“What is commonly called literary history is actually a record of choices.”

--Louise Bernikow

As I read and digested this sentence I realized, thanks to the information we have covered in this course, it is a simple and profoundly accurate statement. I have always had the desire to create an original statement, such as this one by Louise Bernikow, that encompasses a myriad of thoughts and ideas and condense them into one prolific sentence. After I read this statement and reflected upon the material and topics that we’ve discussed over the past twelve weeks, it suddenly made sense this is exactly what I have learned and discovered in this course; books that are award winners and also those that are considered classics have found their place in literary history and they are all ultimately a record of choices through their readers. I must admit, before this course, that sentence would not have made sense to me or carried the understanding if does for me today. Honestly, I probably would have read it and thought, “Alright, I’ll take the literary expert’s word for that!” Now, I am able to personalize that statement and attest to its validity through my experiences and knowledge I have recently acquired. What a feeling of accomplishment to be able to take a profound statement that carries no personal meaning or relevance in January and have the ability to conceptualize its significance by the end of March. I appreciate this opportunity for personal growth that will carry over into my professional development as well.

To reach this point has been an interesting and enlightening journey. It all began back in our first week when we discussed “good” books for children. This was the beginning of what would prove to be twelve weeks of thought-provoking self-discovery. Basically, in that first week we began to lay a foundation for determining what “good” literature consists of, who decides what is good, for whom are those choices made, the role longevity plays, and what assessments are involved in these determinations. Let me say that my opinions and ideas have evolved from when we began Module 1 to our conclusion in Module 12. When the question, “What is a good book?” was originally presented, my initial response was simplistic in theory. I knew what I personally thought were good books and why I preferred them, but it was difficult for me to think on a broader scope until we began our discussions. It was through these discussions I discovered that deeming a book good involves individualized and personal choices. One person may absolutely love a particular book that another person finds completely uninteresting; and that is perfectly acceptable. This will probably sound very close-minded, but I never thought in those terms before. If a book was consider good by others, then I just assumed and accepted it was good; simply because it had already received that label. If I didn’t care for a book that was considered good, then I chalked it up to being “my problem”. It didn’t occur to me that everyone’s opinion is relevant when determining what books are “good”. Every reader has a voice about what they prefer and consider “good” when it comes to literature. What an empowering feeling! That is what I walked away from after our first week in this course.
After our in depth discussions about “good” books, we moved on to the topic of Children’s Literature Awards. My first reaction after reading about the different awards was, “I had absolutely no idea there were this many awards!” My next thought was, “Am I the only uninformed idiot who is just now learning about these different awards?” Of course I never shared my term of “uniformed idiot”, but I was relieved to discover there were other people (yes, my peers and fellow teachers) who weren’t familiar with some of the awards either. “After all,” I tried to reassure my pathetic self, “I’m in this course to learn and grow both personally and professionally.” It became abundantly clear there was a lot for me to learn. A big thank you to Dr. Apol for putting me in my “literary knowledge place” (actually, lack of!) right from the beginning. This realization challenged me to think, question, discuss, understand, learn and grow with each passing week.

Module 1 was a period of adjustment for me. I was discovering just how little I actually knew about the literary world. At the same time I was also learning about the expectations of this course and more about my classmates. Despite the uncertainty and nervous reservations I was experiencing, I began to settle into my routine and really feel a connection with the course material when we began to study the Newbery and Caldecott Awards. In Week 3 some of us learned, while others had their memories refreshed, about literary elements: Plot, Setting, Character, Theme, and Style. This information proved beneficial for future discussions within my group. Understanding these elements and their meanings and utilizing them in our discussions, enabled us to examine a book more in depth and helped us avoid using simple terms (such as “nice” or “cute”) which really lack in impact when it comes to eliciting and evoking thought-provoking ideas, perspectives or questions. Gaining a grasp of these literary elements will continue to be beneficial when discussing literature in the future, whether it is with my peers or my students.

