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Fall 2002
MWF 6

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The Newbery Medal Books

On June 21, 1921, publisher Frederic G. Melcher proposed to the American Library Association that a medal be given for the most distinguished children's book of the year, suggesting that it be named in honor of the eighteenth-century bookseller, John Newbery. Since 1922, the Newbery Medal has been awarded annually to books of assorted themes, genres, narrative complexities, and ideological orientations. The first such award in the world, the Medal has had a profound impact on the field of children's literature, on K-12 education, and on children's publishing. The winners constitute a canon of modern-day children's classics; they stay in print for decades and influence as well as document our social values and national priorities. For instance, in the 1920s and 1930s, eight of the first eighteen Medal books addressed foreign cultures or indigenous groups in the Americas. In the 1940s, the winning books were often patriotic in theme. Utopian/dystopian fantasy and science fiction became more popular after the 1950s, and since the late 1960s, family drama and dysfunction have taken center stage.

Weirdly, there has been almost no research on the Newbery canon and its significance for American culture, and that larger issue will be our primary concern. We'll also explore the role of the Newbery books in the K-12 curriculum, since many are taught or recommended in school. We'll collectively read all of these 'instant classics,' which range in genre from poetry to biography to various forms of fiction. To understand their appeal and import, we'll draw from critical studies such as Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction*, John Guillory's *Cultural Capital*, and Janice Radway's *A Feeling for Books* (a magisterial study of the Book-of-the-Month Club). The Newbery books emerged out of the early twentieth-century heyday of children's book publishing, selling, and reviewing. We'll thus address the tension between newer, mass-market methods of book distribution and a more genteel and singular sense of literature. Fundamental to the course are questions of canonicity and taste, in and around modernity and the larger history of children's culture.

Texts

Elizabeth Coatsworth, *The Cat Who Went to Heaven*

Elizabeth Borton de Treviño, *I, Juan de Pareja*

William Pène Du Bois, *The Twenty-One Balloons*

Russell Freedman, *Lincoln: A Photobiography*

Virginia Hamilton, *M.C. Higgins, the Great*

Karen Hesse, *Out of the Dust*

Harold Keith, *Rifles for Watie*

Eric P. Kelley, *The Trumpeter of Krakow*

E. L. Konigsburg, *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler*
 Lois Lowry, *The Giver*
 Linda Sue Park, *A Single Shard*
 Ellen Raskin, *The Westing Game*
 Ruth Sawyer, *Roller Skates*

And a coursepacket from Xerographic. All materials available at Goering's.

We'll read at least one text a week, sometimes more. A complete (and chronological) list of the Newbery Medal Winners and Honor Books can be found on the webpage of the American Library Association: <http://ala.org/alsc/newbpast.html>. If you're worried about book expenses, fear not, as all of these titles are in print and available at public and school libraries. When possible, use the editions I've ordered but other regular editions are ok.

These books are not difficult, but there are times when we'll only have a day or so to address certain texts. I'd recommend that you read ahead in the literature, especially in the first few weeks as we're developing context (and whenever the theoretical reading is light). I know already that we won't have enough time to deal adequately with these books, but I want to give you the broadest sweep possible.

Assignments and Grading

Your course grade will be based on the following assignments. There are no exams; nearly all of your grade comes from your writing. Because we have a lot to do in class, I don't plan to devote class time to writing issues, but I'm very available during office hours for help. I reserve the right to give unannounced quizzes if I feel that students are too far behind in the reading or if discussion lags; should we have quizzes, they will be averaged with the presentation and participation grade.

Essay 1	25%
Essay 2	20%
Essay 3	35%
Group Presentation & active participation	15%

Essay 1. For the group presentation, you will work in small groups to assess a decade's worth of Medal winners. That means that each of you will read 2-3 books per that decade, not including the ones I've assigned for the whole class. In preparation for your group presentation, and after you've divided up the labor within your group, write a short essay evaluating your two winners in any way that makes sense. You may draw from any of the readings or bring in other material as needed. I'd prefer that you try to situate

these texts in the decade under study, but if that doesn't work, do what you can. Although you will obviously present at different times, everyone will turn this essay in on the same day in the interest of fairness. This should make the presentation easier, too. 5-7 d-s pp.

