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12.1 Final Paper

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

--Louise Bernikow

When I began the journey of TE 836 in January, I was looking forward to learning about the great children literature that teachers and literature critics had deemed "quality." I wanted to be able to learn about these pieces, analyze them, and apply them to my own teaching experience. I thought, without a doubt, that if a book had received an award, it must be a highly regarded text with elements that authors strive to include in their writing. I thought that if a book was considered a "classic," and if I didn't care for it, then it was just too old or dated for me to understand. All of that changed through the readings, discussions, and writing assignments I took part in this semester. I now understand that awards are given out through a process in which only a few people get to choose the winning books. Even then, there are several awards that seem to be hardly spoken of in the teaching profession, other than the Newbery and Caldecott Awards, and those books fall under the same circumstances of being chosen by a committee. "Classic" books were the most surprising to me; I always thought that classics were simply old and boring, when in actuality, classics are deemed "classics" by those who read them and keep going back to them. So therefore, maybe the so-called "classics" that I disliked as a child and as an adult are just not "classics" to me!

Bernikow's quote strikes a chord with me, especially when thinking about the first assignment of our course. We were assigned to discuss what makes a "good" book, and to think about the best books we ever read. I had decided on the best book I had read as a child: *The Pain and the Great One* by Judy Blume. This book was a story that my mom and dad read to me over and over again, and the storyline was close to my heart, because it was about an older sister and younger brother who just can't seem to get along. I was the older sister in real life, with the younger brother, and we couldn't get along. I connected with this book on so many levels and read it to my own students each year. To me, this is the best book because of my own experiences. However, in reading all of our classmates' responses to the same prompt, I realized that opinion really does matter in choosing a favorite book of all time. What goes into our choices of the best books we've ever read are things like life experience, text connections, author style, illustrations, and so much more. Some classmates described their favorite book as a book that I totally disliked as a child. One person's "literary history" is based on all of the choices they made as a child of what to read, what not to read, and whether or not the person actually enjoyed his or her reading of the book at hand.

When we moved into the second week of the course and began studying the several different children's literature awards, I was amazed at the quantity of them. It was actually pleasing to learn that so many different cultures and special needs groups

were getting their voice heard by nominating and handing out awards for different reasons. This opened up my perspective on awards from the moment we began studying awards. My group researched the Schneider Family Award, which is given to books that artistically demonstrate the disability experience. It was while researching this award that I read an amazing book, *Becoming Naomi Leon* by Pam Munoz Ryan. It was because I could make a choice on what book I wanted to read for this assignment that I was opened up to a wonderful piece of literature that discusses such topics as physical disabilities, mental disabilities, cultural recognition, and finding out who one really is, deep down. I found that as I researched the Schneider Family Award, and read books that had won the Coretta Scott King Award and the Pura Belpre Award, that I enjoyed the books that won for their text, more so than the books that won for their illustrations. I got more out of reading the words and making sense of the story, whereas the illustrations may not have provided as deep of a story as I would have liked.

I also had a chance to learn about other awards given based on different genre requirements, ethnicities, and cultures. These different awards inspired me to think of how I could incorporate them into my classroom. It would be a great experience for my students to work in their literature groups to research an award, read some books that have been nominated and/or have won the award, and present them to the class, sort of like we did in our discussion forums. Students at fourth grade could also discuss the importance of award-giving for children's literature, as well as debate whether they agree or disagree with the process of handing out awards, and whether or not they agree that the books they read were deserving of winning. After all, whether or not a book deserves an award, as we found, is based on a committee's opinion, not a public vote by all teachers, all parents, and all children. It would also be engaging and exciting for students to create a classroom award for different books, list criteria for being nominated, and choose winners each marking period or so. This would give them the experience of being on the "other side" of literature awards, and help them understand that just because a book won an award, does not mean that they always agree with it. It would also help students become more engaged in reading a variety of books, and therefore, become more critical readers.

