

ENOUGH IS ENOUGH! TIME TO RETHINK THE PRESTIGE OF THE NEWBERY MEDAL



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“I want to get big too and ride the bus just like the boy did,” my three-year-old son said as I closed the book we were reading, *Last Stop on Market Street*, by the 2016 *Newbery Medal* winning author Peña and *Caldecott* winning illustrator Robinson. As a classroom teacher and Reading Specialist, I frequently used and even recommended award-winning texts, like the Newbery Medal, with my students and colleagues. I can even admit to making a hurried selection in the bookroom, reaching for the medal winner over a non-medal winner with the assumption *it must be good, it won something!*

My son’s comment claiming he wanted to be just like the character, stopped me dead in my tracks. If teachers and parents are relying on medals, specifically the *Newbery Medal*, a historically debated award (Kidd, 2007; Maugh, 2014; Bittner & Superle, 2017); then what do we know about this *Newbery Medal* (here-to-for referred to as *Newbery*) and the messages it sends to the intended audience, our children? To answer this question, I have provided an overview analyzing the history and debates surrounding the *Newbery*. I then see if the findings from the literature review reign true by analyzing themes in the 1950s and 2000s *Newbery* winners. These decades were selected because a) The fifty year gap in analysis offers a significant amount of time that is close enough to present day to see if the criticisms of the award remain true; and b) These decades were of particular interest because of the timeliness of the children who read them: Children who grew up in the 1950s reading the winning texts are now leaders in America today, while children from the 2010s will be the next generation of leaders.

A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Winning a *Newbery* is not just a one-time honor, but also serves as a lifetime of recognition in schools, libraries and bookstores. Although the *Newbery*, like the *Caldecott*, does not reward authors with money, it has been shown to increase sales when compared to other prized texts and children’s literature (Ventura, 2017; Kidd, 2017). Winning the medal not only establishes the text as a part of a canon of children’s literature, it guarantees a longevity that exceeds other texts

in libraries and schools (Ventura, 2017; Kidd, 2017). I begin by providing an overview of the history and research about the Newbery.

JOHN NEWBERY

Founded by Frederic Melcher in the 1920s (Bittner & Superle, 2017), the *Newbery’s* intent was and is to award children’s literature representing American literature. Melcher named the medal after John Newbery, “often dubbed the father of children’s literature” (Kidd, 2007, p.40). The medal is considered the second most popular literature prize, second to the *Pulitzer* (Kidd, 2007). Selected by a committee, the medal’s purpose and qualifications are stated here:

Encourage original creative work in the field of work for children. The qualifications of the award include: 1) Must be a form of nonfiction, poetry, or play that represents American Literature; 2) Must be a contribution to American Literature for children... in which children are the intended potential audience; and 3) Must be distinguished including by significant achievement, quality, and excellence (ALSC, 2019).

Other details, including the author being a resident of the United States, are also considered (ALSC, 2019). The committee evaluates a theme, examines story elements including the characters, setting, and plot, and considers the text style. No other details are provided.

DEBATES SURROUNDING THE NEWBERY

Earning the *Newbery*, while an honor on one hand, has been argued by others as a way to sift through what is really American literature (Kidd, 2007). This is not a surprise as prized texts (in general) have been criticized for their narrow selections, often leaving out representations of cultures besides the dominate Western Culture (Ventura, 2017). Literary texts affirm the current values of the culture surrounding it (Eliot, 1919), which is really then acting as an enacted curriculum, carrying out messages that are reflective of current socio-culture practices and beliefs (Gershon, 2017; Flinders et al., 1986). While it is no secret that published literature often contains hidden agendas, or a hidden curriculum (Apple, 1971; Gershon, 2017), the *Newbery* is given to children’s

literature. Adults are awarding the texts, and children are relying, in most cases, on adults to make text selections for them (McNeil, 2017).

