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

I believe that Louise Bernikow’s above quote works well to explain the theme of this semester’s class on awards and classics in children’s literature. All of the books that we named, recommended, experienced, and discussed in the course, in addition to the scholarship we read, were all useful contributions to children’s literature and should be considered the literary history that Bernikow is referring to. I feel that this literary history then can be documented as a “record of choices”. Through the work that we did as a class, in groups, and as individuals, showed that awards, classics, and personal favorites or “great” books in children’s literature were all established as such through a series of choices made by authors, librarians, publishers, critics, readers, society, generations, and cultures. Also, through my coursework, I have come to believe that choice determines the path, journey, and outcome of our literary history.

At the beginning of the course, I felt that much of the labeling and popularity of certain books within the world of children’s literature was controlled mostly by publishing company or the “powers that be”-created hype. Through this then, honor and award-granting committees responded. But I pleasantly discovered through my coursework that the medals on the covers of the books and the labels of “classic” don’t result from such a jaded place or world.

First, as a class, we were asked to discuss our personal choices for “great” books. This did not imply that they must be award-winning or distinguished. Many students’ choices were similar and started to show some evolving patterns. Through class discussion, we discovered that many of our personal “great” books were similar in theme, plot, and character, to choices made by others in the class. Some collections/series (Babysitters Club, Harry Potter) kept popping up, as did revered “classics” such as Charlotte’s Web and Little Women. It quickly became apparent that many of the “choices” were also influenced by “choice”. Many students, including myself, discussed how certain books had become “greats” to them through their personal experience which was actually initiated by someone else. Fathers, mothers, grandparents, and teachers had all made conscious choices to read these books to children and so they continued on in the lives of these students. In addition to these people introducing the book, they also brought with them emotion, which deepened the reader’s connection to that particular book. This was an element that caused us to recognize that popularity in children’s literature, and thus literary history, is not instant, random, or static, and is influenced by many things, which is, most importantly, choices. We also discovered through our similarities in choice and notice of personal experience acting as an influence on our choices, that our reasoning behind our choices were establishing criteria for why certain books receive awards and why some are eventually labeled “classic”. This helped me
begin to realize that books are ultimately determined to be classics by readers and not by outsiders who wish certain books to gain popularity over others because of agendas.

After analyzing personal “choice” among children’s literature, we then were to establish a way to analyze why influential people make their own personal choices of “notable” and even “classic” books. Before this course, much like others (as I discovered in the discussions), I had no clue as to who sat on the committees to choose books for awards or how a book was even nominated. Through group research, I was able to find out who actually composed the committees that choose books to receive awards. It was interesting to know that the people choosing (librarians, authors, critics), although qualified, may not be the best choices to choose books that deserve the recognition, according to the class. Much like me, many were curious as to why teacher opinion was not more regarded in award nominations and choice. We then began to research and discussed various books that had been honored, awarded, and in some circumstances, passed over in distinctions for other books in a particular year. We then discussed different reasons why committees choose books to be distinguished. I was able to determine that even though some books like The Secret of the Andes was chosen over Charlotte’s Web, it was not necessarily a superior book and readers were still able to find, embrace, and make Charlotte’s Web a celebrated children’s classic. It is reassuring to know that even though a committee may pass up a good book, if it really is “good”, readers will still find it.

I also learned that in addition to receiving the distinction of an actual award, books also receive some advantages that help their tale come closer to “classic” status. The awarded or honored author and/or illustrator gain recognition and respect within literary communities, popularity with a large group of readers, money in the form of press, publicity, and sales, and higher standing and trust for future stories or books within the publishing world. All the aforementioned gains then influence readers and may then help a book becoming a “classic” that otherwise may not have been so popular on its own. So then, although it is not a primary reason, a committee’s “choice” may help lead a book to becoming a possible personal “choice” of a reader one day and eventually entering the realm of literary history as a “classic”.

When an award book becomes popular because of an award, publicity or even, in some circumstances, controversy (like that seen with the 2007 Newbury winner), it then “begs” or lends itself to reinterpretation in a different medium, such as film, television, stage, etc. Our group discussed the fact that reinterpretation becomes a reason for making something a “classic”. Our groups and class then established and discussed various criteria for determining what actually a classic is. These also may become the reasons that people make the choice to read certain literature and help its “classic” status. Some of these criteria were: universal themes, timeless themes, generational continuations in themes, school study, reinterpretation, and marketing. But this discussion then led to a question of whether a classic is really a classic because a publisher “chooses” to label it as such, or is it really more about the choices made by a reader? I feel that through all of
the coursework, I have discovered that a personal choice made by a reader ultimately dictates the choice of the publisher, which then in turn influences choices made by new readers, and creates a large revolving circle of choice that ends in the same conclusion: classics are classics because they contain elements that engage readers and readers keep those tales alive because of the connection they share with the text (and publishers just keep up with the demand).

As mentioned again, one action occurs frequently with literary history, reinterpretation. I was able to further examine this by reading the novel, Little Women, and then viewing two different film versions of the book. I also read and discussed reviews, critiques, and criticisms (or scholarship) surrounding the novel and reinterpretations. The theme of “choice” resounded over and over again throughout these activities. By watching the film versions and reading scholarship, “choice” occurred in each of the readings and viewings. In the scholarship pieces, the authors chose what elements of the text to center their response around. Some chose which elements of the original novel to visually represent and which elements to omit. They chose which elements were not necessary in order to convey their “vision” of the novel. In each circumstance, the viewer or reader is then again able to choose their response and reaction. I even found myself greatly opposed to some of the opinion in the scholarship and how some of the story elements were portrayed or omitted in the films. These provocations each illustrated the personal choice brought to the literary history that is Little Women.

From the choice within reinterpretations and scholarship, we were able to explore the interactions of “awards” with “classics”. By being able to keep the reasoning surrounding a “classic” in mind, I was able to evaluate the merit of pairing an award with a classic that shared a common theme. Just as with classics, awards are reinterpreted into various mediums and utilization of themes (both timeless and transcendent) occur and show cultural, societal, and generational accounts that are important for readers to experience. Again, choice was able to come in to play. As an educator, I would be able to pair up either: two classics, an award with a classic, or even two awards together, based on what my motivation was for teaching. I could choose similar themes to accentuate a message; I could choose opposing ideas or themes to further illustrate the differences and allow deeper interaction with each of the separate themes. There are endless possibilities within choice of how to employ awards and classics within a curriculum. This then leads the choice to further establishing “established” literary history with the next generation, our students.

So, throughout the course and the assignments, I was able to explore, discuss, and reflect upon how our literary history, especially awards and classics in children’s literature and scholarship concerning these works, actually reflects the choices made by scholars, critics, librarians, authors, readers, publishers, society, generations, cultures, and
societies as a whole. By going through various classics and award books, we can explore the choices behind how this book came to its current status or why a book may not have been considered as important or influential as another in our literary history. Thus, through the activities throughout the course, I was able to determine that choice establishes the path and journey of the literary history of our time (and that of the previous and future generations). “Choice” thus dictates what books actually become our “literary history”, as Bernikow suggests.