Perhaps the most eye-opening experience for me was the week we studied the Newbery Award. I started by reading *The Secret of the Andes* by Ann Nolan Clark, which was written in 1952. To be honest, I fell asleep more than once while reading the story. The descriptions of the boy and his mentor in the Andes Mountains were far from descriptive enough. The style of writing was dry, and the dialogue between the boy and other characters was boring and seemed unrealistically simple. After discussing this novel with my group mates, we were somewhat divided on this novel, which actually *won* the Newbery Award that year. Some group members thought the story was beautifully written, while others, including myself, did not see how it could have won an award. Several ideas were thrown into our discussion: maybe it was during a time when people were curious about other cultures, maybe it could be used while studying ancient native cultures, and so on.

What really changed my perspective on awards was reading *Charlotte's Web*, the runner-up to *The Secret of the Andes* for the Newbery Award in the exact same year. Here was an engaging book, where I could make connections, smile, laugh, and cry, all while reading it. I felt like I couldn't put this book down, which was a significant difference between the way I read the first book and this one. I was emotionally involved in the story, and although it had a simple setting, simple problem, and a somewhat childish feel to it, I still consider it a better read than *The Secret of the Andes* simply because it is a book that more people would enjoy. The quote that this paper is based around only is further supported when thinking about my group's discussion, as well as the discussion forums that we read debating the same exact two novels. Some people did agree that *The Secret of the Andes* was the clear winner, while most people were stunned and upset that *Charlotte's Web* did not win the Newbery Award. Again, the committee that year, the situations occurring at that time, and other things, I'm sure, all contributed to who won the award. It was their choice, but we can certainly disagree!

The lesson I learned through researching the Newbery Award by reading the two novels discussed above was probably what changed my perspective the most on award-winning books. The opinions I have of the two novels are what I will base the way I discuss award winners with my students on, because I found that in this scenario, the actual winner was not better than the runner-up, in my opinion. I will strive to let my students see for themselves who they think the winner should have been, and what level of quality other books are when compared to the winner.

I enjoyed the Caldecott Award week because I had previously not studied children's literature illustrations. Being a teacher of fourth grade, I do not usually spend a lot of time helping my students pick out picture books to read, and instead focus more on chapter books. I was able to analyze different parts of illustrated children's literature that I had never known about, such as full-page spreads, bleeds, and so on. However, I again noticed a common theme with award winners: it is all a matter of who is deciding on the winner. We read *The Ugly Duckling* storybook that won the Caldecott Award. After, we read a different version that had not won the award. I found that I enjoyed the second book's illustrations better because they were more serene and calming, but I was the only one in my group who felt that way. Again, I saw how one's own opinion is the biggest determining factor in whether or not they think a book should win an award. Like many things in life, getting everyone to come to an agreement is not easy, and will probably never happen.

Moving on from awards, we began to think about what we think of as a "classic" of children's literature. Immediately, I thought of picture books that I spent time reading as a child, like the aforementioned *The Pain and the Great One* by Judy Blume, and *Green Eggs and Ham* by Dr. Seuss. I think of classics as books that hold sentimental meaning to me from my childhood, and books that I have revisited since my first reading. Many of these books are older books that remain in the hands of children to this day, because their stories are meaningful and their themes may be timeless. However, after our class list of "classics" was posted, I was surprised to

see books like *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* by J.K. Rowling on it. Don't get me wrong; I am an avid *Harry Potter* fan! I just did not think about a "newer" book begin considered a "classic" already. I should have taken this to be a preview of what I would learn in the classics module, but did not begin to think more deeply about classics in this way until later.

We began reading classics by reading *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* by Beatrix Potter. This came after a discussion with team members about what designates a book "a classic." We decided that the book has a timeless message, can be read again and again, holds sentimental meaning, and has been adapted in several ways by society today. *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* is a "cute" story where Peter Rabbit learns the lesson to follow his mother's directions. I find that this is probably a universal theme that parents around the world might want their children to learn. However, I know that some people dislike the theme of the story and do not find it worthy of the "classic" label. Again, literary history is a matter of choices!