Many children's literature advocates reported issues with prizing a text. Some argue that prizing is biased when done by a single group of individuals (Bittner & Superle, 2017); others criticize the award's qualifications, or lack thereof (Murphy, 2017; Kidd 2007; Kidd 2017). The committee for selecting the *Newbery*, which has followed the same qualifications with few changes since the 1920s, is comprised of 15 librarians, "Seven of which are elected by the general membership, as is the Chair, who appoints the other seven" (Kidd, 2007, p. 41). The committee established the guidelines for winning the *Newbery* award as excellent American literature (ALSC, 2019); but does not clearly define what "excellence" nor "American literature" mean. Murphy (2017) contended the *Newbery* leaves out explanations of socio-cultural, race, or ethnic background. Bittner and Superle (2017) found the medal to have limited, if any, representation of feminism, queer, or post-colonial literacy. Excellence then, an undefined term, is secretly defined by the committee.

The committee formation and lack of definition for the award is not the only troubling issue with the *Newbery* (Kidd 2017). Authors themselves feed into the cycle of prizing by wanting and even needing a prize to guarantee book sales and a long-term shelf life. Often, winning a prize can be a career boost after years of unrecognition with limited book sales (Kidd, 2017). Compromising a lifetime of fame is unlikely is enough reason for authors to remain silent over the debates of the *Newbery*.

The *Newbery* has been argued to contribute to the canon wars (Bittner & Superle; Ventura, 2017). The canon of literature though was not started by the *Newbery* itself, as canons have existed for quite some time (Kliebard, 1970), even beginning in the early 1900s as a way to separate literature for children of certain races and classes (Bobbit, 1909). Beginning in the 1920s, librarians in the United States were seen as facilitators establishing a canon of literature. Working with book publishing companies, they weeded what would or would not be allowed into the library for children to read (Lundin, 2004; Kidd 2007). In this same decade, librarians lobbied to increase authentic literature in school systems in order to broaden then current curricular materials (Kidd, 2007). This change began a transition from the *McGuffey Readers* of the 1800s to basal readers that flourished in the 1960s (Deford & Klein, 2008). Books awarded and stamped with the *Newbery* became quality literature recommended for use in school systems. Having the award meant and continues to mean that these books are in the hands of readers who frequent the library and in the hands of public-school children nationwide (Kidd, 2007).

A HISTORY OF DISTURBANCES

It is no secret that the *Newbery* has faced accusations for using undefinable criterion (Breed, 1942; Kidd, 2007; Bittner & Superle, 2017; Lathey, 2018). In a recent content analysis, Lathey (2018) investigated themes in *Newbery* winners from 2005- 2018. He found little to no representation of lower- or working-class families, and instead high representations of middle-class families. Other studies (Kidd, 2007) reported and criticized the *Newbery* for not representing race accurately. Kidd (2007) found limited and questionable representations of race, such as Elizabeth Yates's (1951) *Newbery* winner, *Amos Fortune, Free Man*, a text about a slave that not only downplays slavery, but also states that the slave is better off in America. It wasn't until 19 years later that another text, *Sounder* (Armstrong, 1969), addressed African American life. Its author was also white (Kidd, 2007).

If educators, parents, curriculum writers and even children are choosing these winning American literature texts, it is most important to know the criteria for prizing the texts. Therefore, my research examines the thematic messages in specific texts in an attempt to put the historical debate of the *Newbery* to rest: Does the *Newbery* promote gender stereotypes and white, Christian, Western Civilized norms?

METHODOLOGY

Content analysis was used to analyze several *Newbery* winners. Content analysis is defined as a "research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts" (Krippendorff, 2004, p.18) and is used to infer messages upon analysis of a text's content (White & Marsh, 2006). Every other text was chosen from the 1950s (1950, 1952, 1954, etc.) and the 2000s. These decades were selected for two critical reasons: 1) The time between both decades, an equal fifty years, is ample enough to see what themes remain consistent or inconsistent; and 2) Children who read texts from the 1950s are now adults in established careers with authoritative positions; readers of the 2010s' texts are the next generation of leaders.