Essay 2. Write a short interpretative essay of any Newbery Medal text – or Honor Book – drawing from and using the theoretical ideas of Habermas, Guillory, Bordieu, or Radway (just one). You may cite other sources if they are helpful but concentrate on offering a critical evaluation of one literary text. 5 d-s pp.

Essay 3. Write an essay on the Newbery Medal topic of your choice, using whatever texts and methodologies you prefer. Your essay may be an in-depth analysis of select texts, or may be more theoretically driven (in which case you must still furnish persuasive textual evidence). This essay may derive from Essay 1 or 2 but should take the analysis further or in a different direction. 7-10 d-s pp.

Grading Scheme. I give A's to essays using an original and spirited argument to illuminate complexities of language and theme. I give B+'s to well-organized, well-developed, relatively error-free essays with sparks of originality or daring, and B's to competent essays needing more complex development and/or clearer focus. Lower grades mean greater problems with development, structure, and grammar. Recurrent grammatical errors lower the grade; occasional spelling errors and typos don't. The best essays sustain complex and or audacious arguments; a good B essay capably summarizes and compares themes.

Active participation means attending regularly, asking questions, offering insights, sharing memos -- in short, being actively involved. I respect individual styles, and I do not expect you to talk all of the time, but plan to attend and to contribute to discussion.

Reading Schedule

August

26 (M) Introductions.
 28 W) **Why John Newbery?** Townsend (cp).
 30 (F) Pickering; Viguers (cp).

September

2 (M) Labor Day. Begin reading *The Cat Who Went to Heaven*.
 4 (W) **Bookwomen.** Kidd; Irene Smith (cp).
 6 (F) Moore; Bush (cp). Begin working on group assignments.

 9 (M) Vandergrift; Jenkins (cp).

11 (W) **Frame 1: The Public Sphere.** Habermas (cp).
 13 (F) Habermas; Coatsworth, *The Cat*.

16 (M) **Frame 2: Literature as Distinction.** Bordieu (cp).
 18 (W) Bordieu; Nodelman (cp).
 20 (F) continued. Begin *The Trumpeter of Krakow*.

23 (M) **The 1920s.** *The Trumpeter of Krakow*.
 25 (W) Group 1 report.
 27 (F) No class.

30 (M) **Frame 3: Modernity and Mass Media.** Radway; Goldsmith (cp).
 Begin *Roller Skates*.

October

2 (W) **The 1930s.** *Roller Skates*.
 4 (F) Group 2 report. Essay 1 due.

7 (M) **The 1940s.** *The 21 Balloons*.
 9 (W) cont.
 11 (F) Group 3 report.

14 (M) **The 1950s.** *Rifles for Watie*.
 16 (W) cont.
 18 (F) Group 4 report.

21 (M) **Frame 4: Cultural Capital.** Guillory (cp).
 23 (W) Miller; Aronson (cp). **The 1960s.** Begin *I, Juan de Pareja*.
 25 (F) No class.

28 (M) *I, Juan de Pareja*; begin *From the Mixed Up Files...*
 30 (W) cont.

November

1 (F) Group 5 report. Essay 2 due.

4 (M) **The 1970s.** *The Westing Game*.
 6 (W) cont.
 8 (F) Homecoming.

11 (M) Veteran's Day.
 13 (W) *M. C. Higgins, the Great*.
 15 (F) cont. Group 6 report.

18 (M) **The 1980s.** *Lincoln: A Photobiography.*
 20 (W) cont.
 22 (F) Group 7 report.

25 (M) **The 1990s.** *The Giver.*
 27 (W) No class.
 29 (F) Thanksgiving holiday.

December

2 (M) *The Giver* cont.; begin *Out of the Dust.*
 4 (W) *Out of the Dust.*
 6 (F) Group 8 report.

9 (M) **Into the Millennium.** *A Single Shard.*
 11 (W) cont.; wrap-up. Essay 3 due.