Next, we read the long, grueling novel *Little Women*. This story had several themes that people can probably connect to. I did not really enjoy this story, to be honest. I found that it was overdone, too lengthy, and hard to connect to for a reader in 2012. I can see how the themes can be easily understood and used by a woman of this time, such as poverty vs. wealth and female empowerment, but also can see how not every reader will appreciate them. For example, we read different scholarship written about *Little Women* in our groups. One male writer knew other men who did not appreciate the story, because it was all about girls and their life events. I can understand where he is coming from because I do not like certain books that I consider "boy books," as I'm sure other women would agree. Several of my male students are currently reading the *Percy Jackson* series, which I'm sure is a quality series to read, but it doesn't interest me to begin this because of my preconceptions about it being a "boy series." This book was chosen by a certain generation to be deemed as a "classic" based on the time it was written, its characters and their personalities, and so on.

What I really liked about the "classics" module was how we were able to compare a "classic" book with film adaptations. I think that this was a valuable critical thinking exercise. I had not previously had to watch a film, make note of differences between not only it and the book, but also differences between two different film adaptations. I was able to think more deeply about the novel itself, and critically think about why or why not the different directors included certain scenes from the novel into each film. This is an activity I long to try with my own students. I am sure that teachers already do this activity with many different novels, such as *Holes* by Louis Sachar or *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* by J.K. Rowling. By giving students something to focus on while watching a film, we can ensure that they will take part in a learning experience while watching the film.

I was surprised at how many similarities and differences I found between the two *Little Women* films, and found that I liked the newer one better! First, it included

more important character development scenes, such as Jo and Laurie helping Amy get out of the broken ice (we learn that Jo is compassionate toward her younger sister and apologetic for being angry at her earlier), and we see more of Amy in Europe, exploring her artistic passions. Again, I think of the Bernikow quote from earlier: my learning history of children's literature is again a collection of choices. I would consider the second *Little Women* film to be more quality than the first, but perhaps others would disagree.

In the last two weeks, we have participated in discussion groups in which my group and I read and discussed two novels: *The Wind in the Willows* by Kenneth Grahame, and *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* by Robert C. O'Brien. *The Wind in the Willows* was chosen as a "classic," whereas *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* was the winner of the 1972 Newbery Award. Through reading and discussion using our literature discussion roles, my group and I took part in a meaningful learning experience. I think that after reading and posting our initial papers, we had a more meaningful and interesting conversation surrounding the second novel, the award winner. I found that I enjoyed *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* much more because of its quicker pace, more controversial themes, and ease of connecting to its characters. We discussed such themes as animals and science, the importance of "home," and friendship with both novels.

Many people consider The Wind in the Willows a "classic". In my opinion, however, I found it to be dry and somewhat boring. The animals were of course heartwarming characters, especially Mole, Rat, and Badger. However, I became frustrated with the character of Mr. Toad because of his incessant obsession with motorcars and trickery. I'm sure Grahame intended this characterization through the events that Toad participates in throughout the story. The theme of "home" is present throughout the story through Mole leaving his home to live with Rat and then missing it later, Badger's home being a refuge for weary travelers through the Wild Wood, and Toad losing and gaining his home back. However, I just didn't have the interest in this story. If I think about the criteria for a book to be a "classic" to me, I think about how I would not return to this book to read it again.

However, I do see the benefits of pairing an award winner with a "classic" in my own classroom. My students could easily debate the notion of "classic" and award books after reading a pair. We could also watch the film adaptations of each novel and compare the novels to the films. Students could easily take on the roles we took on in literature discussion groups, and later transfer those roles into film discussion group roles. It would be an exciting and engaging way for students to get involved in their reading and viewing skills, all while helping them analyze and synthesize the texts and their preconceived labels of "award" and "classic."

Overall, the experience of TE 836 has definitely helped me to see that just because a book is labeled as an award-winning book, or a "classic" of children's literature, does not mean I should accept those labels with no questions asked. It is important for a teacher, parent, and even children themselves to experience these books firsthand

to make their own opinion on whether or not the books are quality pieces of literature. This is not to say that all award-winning books and all “classics” are not fantastic books! However, each reader must decide this on his/her own after reading and thinking about the text. Sometimes, a film adaptation, discussion with peers, or scholarship surrounding a particular book will help reaffirm one’s opinion, as well. My “literary history” will be different from the next person’s, because of my own experiences and choices I have made throughout my reading life. I can take what I have learned about awards and “classics” this semester, use them to make more choices, and help my students to see this through their own exploration of children’s literature, too.