Data collection involved coding messages present in each text. The coded messages were then categorized into themes of *gender roles*, *race*, *religion*, *socio economic status*, *family*, and *education*. Only the first three themes are reported in this manuscript. Table 1 provides the questions that guided the content analysis for each theme.

Table 1.
Defined Themes Used During the Newbery Content Analysis

Theme	Analytic Questions
Gender Roles	What gender roles are seen in the texts and are they considered stereotypical? Specifically, are men seen doing masculine work while women are taking on traditional roles including domestic chores or housework and nurturing children? Are both men and women working? Do children participate in tasks that are gender-stereotyped? What future roles are modeled for children or explicitly stated as expectations for their future?
Race	What races are revealed in the winning texts? Is it representative of the melting pot of American, meaning are there a variety of Caucasian, African-Americans, Latinos, Asians, etc.? Or, is there a biased representation of race? And, are the races seen in stereotypical manner, even a negative one? For example, are Caucasian characters seen as educated while African American uneducated and lower class?
Religion	Is organized religion present in the Newbery winners? Are characters attending church, praying, mentioning the Christian God or other spiritual beings or spiritual traditions? If religion is found, is there a common one presented in the texts?

Analyzing gender roles, race, and religion representations required further examination into the explicit and hidden curriculum of the texts. My findings explain the explicit curriculum of the selected prized texts, or what transparent messages are found within the text (Eisner, 1985; Flinders et al., 1986). The historical and current concepts surrounding the themes selected then explore if there is indeed a hidden curriculum, or what is implied but not always talked about (Apple, 1971) in the books. Through this analysis, conclusions are then drawn about the sociocultural norms and values represented within the texts that are reflective of the society of which they are a part (Gershon, 2018; Flinders et al., 1986).

FINDINGS

Table 2 lists the books analyzed. Each book title is shortened in the following discussions.

Table 2.
Newbery Winning Texts Analyzed from the 1950s and 2000s

Title	Author	Year Awarded	Shortened Title
<i>The Door in the Wall</i>	Angeli, M.	1950	<i>Wall</i>
<i>Ginger Pye</i>	Estes, E.	1952	<i>Ginger Pye</i>
<i>....and Now Miguel</i>	Krumgold, J.	1954	<i>Miguel</i>
<i>Carry on, Mr. Bowditch</i>	Latham, J. L.	1956	<i>Mr. Bowditch</i>
<i>Rifles for Watie</i>	Keith, H.	1958	<i>Watie</i>
<i>Bud, Not Buddy</i>	Curtis, C.P.	2000	<i>Bud</i>
<i>A Single Shard</i>	Park, L.S.	2002	<i>Shard</i>
<i>The Tale of Despereaux</i>	DiCamillo, K.	2004	<i>Despereaux</i>
<i>Criss Cross</i>	Perkins, L.	2006	<i>Criss Cross</i>
<i>Good Masters! Sweet Ladies!</i> <i>Voices from a Medieval Village</i>	Schlitz, L.A.	2008	<i>Medieval Village</i>

GENDER ROLES

The first theme examined gender roles and whether gender was portrayed in stereotypical ways. A stereotype by definition is grouping individuals together based on ostensible characteristics (Robles & Kurylo, 2017). Stereotypes by gender can be classified with two binary definitions: a) Women are seen as nurturing caregivers of their families, and b) Men are seen as masculine, powerful, unemotional, and providers of their family (Prentice & Carranza, 2002). Stereotypes are not a new paradigm; many researchers have spent time examining and criticizing them (Robles & Kurylo, 2017; Cox & Devine, 2015).