I found Weeks 3 & 4 to be very fascinating and informative. Studying the history and criteria behind the Newbery Award and the Caldecott Award lead to a better understanding of and appreciation for both awards. I was completely unfamiliar with the award process or the standards involved for a book to achieve award status. Acquiring this information allowed me to think about, question and comprehend awards, their history, their criteria, their function, and their validity. Initially, I was skeptical of awards. I have always considered awards to be popularity contests that are based on subjective opinion. My opinion and perspective was challenged, and after numerous discussions involving many different points of view, I now feel these awards are beneficial. Learning the history and the assessment process that is done by qualified (but not necessarily diverse) individuals did play a role in helping me recognize the benefits an award can have. As a teacher, I feel anything that acknowledges books and encourages reading is valuable, positive and important. Therefore, it would be hypocritical of me to denounce any award that brings recognition and awareness to children’s literature. Also, the point was made in one of our group discussions that awards help to set a certain standard of excellence. I found it difficult to argue that point considering there are expectations and criteria that need to be met and then judged by a
qualified panel of individuals who are committed to selecting a book that represents what they consider to be the “best” for that particular year. While I still believe *subjectivity* plays a role in an awards process, I now realize that doesn’t decrease the value, meaning, importance or validity of that award. My initial argument was that different people “like” different things so how is it possible for a few select people to “choose” one book to represent what is deemed to be the “best book of the year”? It was brought to my attention that just because one book wins an award that doesn’t mean the rest aren’t “good”. Again, I realized that every reader has a voice about what they prefer and consider “good” when it comes to literature. That thought was consoling enough for me to accept and respect awards for what they can offer to children’s literature.

We read several articles addressing awards. In the Parravano article, Parravano makes the claim that there is a “hidden” criteria for creating a Newbery medal-winning book. She states there is a certain “formula” that seems to be followed to fit a particular mold. Parravano referred to this as the “ur-Newbery”. She validated her point by comparing past Newbery winners and their similar contents such as; Newbery winners tend to be directed toward an older audience (11-14), most (not all though) of the books have male characters as the main lead, the character has to face some personal hardship wrought with self-discovery, and the majority of the books are fiction. Parravano also points out that in the 80+-year history of the Newbery that only three picture books (with a 38 year span between the last two winners) and one easy reader (1972’s Frog and Toad Together) have reached a quality where the committee should recognize them, either as winners or as honor books. This article lead to some pretty thought-provoking and question-raising discussion in our group. Ultimately, we decided it is difficult to believe that one committee can choose a book of excellence among all genres and age levels, but in Parravano’s last statement “…We would like the best book chosen, “whatever the best is for each of us.” I think that summarizes what we have been discussing in this course. A “good” or even “best” book is a personal choice that involves one’s own life experiences and connections that are made with that particular book. It is important to remember that, with awards, there will be subjectivity involved. Awards bring awareness to those books that achieve their label. It is also important to remember that each individual reader will determine a “good” book separately. We are all, as readers, entitled to our own preferences and opinions. Books are a gift to be experienced on a personal level by each individual reader.

In Week 4 we moved on to Caldecott Awards. Learning about the background of the Caldecott set a historical foundation for me. From this information I gained concrete knowledge and insight regarding this award, which then allowed me to move forward with more understanding as we read and compared past winners and non-winners. The most beneficial aspect of this week for me personally was reading the Sipe article. It was from this article that I learned the appropriate vocabulary for discussing picture books. Practicing this vocabulary within our group discussions helped me to become more familiar and comfortable with the language and also to make it an integral part of future thoughts and discussions. It was through this experience that I gained a new appreciation and respect for illustrations and illustrators. I found myself now looking at pictures in a completely different and more complex light. Previously, I was basically ignorant when
it came to illustrations and I only saw “pictures on a page”. It has been a liberating feeling to become more comfortable with “understanding” an illustration and why the artist made the choices that he or she made. I even began discussing illustrations with my 5 year-old daughter as we read together. It was amazing what she was able to comprehend and grasp in relation to understanding terminology and interpreting pictures and the possibilities of different choices of an illustrator. I then realized how important and valuable exposure is for children. Early exposure for children to different elements of illustrations allows them to become comfortable early on with all aspects of a book. Once again, I have gained another useful tool that I can utilize both personally and professionally when discussing books and their illustrations.

