

WHAT THE CHILDREN CHOSE: AN EXAMINATION OF CHARACTERISTICS IN RECENT AWARD-WINNING CHILDREN'S BOOKS



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IF ELEMENTARY students bestowed the famous American Library Association (ALA) Newbery and Caldecott awards, what books would they choose? Though only a small amount of empirical research has been conducted in the area of children's preferences as compared to adult preferences in children's literature, it is an often-discussed topic in the education and literature fields, particularly in relation to awards (for example, see Campbell, 2003; Davila & Patrick, 2010; Feldman, 2017; Kidd, 2007; Hade, 2002; Liang, 2013; Liang, et al., 2015; Liang, et al., 2017; Nilsen, et al., 1980; Parravano, 1999; Shackford, 1977; Ujii & Krashen, 2006.) It seems to be an accepted issue that what children select to read on their own is not necessarily "the best" of what children's literature offers in terms of literary quality, and that part of the role of children's literature awards is to highlight books with extraordinary literary quality. Criteria for children's book awards often demonstrate this, with guidelines that refer to "literary merit" and "high quality."

Many studies have examined children's reading preferences in terms of genres, topics, and literary elements, but only a few have looked at how these preferences differ from the genres, topics, and literary elements present in what adults select as the "best books" for child readers—those books that adult critics praise through starred reviews or awards—despite this widely perceived mismatch of preferences. It has been forty years since the first set of studies considered these award books and children's preferences: Shackford (1977)

looked at Newbery winners; Karrenbrock (1983) considered the Georgia Children's Book Award lists; and, Nilsen et al., (1980) compared the reviews of adult critics with the popularity rankings for children's books in libraries. Their collective work suggested a distinct difference at the time between "award-winning" or critically acclaimed literature, and "popular" books or those that children chose to read. The differences they discovered mainly focused on book format and literary characteristics.

A decade later, Lehman (1991) took a close look at children's preferences using a small set of books that had won both the Newbery Medal and appeared on the International Literacy Association (ILA) Children's Choices award lists, a list selected by children's votes, as compared to a set of books that had received adult acclaim but that children did not rank as favorable. Lehman noticed differences in characteristics related to literary style and structure between adult-selected and child-selected titles. In 2002, and again in 2006, Ujii and Krashen updated these earlier studies by comparing library check-out records and child best-seller lists to see if differences still existed; they discovered that children were more likely to check out best-seller books over award books, and award books were rarely found on the best-seller lists. They further noted that text complexity of the books did not appear to be a factor for difference, and a unique and significant characteristic of the more popular best-seller books was being part of a series.