Robles and Kurylo (2017) explained that stereotypes are the result of social interactions. That is, through one's discourse, both speaking and writing, a construction of gender stereotypes begins. Role congruity theory and social role theory explain further that hearing and reading these constructs creates a trickle-down effect: We read the message, we start thinking about

these ideas, and this potentially shapes our beliefs about other people (Ruce & Barth, 2016). While it could be argued that it is hard to prove if one truly is affected by what they hear and read, current research supports that gender stereotypes persist today in hiring, promotion, and salary between men and women (Rice & Barth, 2016), and even the types of jobs women vs. men apply for and get (Weisgram, Bigler, & Liben, 2010). The present-day existence of stereotypes, suggesting they are alive and well, calls us to examine gender roles in the literature our children are reading, specifically award-winning texts like the *Newbery*, that could potentially shape readers' minds.

The 1950s and 2000s' *Newbery* winners had similarly stereotyped male and female roles. When both male and female characters were present in the 1950s' *Newbery* winners, men were authoritative and dominant figures while women were nurturing, feminine, and passive. In *Mr. Bowditch*, the youngest daughter Lizza stated that she would help bring firewood to the house, until her Grandmother stopped her and said it's "a man's job." Later in the same text, when the main character Nat walked into the house to deliver news about going away to war, his brothers were found studying while the girls were "sitting pretty and knitting their own socks" (Latham, 1955, p. 62). The women in this decade were often portrayed as uneducated females whose purpose in life was to find true love, make a man happy and perform domestic tasks. For example, in *Miguel*, the mother's duty was preparing meals for the men. She also waited until the men finished eating to enjoy her own dinner. The discourse and narration of the discourse between female and male characters stressed inequality among genders, and even subservient roles, as seen in the *Wall* when a wife responds to her husband, "'Yes, my husband,' Lady Constance said obediently" (Angeli, 1949, p. 84).

In the 2000s' winners, men were frequently seen as masculine, dominant over the women, and responsible for family finances. In *Despereaux*, the princess waited helplessly to be rescued by the strong, decision-making male king. Women were typically nurturing and participated in gender specific tasks, like the potter's wife in *Shard* preparing meals for the working men. Women, like Debbie in *Criss Cross*, assumed they could not perform masculine roles such as driving a stick-shift truck when a male friend offered to teach her. When she did successfully drive the truck, she compared it to working the pedal on a sewing machine.

The common theme revealed in both decades suggested that women remain nurturing-caregivers whose responsibility was to ensure their husbands and children were happy, while leaving the hard, physical work up to the men.

Race

Racial identity wars are both a historical and current conflict in America (Schlesinger, 1998; Asante 1998; Wil-

lis, 2015; Whitehead et al., 2018; Kinloch & Penn, 2019). Schlesinger (1998) argued that America really consists of one race which has been upheld by the promotion of one language, one type of education (Apple, 1971; Schlesinger, 1998; Gershon, 2012), and one perspective of history taught in schools (Willis, 2015). Malcom X said it best: "Being born here in America doesn't make you American" (Malcom X & Breitman, 1966, n.p.). Malcom X's statement supports Schlesinger (1998), Asante (1998), Willis (2015), and more recently Whitehead et al. (2018) and Kinloch and Penn's (2019) claim that America runs on Western Civilized ideologies with one race in mind.

The argument of who is human and who is not human remains unresolved (Kinloch & Penn, 2019; Snaza, 2019; Beliso-De Jesús, 2018). Some feel more than ever before, white supremacy is on the rise (Whitehead et al., 2018; Beliso-De Jesús, 2018). Historically, it can be argued that white supremacy began during slavery, when Caucasians needed a clear distinction between what is and is not human, dependent on skin color and the binary of who was educated and who was not (Snaza, 2019; Willis, 2015). The fear of becoming a white slave (Beliso-De Jesús, 2018), was enough to fuel white supremacy. If America has been fighting a long battle of racism and equality, then a critical look into representations of race in children's literature is essential, specifically literature prized by the *Newbery* as representing American values.

