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LIT 4930: 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

Avi, *Crispin: The Cross of Lead*
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*
 Ellen Raskin, *The Westing Game*
 Ruth Sawyer, *Roller Skates*

And a substantial coursepacket from Xerographic Copy Center (927 NW 13th St). All books are available at Goering's. **Please note that 1) the coursepacket is also for LIT 6856, the graduate version of this class; and 2) I've ordered additional books for the graduate course which are not required for you.

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; your grade depends upon written work and class participation. 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	25%
Essay 3	35%
Group Presentation & active participation	15%

Essay 1 and Group Presentation. For your group presentation, you will work in groups of 7 to assess children's books that have been given other awards besides the Newbery. Each of you will read 2-3 books in the category, and in class you will present your

findings as a group. Members of Group 2, presenting on the Caldecott Award, will examine 6-8 books apiece, since Caldecott winners are picture books. Members of Group 5 may choose to examine the same award or several different ones; each person will still read 2-3 titles.

The presentation itself should last between half an hour to an hour. I've reserved a full class period for the presentations. The format can vary as needed, and I encourage you to provide material for the class, perhaps summaries or synopses of trends, themes, etc. You need to meet to discuss your individual readings and decide how to present those readings in and around the award itself. Please give some thought to this. I know it's difficult to organize meetings outside class, and I'd advise you to communicate via email. I will assign a group grade, but your papers will be graded individually. In short, I want the presentations to be informative as well as fun. Be creative, but not at the expense of the material itself. At the beginning of the semester, I will circulate a sign-up sheet so that you can express your preferences. I'll attempt to honor those preferences, but may need to assign you to certain groups if everyone gravitates to, say, the Caldecott group. Thanks for your understanding.

In preparation for that presentation, and after you've divided up the labor within your group, write a short essay evaluating the titles that you've read in any way that makes sense. You may draw from any of the readings or bring in other material as needed. Try to evaluate your 2-3 books with respect to the guidelines/criteria/context of that award. How do the chosen books reflect the spirit of the award? How do the specifics of each story still speak to larger assumptions about identity, excellence, and so forth? 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 and Hendlar on the "public sphere," **or** Bourdieu's analysis of "distinction" and the "literary field," **or** Guillory's critique of the "representative" canon. Concentrate on one text, but feel free to make references to other texts (literary and/or critical) if that's useful. 5-7 d-s pp.

Essay 3. Open topic. Write an essay that addresses Medal and/or other award-winning children's books, 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. You do not have to write about the Newbery Medal, but you need to write about "distinguished" children's books. 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 (T) Introductions.
 28 (R) **Why John Newbery?** Townsend, Pickering, Viguers.

September

- 2 (T) *The Cat Who Went to Heaven.* Smith.
 4 (R) **Bookmen and the Public Sphere.** Habermas, Hendler.

 9 (T) Howard, Radway. **Modern Media and the 1920s.** Begin *The Trumpeter of Krakow.*
 11(R) *The Trumpeter of Krakow.*

 16 (T) **Bookwomen and the Rise of Children's Literature.** Moore, Bush, Vandergrift.
 18 (R) Nodelman, Goldsmith, Johnson, and Jenkins.

 23 (T) **Literature as "Distinction."** Bourdieu.
 25 (R) Bourdieu continued.

 30 (T) No class. Over this week, I recommend that you read one or all of these titles: *The Giver*, *Out of the Dust*, *Crispin: The Cross of Lead*. That way, you'll be ahead of the reading game during the last two weeks and will have more time to work on your third essay.

October

- 2 (R) No class. See above.

 7 (T) Report on "Culture and the Literary Prize."
 9 (R) **The 1930s.** *Roller Skates.* *Presentation 1: The Caldecott Award.*

 14 (T) **The 1940s.** *The 21 Balloons.* Essay 1 due.
 16 (R) Guillory.

 21 (T) **The 1950s. Rifles for Watie.**
 23 (R) Aronson, Miller, McHenry. *Presentation 2: The Laura Ingalls Wilder Award.*

 28 (T) Guest speaker Professor Eliza Dresang (FSU), Chairperson of the 2004 Newbery Medal Committee.
 30 (R) discussion of book award process/politics. *Presentation 3: The Coretta Scott King Award.*

November

4 (T) **Culture Games and The 1960s. I, Juan de Pareja.**
 6 (R) *I, cont; From the Mixed-Up Files . . .*

 11 (T) **The 1970s. The Westing Game. Essay 2 due.**
 13 (R) WG continued; *Presentation 4: The Newbery Honor Books.*

 18 (T) *M. C. Higgins the Great.*
 20 (R) *M. C. continued; Presentation 5: Contemporary Book Awards.*

 25 (T) **The 1980s. Lincoln: A Photobiography..**
 27 (R) Thanksgiving holiday. Read *The Giver* over break if you haven't already.

December

2 (T) **The 1990s and Beyond. The Giver.**
 4 (R) *The Giver* continued.; *Out of the Dust.*

 9 (T) *Crispin: The Cross of Lead.* Course wrap-up. Essay 3 due.