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LIT 6856: The Newbery Medal Books

Texts

Avi, *Crispin: The Cross of Lead*
Joan W. Blos, *A Gathering of Days*
Elizabeth Coatsworth, *The Cat Who Went to Heaven*
Christopher Paul Curtis, *Bud, Not Buddy*
Elizabeth Borton de Treviño, *I, Juan de Pareja*
Meindert DeJong, *The Wheel on the School*
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 Lenski, *Strawberry Girl*
Elizabeth Foreman Lewis, *Young Fu of the UpperYangtze*
Lois Lowry, *The Giver*
Dhan Gopal Mukerji, *Gay Neck, the Story of a Pigeon*
Ellen Raskin, *The Westing Game*
Ruth Sawyer, *Roller Skates*

And a coursepacket from Xerographic Copy Center (927 NW 13th St.)
Books are at Goering's on campus

Overview

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 tendencies. A complete (and chronological) list of the Newbery Medal Winners and Honor Books can be found at the website of the American Library Association: <http://ala.org/alsc/newbpast.html>. 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. I'd even argue that the Newbery Medal helped institutionalize American literature more broadly through its themes and in particular through its foundational mandate that winning authors be American citizens.

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, as well as explore the gender dynamics of book production, promotion, and evaluation. Fundamental to our concerns will be the idea of the public sphere, as well as the question of canonicity in and around "cultural capital." We'll examine the professionalization of library science as well as teaching, with some attention to the development of the curriculum in public schools. Critics have accused the American Library Association of racist book-award practices, and we'll address those accusations in light of the segregationist trajectories of children's literature, from the early twentieth century to the present, giddy day of Harry Potter & Co.

Among our concerns: is children's literature ever really canonical? Is the Newbery a canon, and if so, just how significant is it, both on its own and in relation to the American literary canon at large? Who reads Newbery books, and why? Are these books part of school curricula, whether directly or indirectly? I see the Newbery Medal as a sort of test case for thinking about literature and English studies in the present day. I'd like for us to use the Medal books to read American culture, and vice versa -- and to interrogate our own interests and practices as literary scholars.

The course is organized chronologically for the most part, though also around issues and methodologies. We're reading two Newbery books from each decade, in addition to various articles and book chapters. No doubt we'll need to come back and/or skip ahead from time to time. I suspect we'll have many meetings in which we don't adequately address -- or even start to talk about -- one or more of the readings. Remember that you can engage with those readings in your papers. Thanks in advance for your patience.

I should also note that I've not assigned much theoretical/critical material, and that I may add such readings based on our needs. I promise to be reasonable about any late additions.

Grading and Assignments

Required are attendance and active participation (25%), one 5-7 pp. paper (25%) and a longer essay of 20-25 pp. (50%).

Short essay. You have several options from which to choose (or deviate, with my approval). *Option 1:* Write a short interpretative essay of any Newbery text(s) using the theoretical insights of Guillory or Bourdieu. *Option 2:* Develop an overview of another children's book award besides the Newbery Medal, and evaluate at least one winning title in light of that award's criteria, etc. For a partial list of such awards, go to the ALA's website (see above). *Option 3:* Evaluate the pedagogical literature available on using Newbery books in the classroom (see me for help with titles), again with specific reference to at least one literary title.

Seminar Paper. Develop a more sustained treatment of any course-related topic, preferably dealing with children's literature but not necessarily the Newbery Medal. The paper may develop from the short paper(s) but only if that's advantageous to you. Any

approach is fine, provided that the essay is well developed, thorough, and sufficiently researched. Let me know if you'd like some help.

Reading Schedule

August

26 Introduction(s).

September

- 2 **"Bookmen True" and the Public Sphere.** Townsend, Pickering, Viguers, Habermas, Hendler, and Smith. *The Cat Who Went to Heaven.*
 9 Howard, Radway. *The Trumpeter of Krakow.*
 16 **Bookwomen and the Rise of Children's Literature.** Moore, Bush, Vandergrift, Nodelman, Goldsmith, Johnson, and Jenkins. *Gay Neck.*
 23 **Distinction and Its Discontents.** Bourdieu.
 30 No class.

October

- 7 Report on "Culture and the Literary Prize." **The 1930s.** *Roller Skates* and *Young Fu of the Upper Yangtze.*
 14 Guillory. **The 1940s.** *The 21 Balloons* and *Strawberry Girl.*
 21 **The 1950s.** *Rifles for Watie* and *The Wheel on the School.*
 28 Aronson, Miller, McHenry. In class: Guest speaker Professor Eliza Dresang (FSU), Chairperson of the 2004 Newbery Committee.

November

- 4 **The 1960s.** *I, Juan de Pareja* and *From the Mixed-Up Files.* **Short essay due.**
 11 **The 1970s.** Michelle Martin on the Coretta Scott King Award (to be distributed); *The Westing Game* and *M.C. Higgins the Great.*
 18 **The 1980s.** *Lincoln: A Photobiography* and *A Gathering of Days.*
 25 **The 1990s.** *The Giver* and *Out of the Dust.*

December

- 2 **The 2000s.** *Bud, Not Buddy* and *Crispin: The Cross of Lead.*
 9 **Best in Show?** Evan Watkins, "Your Dog's Just a Dog" (to be distributed).
 Course wrap-up.

Seminar essay due Sunday, December 14, by 10 p.m.