Also in Week 4, we read a Caldecott medal winning book and an accompanying acceptance speech. I read My Friend Rabbit and then I read Eric Rohmann’s acceptance speech. I enjoyed this assignment because I felt a new sense of connection, a more personal one, after I read Rohmann’s speech. As I read his speech, I realized he was thrilled, excited, perplexed, and humbled to receive the award. It was apparent that Rohmann was simply doing something he loved and felt passion for when he produced My Friend Rabbit and to receive a Caldecott Award was truly an honor and the “cherry on his sundae” (that was my sweet tooth analogy, not his!). It was obvious he admired and respected this award and while he clearly didn’t create My Friend Rabbit with receiving an award in mind, it was an achievement he was honored to accept. It became clear to me at this point that writers create stories and illustrators create meaningful pictures because of a special fire that burns within the depths of their souls. This creative passion pours out onto paper, is put into book form and then is graciously shared with literary world for all of its readers to experience. What a generous gift! It’s at this point, whether the book is a medal winner or not, that each individual reader exercises their own personal preference to determine what they deem to be “good”. Caldecott and Newbery Award winners will always maintain their place in literary history and we, the reading population, will always have those record of choices available.

Now, moving on to Week 5 and the author or illustrator study assignment. Initially my reaction to this assignment was, “Dr. Apol, are you crazy? A fairly substantial research paper in the first part of this course? What will the final paper entail? Are you trying to kill me? Where’s the chocolate?!” After my dramatic overreaction ceased and I began my research, it became abundantly clear how appropriately timed this assignment was and I vowed to never question Dr. Apol’s professional decisions again. As I learned more about Chris Van Allsburg, both personally and professionally, I began to comprehend how his contributions were relevant and reflective of our Module 1 study of Awards. I discovered Chris Van Allsburg’s personal journey to becoming an author and illustrator was a path of initial uncertainty. His interest in drawing was discouraged as a child and it wasn’t until a freshman course in sculpture at the University of Michigan that he met his artistic fate. After sculpting, teaching and writing at night, Van Allsburg’s future in children’s literature finally connected with a publisher; and the rest is history. As I looked through Van Allsburg’s work, I was in awe of his creative genius and imagination. It was through the previous weeks of material that we studied and discussed in this course though, that enabled me to really understand his work on a more in-depth
As I read his books, I was able to thoughtfully consider the literary elements (plot, setting, theme, and style) and contemplate his choices and their impact. I also thought about the vocabulary in Sipe’s article, which enabled me to think about the various choices Van Allsburg made regarding his illustrations. I also thought about the criteria necessary for winning a Caldecott. All of these different elements brought new meaning to literature for me. I now experience, interpret, question, and appreciate a book instead of simply just reading it. As for Chris Van Allsburg, he and his work hold a place in literary history and a special place in the memories of my daughter and myself.

In conclusion for Module 1, I have discovered “good” books are determined individually by the life experiences and personal connections that each reader brings to a book. As far as awards are concerned, while they are “subjective” and don’t necessarily reflect everyone’s personal preference, the winners are often pretty good. Our literary history constantly evolves as our record of choices expands. It is vital that we constantly expose children to a variety of literature and allow them to personally experience and interpret those selections. Every reader carries their own personal record of choices in their memories and hearts. Sharing those choices and having them continue to be read and enjoyed over generations brings us to our next Module: Classics.

During Weeks 6-9, we studied classics. Within our group discussions in Week 6, we determined that classics possess several characteristics that establish their position in the category of “classic”. Those elements are: the book must maintain its staying power throughout different generations, it must contain universal themes that people can relate and connect to, and it usually offers a timeless life lesson. We read and discussed The Tale of Peter Rabbit and this story contained all of the elements and characteristics that our group felt were necessary for a book to be a classic. The Tale of Peter Rabbit has been read over many generations, it contains a universal theme such as good bunnies versus a naughty bunny and the consequences that may possibly occur to those who don’t listen to their parents (life lesson). It was beneficial to independently establish criteria necessary to reach classic status, then discuss and build upon my original ideas and finally to read a classic and be able to experience first hand whether or not this book fit our credentials. It brought the learning process of “how” a book becomes a classic, “what” makes it a classic, “who” determines it to be a classic, “when” does it reach classic status and “why” it is consider a classic. Learning about classics in the “whole sense” of the term better equipped me to understand and teach classics in my classroom.