In the 1950s' *Newbery* winners studied, only *Wattie* featured an African American family, living during Abraham's Lincoln's presidency while the United States was a divided nation. The main character, Jeff, was caught between fighting on both sides of the war, while also having a romantic relationship with a Cherokee Indian. Jeff ultimately joined the army to fight for the nation as opposed to remaining on "his side." Similarly, although *Miguel* told a story of a Hispanic family, the plot followed a familiar Caucasian pathway when his brother was drafted to the army at first unwillingly, but ultimately became happy by justifying it would allow him to see the world. *Wall*, *Ginger Pye* and *Mr. Bowditch* were stories depicting only Caucasian people.

Although the 1950s' winners then *did* show diversity in all 5 texts including African American, Native American, Caucasian and Hispanic characters, the plots aligned with what Sims (1982) referred to as a melting pot category: There were racial representations, but beliefs, behaviors and thoughts more closely followed white culture.

Criss Cross and *Medieval Village*, 2000s winners, featured Caucasians while *Despereaux* included fictional personified characters of mice and rats. *Bud* was the only text featuring an African American by skin color, although it appeared his actions or words did not usually align with racial

representations. Like the 1950s, the 2000s' winners again took a melting pot approach; the texts included characters of color and race is mentioned but not necessarily represented (Sims, 1982). *Shards* broke the cycle of underrepresentation of accurate racial representations. It was set in Korea with Korean characters and included cultural representations of Korean identity including both apprenticeship paths to master craftsmanship and the important role pottery plays in Korean culture and history.

Newbery characters' race representations could be considered somewhat diverse. Out of the 10 books, 50% centered on Caucasian characters. Two books included African American characters, 1 represented Koreans, and 1 book portrayed Hispanic. Although other racial groups besides Caucasians were represented, the plots that African American and Hispanic children suggested that African American and Hispanic children were not the intended audience for these texts (Simm, 1982). These characters still took on Caucasian characteristics as seen in their discourse and actions. Children, specifically children of color, need to accurately see themselves in the texts in order to relate to the text (Kinloch & Penn, 2017).

Like the 1950s *Newbery* winners, the 2000s' winners included racial diversity using a melting pot approach in 2 of the 5 texts and attempted to place the characters in unique situations not characterized as White more effectively than the 1950s' winners. This lack of accurate, defined racial identity is perpetuating a status quo; in other words, by saying the books are "color blind" while meekly representing diversity, the *Newbery* is supporting a hidden agenda (Apple, 1971) which keeps boundaries within the societal hierarchy of race intact.

RELIGION

Religion, argued by Power and Cook (2017) cannot be studied without recognizing it as an entanglement of a person's gender and identity. In a recent study showing the connection between religion and gender stereotypes, Power and Cook (2017) reported the Christian Bible included many passages promoting women in domestic roles, such as staying home to care for the family, which they contend leads to the conclusion that if someone supports the Christian Bible, that person may also believe in the gender stereotypes portrayed in the Bible. For these reasons it is recommended not to separate gender stereotypes and religion because to understand one is to understand the other (Cole, 2009; Schlosser, 2003).

It is no secret that Western culture is rooted in Christianity (Dawson, 1957; Habib, 2017), and could even be considered another assigned quality to be American in addition to being white (Beliso-De Jesús, 2018). Although many religions (i.e. Judaism, Islamic, Hindu to name a few) live in the U.S., Christianity has been argued to be the law of the land

(Dawson, 1957). Christian Nationalism, rooted in the Old Testament, seeks to maintain a "cultural and blood purity, often through war, conquest, and separatism" (Whitehead et al., 2018, p.150). Christian Nationalism represented in *Newbery* winners promotes norms and values intended to maintain the status quo, or the cultural and book purity of the land of one American race (Schlesinger, 1998).

