery winning books.

That makes a person begin to wonder if Newbery award winners are really worthy of the honor or just chosen based on their similarity to past winners. During this class I had the chance to read two Newbery winning novels. The first novel I read which had also won the Coretta Scott King award was *Bud, Not Buddy*. I found this book to be excellent in my eyes as a book that was interesting, yet historically accurate and informative. I was not surprised that it had won two awards, yet it also fit the claimed Newbery stereotype as well.

As I evaluated the list of winners and considered the books I have read, the stereotype does seem to fit. Many of the award winners involve a male character who must do some type of soul-searching. There are also many books which involve either fantasy or adventure. However, there are books which do not fit the stereotype and seem to stick out in the list of winners including *Joyful Noise: Poems for Two Voices*, 1989 award winner and *Lincoln: A Photobiography*, 1988 award winner. I think this is more evidence towards the earlier quote about literary history being a series of choices.

While there are important and well-known children's literature awards like the Newbery and Caldecott awards, there are also many smaller, lesser-known awards which seem to be much more focused and specific in their criteria. The fact that some awards have gained much prestige and others are much less well-known is an important issue to consider when evaluating children's literature. In my experiences during this class, I found the smaller awards to be just as important in finding quality children's literature as the more well-known awards. I appreciated

that I could use the smaller awards to find more specific lists of books addressing a specific topic. In my opinion this topic differentiation is very helpful for professional teachers. By knowing the smaller awards and their topical focuses, it can help teachers to find excellent books for their classrooms more quickly and effectively.

Specific awards such as the Schneider Family award for books about children with disabilities or the Sydney Taylor book award for books accurately portraying the Jewish faith are much less-popular among average people, yet their specific criteria for winners helps to create a more accurate and focused set of books. Teachers and others interested in children's literature can pinpoint the goals and themes within books which have won this specific award. This helps teachers to be able to use awards more appropriately and creates a use for awards other than simply individual recognition.

During this class, I appreciated the chance to explore both the well-known and lesser-known awards in children's literature. As we researched and learned about six smaller awards, I was struck at the irony that those awards were more objective than the big awards such as the Newbery or Caldecott. This was certainly not what I had expected and I gained a respect for those awards which I had not known prior to our study. Previously, I had thought that the plethora of smaller awards made them less prestigious and therefore less important. However, what I learned was that the objective focus and smaller amount of qualified literature makes these awards just as important and prestigious as the Newbery or the Caldecott.

For example, knowing that a book won the Sydney Taylor book awards would help the reader to know that the book is an excellent representation of the accuracy and authenticity of the Jewish faith. These smaller awards help to pinpoint books better by their themes and characteristics. Also, these awards are not necessarily less prestigious simply because they draw

from a smaller number of books. In contrast, these awards might actually be better because they have a more specific purpose and intent backing up their book selection.

In the end, when considering children's literature awards, the result is a list of personal choices chosen subjectively by the individual opinions of members of the award committee. Personal choice and opinion plays a major role in children's literature awards either in choosing winning books or writing criteria for a new award. Literature evaluation is a matter that takes the heart along with the mind. The reality of literature evaluation is that people have personal connections with a piece of literature which can entirely change their attitude and mindset towards that piece.

As we began the second module of this class, we began to evaluate and discuss classics of children's literature. When creating our personal list of classics, I realized how difficult literature evaluation can be. There are many great books and choosing only five was a daunting task to say the least. There are so many elements to consider in literature evaluation and it was a struggle to separate the quality of literary elements from my personal attraction to certain books. In some ways, we as students were able to experience the internal struggle of award committee members. In the end of that assignment I had to come to a compromise between books that I enjoyed personally and books that I knew contained high-quality literary elements exemplified at a child's level.

The novel which we evaluated in our classics module was *Little Women*. In many ways the novel seemed similar to the award-winning books which we had studied earlier. Again, this brought up the point of people's personal connection when evaluating a book. So much of our opinions and feelings towards a book are based upon the personal connections which we have made. This was expressed many times in our discussion forum and seemed to be a theme

throughout the entire course. People make decisions or choices about a book's quality based upon their personal experiences while reading and their personal connection with the characters.

In my life, *Little Women* was an excellent example of the power of personal experience while reading a book. *Little Women* was a book in which I had never been interested nor had any desire to read. I never thought much of the book because I had not connected with it. I remembered watching the movie as a child and finding it boring; therefore, I never even attempted to read the book. Yet as I read the book for this class, I felt myself being drawn into the story. My personal connection with the story was being developed and I began wanting to read more. My opinion and thoughts about the book changed significantly after having the positive experience of reading it fully during this class.

Along with the literary choices made by a personal connection with the story, there is also a choice made by the culture and time period during which a book is evaluated. This was evident in our evaluation of the scholarship surrounding *Little Women*. It was interesting to see how the attitudes towards the novel changed as the time period progressed. The cultural norms of society during a particular time period played a huge role in the popularity of the novel. The way that people felt towards women's roles and their place in society played a large part in how the novel was understood and interpreted.

When reading a novel, it is important to consider when the book was written and the societal expectations or norms during that time period. Books will often reflect society and therefore to fully understand a writer's intentions, the reader must understand society during the time it was written. To some degree, books can be considered a historical record of society and people's thoughts during a certain time. The author makes choices of what and how to write based upon the society in which he or she is living. Therefore, literary records are certainly a

record of choices in relation to culture and society. They show choices of either what was considered appropriate or a representation of the author's ideal of society. However, either way there is a tremendous amount of choices and personal decisions which must be made prior to an author's finished piece of literature.

Watching the two different movies of *Little Women* was another example of the consideration of the time period surrounding literary evaluation. The two movies were based upon the same novel, yet each portrayed a very different viewpoint and overarching theme. The 1933 version of *Little Women* was a more factual and event-based representation of the book. The filmmaker seemed to design his movie as a series of events with few connections. In contrast, the 1994 version of the film seemed to take a more focused viewpoint on the theme of romance through the novel. The events from the novel chosen to be included in this movie all developed the theme of romance. While this was a definite theme in Alcott's book, it was less developed than the movie portrayed and some of the other elements of family and sibling rivalry were missed.

It was clear while watching these movies, that each filmmaker made choices about which pieces from the novel to include based on culture and society during that time. Romance was less accepted, especially in the visual arts during the 1930's, but by 1994 it was expected and needed to be somewhat larger than life. However neither movie was an exactly accurate representation of Alcott's novel written in 1869. I believe that most of the reason for this is cultural expectations.

Authors and filmmakers must both write or design something that people will enjoy. Therefore, they must make choices based on what the surrounding people in society would want to read or see. Cultural and societal expectations unmistakably play a role in literary decisions.

Whether it is a classic chosen by popular opinion or an award-winning book chosen by a professionally qualified committee, choices play a rather significant role in the final decisions.

This all brings it back to the original quote by Louise Bernikow that, “What is commonly called literary history is actually a record of choices.” Whether discussing literary award winning novels or children’s books considered to be classics, there is a tremendous amount of choices which are involved. There are many choices in literary evaluation based on personal opinions, but there are also cultural factors which must be considered. Literary history can show us much about culture, society, and personal thoughts based upon the choices and decisions which were made in the evaluations.