Weeks 7-9 were spent covering Little Women. I was glad this was a course assignment because so many of my friends had read Little Women and I had not. Without a “mandatory push” I probably would have never experienced this book. When I initially began reading Little Women I found it to be slow and tedious, but within a few chapters I was immersed in the story. I chose to focus on the theme of poverty versus wealth as I read. I found choosing a theme to focus on when reading, to be a powerful and insight tool. This is another strategy I would implement into my future literature lesson plans. I feel that choosing a particular theme to concentrate on encouraged me to question and understand Louisa May Alcott’s decisions and choices on a deeper level. I made personal connections with certain characters as I read and I also thought about how different outcomes to the
characters might impact readers. It became apparent how instrumental individual experiences are in determining how we interpret a book and its characters. It is important to remember that personal experiences and preferences play a vital role in determining individual favorites. With that said, both award books and classics carry different meaning for different people. While some people love Little Women, others hate it; and that’s acceptable. Writing and reading are such powerful gifts and both should be appreciated and respected.

When considering classics, it’s also important to remember there is flexibility and change over time. Groups of people, gender, race, geography, and social awareness all have the ability to impact and determine a book’s success and historical place. Difference in opinions over time became apparent when we read the selected scholarship articles for Little Women. This articles ranged over a 90-year period. In 1869, the article was positive which isn’t surprising considering the success Little Women had achieved. The 1929 Mann article was very informative about Louisa May Alcott on both a personal and professional level. In spoke in a positive light about Little Women still being “more popular than ever” sixty years after its publication. Again, this positive article was probably a reflection of the popularity and demand with which Little Women continued to maintain. The Barnett (1957) article again still remained positive and focused on how Little Woman sustained and increased in popularity. The positive perspectives slowly and dramatically began to change with the Brophy (1966), Russ (1968), Fetterley (1979), and the Susina (1999) articles. These articles became more critical of Little Women and Alcott. I feel generational and social changes and expectations were beginning. These changes and modifications had an impact on how previous ideals were perceived. It was a time when women were entering the workforce and becoming more assertive in their expectations. The articles written during this time period basically questioned Alcott’s writing ability. They referred to her as being to “sentimental”, Fetterley states that Alcott made thematic and stylistic compromises in Little Women and Susina tears the book apart by stating that Alcott’s presentation of male characters in limited and flawed. These articles essentially demonstrate and verify the role that society, gender, race, social awareness, time period and geography all have possible impacts on how a book in interpreted, perceived, accepted or rejected. A book achieving “classic” status is largely influenced by the understandings that readers and critics have of that book. Time also plays a role in the way a book is understood, interpreted and written about. It is possible for many shifts of opinion about a book to occur over a period of time. Surviving the test of time is a testament to a book achieving “classic” status. Once again, I found reading various articles over an extended period of time to be a valuable lesson. I learned how time could effect and alter relativeness, perceptions, perspectives and opinions. It was critical to witness an evolution of feelings regarding Little Women and Louisa May Alcott in the articles. Reading the thoughts and opinions enabled me to think about, question and understand how and why time impacts books. This is yet another useful teaching tool for literature in my classroom.