Above, I reported that religion is often best understood by also examining the gender stereotypes and race identities it is wrapped in. For the sake of having an unbiased and clear lens, my analysis separated religion to identify what religion or religious trends are present in the *Newbery* winners, even if these simultaneously did also represent race and gender identities.

Organized religion was present in every *Newbery* 1950s' book. *Wall* included many direct messages about the power of prayer. Robin was relieved of illness after praying to God; continual pause for prayer was included while characters partook in daily activities, and there was dialogue about God, such as "God's good time, his sunshine, and the love that is borne thee, are healing" (Angeli, 1949, p.29). The book's last sentence reads "AMEN." in capital letters and large font. Estes's characters attended Sunday School; Miguel gave thanks in prayer to the Lord; and Granny in *Mr. Bowditch* explained rules to her grandson saying, "It isn't Christian to throw out good food" (Latham, 1955, p.59). The only religion referenced in the selected 1950s' *Newbery* winners was Christianity, suggesting that Christianity was not only the preferred religion but essential in shaping the identity of young readers.

Religion was mentioned in 3 out of the 5 2000s' winners. *Shard's* characters celebrated Buddha's birthday and discussed the possibility of an afterlife. Hector and Debbie in *Criss Cross* rationalized that God has a plan for everything and two minor characters, Lenny and Phil, explained the sacrament of Confession. Schlitz's characters celebrated *The Feast of All Soul's Day*, a Christian holiday, and discussed the possibility of a man burning in hell.

Religion was abundant in the *Newbery* winners as seen in 8 of the 10 texts suggesting its importance of inclusion in the winning texts, making religion an enacted curriculum within the texts (Gershon, 2017; Flinders et al., 1986). While the 1950s' religion referenced Christianity, the 2000s attempted to include other religions such as Buddhism. Some kind of spirituality is present in most of the *Newbery* winners, suggesting the *Newbery* Committee members may believe children need a religious compass in order to be American.

CONCLUSION

This study supports that although the *Newbery* has made some adaptations, such as expanding the religion seen in the 2000s to include Buddhism, the prized texts have ultimately

remained consistent with themes in the 1950s. Gender stereotypes were often present with men as providers performing masculine tasks while women were nurturing caregivers. While the *Newbery* winners did attempt to represent different races, the race representations in the texts analyzed were predominately Caucasian or other races taking on Caucasian characteristics.

Unlike other attempts to culturally bridge marginalized groups (Gershon, 2018), I argue the *Newbery* is actually creating a moat between Western Civilization and marginalized groups. The medal hides behind the loose terms of “contribution to American literature” (ASCL, 2019). By failing to define what contributes to *distinguishable* American literature, the *Newbery* has created its own hidden curriculum related to gender, race, and religion that in turn potentially shape the minds, values, and beliefs of the intended audience of children which the ASCL (2019) defines up to age fourteen. Using Kinloch and Penn’s (2019) striking points of conflict today in American society and culture related to race, gender, and sex identity, there were no representations of LGBTQ individuals, mixed families (such as same sex marriages, or alternative traditional “male and female” parental roles), or even an absence of religion in the books. These missing ideas contribute to the null curriculum, or the curriculum absent from the text (Flinders et al., 1986). What is *not* included is just as important as what is included.

Teachers, literacy specialists, parents (myself included in all three of these identities) find canons of literature to be helpful when selecting quality texts for children. Awards like the *Coretta Scott King Award*, *Pura Belpré Medal*, *Batchelder Award* are examples of awards given to texts that establish a firm understanding and diverse representations of identity, which are reflective of the America we live in today. The *Newbery* hides behind a broad definition of terms for an award that appears to be colorblind and not linked to any one identity, which in turn gives leverage to select texts that uphold the status quo: a gender stereotyped, Christian, and white supremacy America. If after fifty years the *Newbery* does not reflect the socio-cultural events and people in the U.S., perhaps it’s time we reconsider the prestige given to the *Newbery Medal*.

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