Children’s Literature Awards: Why They Matter in an Era of Common Core State Standards

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At 8:00 a.m. on Monday, January 28, many school librarians across the country hovered near the computers in their media centers. English and language arts teachers glanced at their Twitter feeds during passing periods, and reading specialists checked Facebook quickly on their phones while moving to the next classroom. Small groups of children eagerly awaited the meeting of their “Mock Newbery” book clubs after school. What was all the excitement? It was the Oscars of the children’s literature field: the American Library Association’s announcement of its 2013 Youth Media Awards. While the awards were closely followed, as evidenced by the number of logins and comments on the ALA webcast, some teachers wonder if the relevance of the awards to education is waning. In an era of Common Core State Standards, do children’s literature awards still matter?

Much of this concern arises from one of the more common “misconceptions” (Short, 2013) surrounding the Common Core State Standards for the English Language Arts. Appendix B of the CCSS offers a grade-leveled list of text exemplars, including stories, poems, and informational texts. The CCSS document explains its purpose:

[These texts] primarily serve to exemplify the level of complexity and quality that the Standards require all students in a given grade band to engage with. Additionally, they are suggestive of the breadth of texts that students should encounter in the text types required by the Standards. The choices should serve as useful guideposts in helping educators select texts of similar complexity, quality, and range for their own classrooms. They expressly do not represent a partial or complete reading list. (CCSSO, 2010, p. 2)

Yet almost as soon as the CCSS appeared, publishers across the country began selling “CCSS exemplar text sets,” “CCSS leveled libraries,” etc. A simple internet search pulls up several that are readily available for purchase. On initial reading of the CCSS document, some school districts even began mandating that the texts found on the exemplar lists be taught in the prescribed grade levels. Thus a quick backlash started in many education circles as teachers
became concerned over the trend to adopt the lists as required reading. As they examined the exemplar lists more closely, many criticized their seeming reliance on older books (many out of print) and the lack of culturally diverse texts. Was this a nod to the “canon”? Would administrators who did not adopt the lists outright believe the only books read in school should reflect the dated content of these exemplars?

None of this appears to have been the intent of the writers of the CCSS document, and they have tried to relay that message during the last several months. In newspaper articles, statements, and seminars they have reacted to these concerns. The most direct response has been to explain the text exemplars as simply examples to demonstrate text complexity levels rather than a specific reading list; the CCSS has emphasized the language used in the appendices of the standards. The CCSS has relied on this response in addressing concerns about the lack of newer and more diverse texts on the list rather than explain a more pragmatic issue: Many of the newer and more diverse exemplar texts originally chosen had to be eliminated due to the high cost of getting permissions to publish excerpts, generally not a problem with many older books (Short, 2013).

With these misconceptions related to the text exemplars as mandated reading put to rest, it becomes evident that in this era of Common Core State Standards, children’s literature awards may actually be even more important to educators now than they have been in the past. CCSS asks teachers to help students closely read and deeply understand increasingly complex texts. But they do not suggest rich texts with which to do this. In search of excellent quality texts worthy of the sort of time this task demands, what better place to turn then the winners and honored books of children’s literature awards? Books winning these awards are deemed as the highest examples of literary excellence for children. They serve as models of writers’ craft, they deal with complex issues and ideas, and many represent diverse perspectives and cultures—all goals in the selection of reading materials under the CCSS for English Language Arts.

Most educators are familiar with the Newbery and Caldecott Medals, but recognition of additional awards is fairly uncommon. Three of the leading United States reading professionals’ organizations—the American Library Association, the International Reading Association, and the National Council of Teachers of English—grant several children’s literature awards, as do a few other important literary organizations. Individuals serving on these children’s literature award committees are either elected to their post or named to it by the president and executive board of the sponsoring organization. Service on the committees is considered an honor, a time-consuming one as each book eligible for the award must be carefully considered for literary and artistic merit within the guidelines of the award. Teachers can have faith that books winning these prestigious awards are outstanding examples of the best books of the year, thus worthy of consideration for their classroom use.

Being aware of the awards and their annual winners can be a time saving trick to finding complex and engaging texts that work well under the CCSS recommendations. Especially worth consideration are those books that win multiple honors and awards, something that happens with perhaps surprising frequency given the hundreds of children’s and young adults’ books published each year. As award committees work independently and in secrecy, having two or more groups select the same book to honor is a strong encouragement to check out that title. (Steve Sheinkin’s Bomb, for example, picked up a Newbery Honor, the Robert Siebert Award, and the YALSA Award for Excellence in Nonfiction this January.) Books winning awards, especially multiple awards, are also more quickly published in paperback editions and more readily available at bookstores and libraries.

Below are listed several of the major national children’s book awards which make yearly selections that are particularly useful for educators. Each award listed includes a brief educator-relevant description based on and when
indicated quoted from the granting organization’s description (see listed websites) and a link to the award webpage. More details about the awards’ processes and past winners as well as descriptions are found on these websites.

I encourage teachers to consider reviewing the winners each summer to determine possible texts for the following year’s classroom use. Thus the awards are arranged in chronological “school year” order according to each award’s typical date for announcing its winners.

