

I consider myself a late bloomer into the world of reading. I did my required reading in school, but I certainly didn't read for enjoyment. For me, it was the combination of the Accelerated Reading program and the lack of literature that I found interesting and/or relatable. "Reading for pleasure" was not instilled in me by my teachers. What I found most fascinating is that as I have been consuming literature for this course, I found that I have read many award-winning books. Majority of the books read this semester were required reading during my elementary years. My teachers exposed me to award winning literature, but why was I not impressed? Through the reflection and introspection of this semester, I have found that it is a common theme that "good" and "best" books involve emotions and memories. My favorite books are those that elicit strong emotional reactions or have relatable storylines. As we wrote about our favorite books or books that we consider "classics" they had two commonalities: they varied from person to person and more often than not, they draw up a memory. Literature is passed on from generation to generation. In her article *Classics and canons*, Deborah Stevenson bluntly points out that "ultimately, the literature's most powerful children are ex-children." Given my own background, the literature read thus far regarding award biases, and countless discussions with my own school librarian, I am stuck in an internal debate of whether or not national awards truly award the best literature has to offer in a given year.

Koss, Johnson and Martinez wrote the article, *Mapping the Diversity in Caldecott Books from 1938 to 2017: The Changing Topography*, which highlights that our advancing and changing society is a good thing. We now have the advantage of modern technology, which allows us to find answers to questions instantly. While we are an ever-evolving society, Koss et al. point out, "just as a map is a specific representation of the landscape at a particular time and place, so, too, are Caldecott books." Through their extensive research, they have uncovered that

not much has changed in the world of literature, even as we see an increase in diversification amongst the human race. Minorities are underrepresented, despite the growing consumerism within the many cultures. As we have discovered, article after article, minorities are at a disadvantage when it comes to representing and celebrating the many cultures that make up our nation. Being a white, middle class woman, I am not fully able to understand what it must feel like, since my culture is plastered everywhere. However, empathy allows me to try to put myself in the shoes of others, particularly for the population I teach. Koss et al. discuss the implication of the lack of diversity within awarded literature. They point out adolescents that are underrepresented often deal with issues of identity. They can begin to feel “marginalized without any mirrors in literature.” In addition to not seeing your ethnicity, there are social impacts for the lack of gender diversification within children’s literature. Crisp and Hiller’s article, *“Is This a Boy or a Girl?”: Rethinking Sex-Role Representation in Caldecott Medal-Winning Picturebooks, 1938–2011*, make valid arguments to encourage the resistance against traditional gender stereotypes and for literature to move towards ungendered characters. They identify that “winning titles reach a wide audience and may have a profound influence on readers. These books legitimize and validate experiences, providing spaces that allow readers to locate images of themselves and the people they love.” Not only is underrepresentation a continual issue in children’s literature, but so too is censorship. Kenneth Kidd writes a scathing, yet thought-provoking essay regarding the parallels between the world of prizing and the world of anticensorship. Kidd believes that anticensorship campaigns, like Banned Book Week, are functioning much like awards. He argues that some authors have added content to their books, in hopes of offending someone to drum up discussions about their book. Drama is good for business. However, his main point is a very valid one. When selecting a book, trust the librarian.

The librarian is trained to make choices about books and their appropriateness. Let them do their jobs.

While I do find some value in national literature prizes, it is not without fault. Awards give readers a starting point for consuming literature. It allows them opportunities to get their feet wet when they are unsure where to begin. Awards make book selection easy. If it is awarded, it must be good. However, that statement is the paradox behind awards. Do awards automatically determine that a particular book is good? To an extent, I don't believe so. One must consider how awards are decided upon. As Deborah Stevenson postulates in her article, "an adult book is written by adults, read by adults, judged by adults and passed on to adults; the people in the position of gatekeepers, selecting and championing particular texts for admission to the canon and lionisation as classics, are themselves inarguably members of those texts' official and intended audience." Children, the intended audience, have very little say in what books they read, especially in the early years of their life. The books are chosen by the parents, and those books are most likely books read to them as a child, continuing the cycle of undiversified literature. Through this course, I am finding myself more and more a proponent of cultural awards. By presenting awards for those authors and illustrators that promote their culture, I believe you broaden the horizons for underrepresented cultures. This gives parents of differing ethnicity an opportunity to rewrite the history of what books are passed down to their kids. One generation at a time, diversification can happen.

If teachers and librarians are simply using "distinguished" awards to determine what is "good" to read, then authors and illustrators who win national awards will continue to grow their brand. If the majority of winners are white, then white authors and illustrators will continue to flood bookshelves. I believe in order for this to change, teachers and librarians need to make a

conscious effort to provide books that have won awards based on ethnic ties. Children are so moldable and providing them with books where the protagonist is of a minority, might help expand the views of future generations. As Bittner states in his article *The Mainstreaming of Controversy in Children's and YA Book Award Winners: How on Earth Did That Book Win?*, “children’s literature belongs to and is controlled by adults”. As an educator, it is my responsibility to give students the opportunity to expose themselves to as much literature as they can. It is also my responsibility to expose myself to as much literature as I can. As I have mentioned before, I am always impressed by my own school librarian and team teacher. Neither buy into the awarding system. They highlight books that are well rounded and applicable to students. I believe there is huge value in revamping how reading is taught. Allowing kids to read for enjoyment will give them opportunities to find relatable characters, both ethically and socially. By not forcing all students to read based on awards, we are able to discuss topics that may not be a part of mainstream literature.

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