In conclusion of our Little Women study, we viewed two film versions of the book. Comparing and contrasting these two movies was fun and interesting. Basically I learned that how a book is perceived and interpreted effects how it is represented and produced. Altering elements are: cast members chosen for characters, selected sections that are
chosen and those that are cut from the book, which dialogue will be enhanced or abbreviated and which characters will be accentuated and which will be overshadowed. Money, audience, time, particular message desired to portray, and interpretation or understanding of the book also have an effect on the outcome of the movie. Once again, time plays an important role between the two movie (1933 & 1994) versions. Relevance to each time period is essential in determining what would be included and excluded in the movie. Expectations and acceptance of the audience for each time period play a role in the choices made when producing a movie. The movie needs to be able to “sell” and that depends on what is important and relevant during that particular period of time. There were definite variances between the book and both movies. This, as I previously pointed out, is a clear reflection of time period, audience, expectations, acceptable ideals, money, character portrayals, chosen actors, book interpretations and understandings and messages desired to be stressed. Each and every change that occurs makes an impact. Certain aspects are lost and others are gained. Ultimately, it depends on each individual, whether they are reading the book or viewing the movie, as to how the contents are experienced. I think comparing and contrasting a book and a movie allows for a better understanding of the relevance of time and importance of interpretation (from the author to the producer). This contrast and comparison assignment also allows an individual to experience the difference between the intentions of a writer and the interpretations of a producer and cast. I would definitely use this method of comparing and contrasting in my classroom.

In Weeks 10 and 11, for Module 3, we covered Awards & Classics. Our group chose to read The Wizard of Oz and A Wrinkle In Time for this assignment. There were four different roles: personal response, textual response, critical response and pedagogical response. I assumed the position of critical response for The Wizard of Oz and textual response for A Wrinkle In Time. I really enjoyed this method of discussing and comparing The Wizard of Oz, which is considered a “classic” of children’s literature, and A Wrinkle In Time, which won a Newbery Award. Using the Literature Discussion Group format of choosing a deliberate role and then writing a summary from your assumed position, proved to be an informative assignment for me. Our group was able to choose our own books (which gave us a sense of personal ownership), we were involved in collaborative working and learning together, assuming a specific role lead to deeper thought, inquiries and discussions, and individually we felt a strong sense of responsibility for sharing adequate and appropriate information with our group members. Our group discovered that Wizard was a “familiar old friend” to read and Wrinkle we unanimously found more difficult and less enjoyable. We established our reasons for The Wizard becoming a children’s “classic” (we feel the popularity of the movie plays a vital role) and we discussed the reasons for Wrinkle’s award status. We also discussed the similarities and differences within the two books. This assignment was reflective of when we compared another award winner (Secret of the Andes) to a children’s “classic” (Charlotte’s Web). I can visualize using Discussion Literature Groups with my class. This method was successful within our group and offers many assets in comparing books. After this final assignment, I came away with a clear, concise and convinced opinion that all literature (whether it wins an award or not and whether it is considered a “classic” or not) is experienced and interpreted differently by each individual. Everyone within our group loved Wizard because we all remembered it from our childhood. None of us enjoyed Wrinkle, yet one group member shared that one
of her students loved it and considered it his favorite book of all time. None of us could relate to that, but we all respected his opinion and feelings. It brought awareness that “one man’s junk is another man’s treasure”.

Before this course I could have never elaborated about literature awards or classics. Previously I could list two awards (the Caldecott and Newbery—I knew nothing in detail about either award) and I struggled with the assignment in this course to list five books I considered to be children’s classics (yes, I was the idiot who listed Moby Dick simply because I couldn’t think of any other title). Primarily this ignorance was due to the fact that I didn’t know about or understand what awards and classics consisted of, how they were established, by whom, for what reason, or any other pertinent information needed to successfully comprehend and discuss these topics. Wow, have I grown! I look at literature with completely different eyes now. I feel as though I now have a knowledgeable foundation to continue to build upon and also to share with my students. I now realize my students can read acceptance speeches, scholarships and reviews. They can look at different versions of a “classic” and recognize the similarities and differences and how they impact a reader or viewer. I can better equip my students with appropriate “vocabulary” to enable them to have more thought-provoking discussions and I can share Sipe’s terms to encourage them to not just “see” an illustration, but to question and understand the illustrator’s choices. I have learned that experiencing literature goes much deeper than simply reading the text on the page. Reading has forever changed for me and I thank Dr. Apol and my classmates who have open my mind and challenged me to experience books on a deeper, more memorable level. I realize that all readers, including myself, have a voice in what is commonly called literary history. Literary history is actually a record of choices that represents all of us who experience literature. Again I reiterate, what a powerful and liberating feeling!

Thank you to Dr. Apol and everyone in TE 836 for making this a memorable experience that I will continue to reflect on both personally and professionally!

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