

Topic Page: [Newbery Medal](#)

Definition: **Newbery Medal** from *The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide*

Annual award for an outstanding US book for children, given by the American Library Association since 1922.

The award is named after John Newbery (1713–1767), an English printer who published many books for children.

Summary Article: **Newbery Medal**

From *Continuum Encyclopedia of Children's Literature*

Donated by the Frederic G. Melcher family, the Newbery Medal has been awarded annually since 1922 under the supervision of the Association for Library Service to Children of the AMERICAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION (ALA). The Newbery Medal is given to the author of the most distinguished contribution to literature for children published in the U.S. during the preceding year. Announced in January, the award is limited to residents or citizens of the United States.

The ingredients to create an audience for children's books included the new Carnegie-endowed libraries with separate rooms for children's services, staffed by librarians trained to provide children's services, the establishment of separate children's publishing departments and a groundswell of children's book reviews by specialists in the field.

The ALA gave enthusiastic support for these efforts, especially in its Children's Librarians Section, now the Association for Library Service to Children. As advocates of good books for children, their gratitude and ours go to such catalysts as the post–World War I triumvirate of Franklin Mathiews, Frederic MELCHER, and Anne Carroll Moore. The two bookmen had approached Moore with a proposal for the establishment of a Children's Book Week in 1919 and then Melcher donated the money to create an award named after British children's book publisher John NEWBERY. It would be, however, the children's librarians who would choose the books to be honored.

It is a monumental task, one that is usually considered a pleasure and a privilege by those who are elected or appointed. It may have been easier in 1922, choosing that first Newbery winner. There were fewer books then. Between 1915 and 1945 the annual average of new titles was only 713. No doubt librarians felt, as we do now, the same sense of obligation to choose wisely. They must have hoped, as we do today, that children who read the award books would enjoy them. Almost certainly, they too were familiar with children's needs and reading interests. And surely, even with fewer eligible books, they were frustrated by the conflicting or competing virtues of fiction and nonfiction, realism and FANTASY, POETRY and prose.

There are other factors that influence the opinions and evaluations of committee members, and some of those factors may operate silently. We are all products of our time as well as of our heredity and our environment. We all have convictions about what children should know, or not know, and perhaps at what age. We each have a preference for some styles of writing and most of us have a desire to be objective and rational. We may unwittingly be swayed in individual establishment of priorities by sympathy for an author who has had many Honor Books but never won the medal. Most of us respond

favorably to books that espouse a cause we hold dear, and we may differ in our opinions of whether a good novel with an important social message or a good novel with superb characterization is the more worthy.

It is true now, as it was true when John Newbery published children's books, that what is published for children reflects contemporary society's idea of what children should read, and that opinions about that idea change with time and place. Today our language has changed, our mores have changed, and our ideas about how children learn and what we want them to learn have shifted repeatedly and will surely continue to change in the future.

If we look at the Newbery Medal books as examples of their times (even as the best of their time) we will find influences of the periods from which they came. They have been worthy of the kudos they have received, even though there are many cases in which members of committees, or librarians not on committees, felt that an Honor Book was equally worthy (or even more worthy) of the medal.

The Newbery winners of the 1920s were, for the most part, not easy reading. Although *The Story of Mankind* (VAN LOON, 1921) has a flowing style and pervasive HUMOR, it is packed with facts and theories and covers a vast expanse of time. While Hugh LOFTING's *The Voyages of Doctor Dolittle* (1922) is a FANTASY with animal characters (always popular with children), there has been contemporary criticism about its depiction of native characters and the use of racial epithets. Although those depictions may not have raised objections at the time of publication, subsequent adverse criticism resulted in a partial revision in the 1980s. These two quite different books most surely would not be published today without major changes.

Despite the severe financial depression of the 1930s, children's book publishing flourished, as did circulation statistics in libraries. While there was an observable interest in books set outside the United States, this was the last decade in which four of the ten medal winners were so framed: *The Cat Who Went to Heaven* (COATS-WORTH, 1930), Japan; *Young Fu of the Upper Yangtze* (Lewis, 1932), China; *Dobry* (Shannon, 1934), Bulgaria; and *The White Stag* (SEREDY, 1937), Hungary.

Although there was an increasing interest in FOLKLORE and in modern FAIRY TALES, that trend may also have been caused by a combination of financial stress and the reinforced patriotism engendered by the recent war. Although *Caddie Woodlawn* (BRINK, 1935) was immediately popular as period fiction it was later criticized for its treatment of NATIVE AMERICANS, but at the time there were few voiced objections. "Sensitivity training" and "political correctness" were phrases of the future. However, both of those concepts were exemplified in Laura Armer's *Waterless Mountain* (1931), a dignified yet moving story of a Navajo boy.