**National Book Award: November**

**National Book Award for Young People’s Literature:** Originally chosen by a jury panel of writers selected by the National Book Foundation, this award is undergoing a significant change in 2013. The award committee will begin to include literary critics, librarians, and booksellers starting with the next award. This is one of the few awards for children’s literature that include a significant direct monetary prize for both the winning and honored authors. Most years middle and high school level books tend to be chosen. 
http://www.nationalbook.org/index.html

**ALA Awards: January**

**John Newbery Medal.** As the oldest children’s literature award in the United States, the Newbery is given to the “most distinguished contribution to literature for children.” In recent years there has been a tendency to select books with a readership of upper elementary students. 
http://www.ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/bookmedia/newbery/awards/newberyaward

**Randolph Caldecott Medal.** This award is given to the “most distinguished picture book for children.” Traditionally it has been considered an award for young children’s fictional picture books; however, picture biographies and illustrated nonfiction/fiction genre blends regularly appear on this list. 
http://www.ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/bookmedia/caldecott/awards/caldecottaward

**Coretta Scott King Awards.** The Coretta Scott King Awards are given annually to African-American authors and illustrators who have accurately represented “the African American experience” in outstanding works for children and young adults. Awards are presented in memory of the lives and achievements of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and his wife, Coretta Scott King. They frequently include nonfiction books in both author and illustrator categories. 
http://www.ala.org/awardsgrants/node/24

**Pura Belpre Award.** A “narrative award” and an “illustration award,” as well as honors, are given each year to recognize Latino/Latina writers and illustrators whose work “portrays, affirms, and celebrates the Latino cultural experience in an outstanding work of literature.” 
http://www.ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/bookmedia/belpre/awards/belpreaward

**Robert F. Sibert Award.** The Robert F. Sibert award and honors are given for outstanding informational books written and illustrated “to present, organize and interpret verifiable, factual material for children.” Sibert winners include books covering a range of topics; most have readability levels tending towards late elementary and early middle school. 
http://www.ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/bookmedia/sibert/awards/sibertaward

**YALSA Award for Excellence in Nonfiction.** This award is only in its third year. It is given for “the best nonfiction book published for young adults (ages 12-18).” Reading levels and anticipated reader maturity vary. 
http://www.ala.org/yalsa/nonfiction-award

**Michael L. Printz Award.** The Printz award honors the book the group considers “the best book written for teens, based entirely on its literary merit.” Winners and honors have been generally aimed at an audience with ages 13-18. This is still a relatively new award, but it is quickly gaining popularity. 
http://www.ala.org/yalsa/printz

**Theodore Seuss Geisel Award.** As evident in its title, the award recognizes “the author and illustrator of the most distinguished American book for beginning readers.” Author/illustrator
Mo Willems has won several awards and honors in this category.

Schneider Family Book Award. The Schneider Family Book Award recognizes an author or an illustrator whose book “embodies an artistic expression of the disability experience for children and adolescents.” It is actually a set of awards with three categories: young children’s book, middle school book, and teen book.

Children’s Notable Books List. This is one of the most useful award lists for educators. The Notable List is a compilation of fiction, information, poetry and picture books for children; it chooses books that are deemed the “best of the best” for that year. The list automatically includes the winners of the major ALA awards, but often includes those books that were talked about throughout the year but did not ultimately win one of the major ALA awards or honors. It offers an effective way to find those outstanding books that missed the big awards. The list is divided into “younger readers” (preschool to Grade 2), “middle readers” (Grades 3-5), “older readers” (Grades 6-8), and “books for all ages.”

National Council of Teachers of English Awards: April

Orbis Pictus Award for Outstanding Nonfiction. This award, dedicated to “promoting and recognizing excellence in the writing of nonfiction for children,” is given to the author of an outstanding nonfiction book; as many as five honor books are also named. The Orbis Pictus committee examines and considers the “accuracy, organization, design and style” of each eligible book as well as its usefulness in the K-8 classroom.

United States Board of Books for Young People Awards: February

USBBY Outstanding International Books: The USBBY Outstanding International Books list includes the “most outstanding book[s] published or distributed in the United States that originated or [were] first published in a country other than the US.” Typically divided by grade levels (Grades K-2, 3-5, 6-8, and 9-12), this list offers an excellent way to introduce students to outstanding easily available international children’s and young adults’ literature.

National Council of Teachers of English Awards: April

Notable Children’s Books in the English Language Arts: The Notable Children’s Books in the English Language Arts list is a selection of 30 books of K-8 fiction or nonfiction or poetry that “deal explicitly with language,” “demonstrate uniqueness in the use of language or style,” and “invite child response or participation,” as well as being of high and enduring literary quality. The list is particularly useful for language arts and reading teachers.

International Reading Association Awards: April

IRA Book Awards: These awards are given to authors new to the field of children’s and young adults’ literature “who shows unusual promise.” Nonfiction as well as fiction books are considered for awards and honors in categories for the primary and intermediate grades and for young adult literature.

Notable Books for a Global Society: This annual list of texts includes 25 K-12 books that “represent a pluralistic view of world society” through the genres of nonfiction, fiction, and poetry. The committee emphasizes authenticity and accuracy in their selections, as well as thought-provoking content that invites reflection, critical analysis and response.
Boston Globe-Horn Book Awards: June

Boston Globe-Horn Book Awards: Awards and up to two honors are given in three categories for the Boston Globe-Horn Book Awards: fiction, poetry, nonfiction and picture book. Because these awards run on a June 1- May 31 cycle, rather than the more typically used January 1- December 31 cycle, the BGHB awards often predict early potential winners of the ALA awards or reflect the strength of past ALA award winners.

http://archive.hbook.com/bghb/default.asp

IRA Teachers’ Choices Awards: September/October

IRA Teachers’ Choices Awards: This unique award uses regional teams of librarians, teachers, and reading specialists from across the U.S. to pick their 30 favorite books of the year for 5-15-year-old students. The emphasis is on books that children and young teens “might not discover or fully appreciate without the help of a teacher, librarian, parent, or other adult,” which will be enjoyed and “can be used across the curriculum.” The use of large numbers of reviewers to select winners for this award list makes it slightly different from the other awards noted in this article, but the unique premise of the list is very applicable and useful for teachers.

http://www.reading.org/resources/booklists/teacherschoices.aspx

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References


Websites as indicated with the award summaries.