In the next twenty years, the preference for books set in the United States continued, with only Armstrong SPERRY's *Call It Courage* (1940), Elizabeth Janet GRAY's *Adam of the Road* (1942), Marguerite DE ANGELI's *The Door in the Wall* (1949), Ann Nolan CLARK's *Secret of the Andes* (1952), and Meindert DEJONG's *The Wheel on the School* (1954) being set in other countries. Again, some of this focus on the home scene may have been due to the war in Europe.

There was little literary experimentation or boundary-crossing save for the yeasty mix of science, humor, and fantasy in *The Twenty-One Balloons* (William Pene DU BOIS, 1947), and in two books that were surely influenced by the growing emphasis on the representation of ethnic diversity in our world. One was *Amos Fortune, Free Man* (Elizabeth YATES, 1950), the true life story of a slave who became

a free man, a landowner, and a valued member of a New Hampshire community. *Secret of the Andes*, with a Peruvian Indian boy as protagonist, is a bit heavy stylistically. With Lois LENSKI's *Strawberry Girl* (1945), the books above show a picture of economic as well as ethnic diversity.

It is not unusual for children's book publishing to show a time lag in depicting changes—a phenomenon that may indicate a reluctance to admit change, perhaps to take the chance, by publishing a taboo-breaking book—to seem to indicate approval of change. Whether books such as E. B. WHITE's *Trumpet of the Swan* (1970) or *Stuart Little* (1945) were on the voting list for award consideration only the committee members for the years in which those books were eligible to know. It is certainly possible that they were considered daring and it is more than possible that Louise FITZHUGH's *Harriet the Spy* (1967) or *Ellen Grae* by Vera and Bill CLEAVER (1967) never even made it onto a preliminary list since both aroused some controversy.

In the 1960s, there was some indication that societal concerns affected what was published and what was applauded. It seems unlikely that an eccentric man who lives in a dilapidated shack and who has difficulty in communicating would have been deemed an appropriate protagonist for the prestigious Newbery Medal in earlier years, but Joseph KRUMGOLD's *Onion John* was the 1960 winner.

In truth, the Newbery Award winners and Honor Books are a small sampling of what is published each year. That perfect-parent image that was maintained for so long is missing from many contemporary books, some of which have had fine reviews—but no Newbery Awards. But changes creep in, as is evident in E. L. KONIGSBURG's *From the Mixed-up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler* (1967), there are no parents to assess in a story in which two children run away—for a while—from home. In Irene HUNT's *Up a Road Slowly* (1966), there's an alcoholic uncle in a story about a child who is sent away to stay with kinfolk for ten years by her widowed father.

Perhaps the 1970s were the years in which there was clear evidence that Newbery committees were corroborating the fact that those children who were coping with real problems in books were a mirror of those who coped in real life. What is remarkable is that half of the Newbery Award books of this decade deal with children facing serious problems; would bereavement, THE DISABLED IN CHILDREN'S AND YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE, racial prejudice, and discrimination have been so honestly explored even a decade earlier?

In the 1980s and 1990s, there were some unusual choices: not one but two poetry books. In Nancy WILLARD's *A Visit to William Blake's Inn: Poems for Innocent and Experienced Travelers* (1981), a carousel of vitality in ebullient verse, an amazing cast of characters visit an inn whose host is William Blake. The book received the singular distinction of being named a CALDECOTT MEDAL Honor Book in the same year. Paul FLEISCHMAN's *Joyful Noise: Poems for Two Voices* (1988) offers an elegant revival of the art of choral reading, with both the voices of each poem spoken by insects, alone or together.

Russell FREEDMAN, in *Lincoln, A Photobiography* (1987) shows his readers that nonfiction can be outstanding for its distinctive style and be “the most distinguished contribution of the year.” A first in Newbery history, Beverly CLEARY's *Dear Mr. Henshaw* (1983) is a story effectively told in deftly sustained letters.

We cannot fail to recognize that for seventy-five years a great many people have created an impressive record of enlightened choice. Of course some books are dated, of course some fine books

were missed, of course each of us has been disappointed at times. The list of winners and honor books is a testament to the democratic process.

(Excerpted by the author from “The Newbery at 75: Changing with the Times” in *American Libraries*, March 1997)

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