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## Literary History Theory

History has and will always be contextual; perceived through a lens in which the media and press create. Another layer to this would be how someone wants to understand it on a personal level; as the old saying goes, "you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make them drink." This ideology does not differ based upon the presented historical subject matter; although this level of blindness occurs most frequently with politics, it is no stranger to other matters. All disputes will be seen in terms of how one would like to see it. After unveiling some of the most notable literary awards, such as the Newbery and the Caldecott, I have stumbled upon several quandaries. The central dilemma is how the selection process works, and who is deciding the fate of these books? The reality is the terms and conditions are loose, and often, award winners are selected through personal connections. As Louise Bernikow, a famous author, once stated, "What is commonly called *literary history* is actually a record of choices." Bernikow could not have described the selection process any better.

As I inquired into the process that these distinguished awards go through, I was surprised to see the lack of specification within the listed criteria. The Newbery award, for example, only presents three documented bullets of criteria to win. All of which are blissfully vague enough for any (American) to be deemed a winner. Similarly, another esteemed award, the Caldecott, also only presents three bullet points of criteria. The Caldecott award does have a few more ramifications listed than the Newbery but is also blissfully vague. So how can such prestigious awards have so little meaning? To me, the answer is money, publishers, and of course, endorsements. I have no plan to devalue the selection committee, but deciding if a book provides a "distinguished contribution" or not is not very distinct. Bernikow's quote supports the idea that the awarded books themselves are not a part of literary history, rather a chosen piece of literacy that a roomful of impressionable individuals sat in to decide at one particular point in society. If one were to examine the award winners with a close lens, one would find trends in publishing companies and authors, leading one to assume that there is more to the selection process than what meets the eye. Like mentioned beforehand, one can expect that money, publishers, and press have a stronghold on which books become award winners; this is not inherently bad, but of course, it derails any niche authors from winning.

Both award companies saw a shift in their chosen winners just a few years ago. Previously, very few awarded books featured minority groups such as African Americans, LGBTQ+ communities, and Asian Americans. Many of the past awarded books are riddled with gender stereotypes and other dated material. Fortunately, award companies are now selecting more diverse books that feature those minority communities; however, from this, a new question developed; are they only selecting books that feature minority communities to tick off a box to support their claim that the selection committee is not prejudiced against the mentioned communities. This is another example that supports Bernikow's quote and my deteriorating

perception of these awards. Within the conversation of awarded books lies another category of books deemed “classics”.

The terms "award-winning" and "classic" are different in a few regards but have similar paths to their becoming. The only notable difference is "award winners" chosen based on money and publisher, whereas "classics" hang onto the bandwagon idea. The bandwagon is that if multiple people like the same thing, it is hard to counter their opinions; thus, a "classic" is chosen essentially based on popularity. Reinforcing the idea that literary history is a collection of chosen books; because of this, Bernikow's accusation of literary history being a record of literary choices transcends into the selection of "classics" just as easily. Like past awarded books, the books we once deemed classics uphold the same pitfalls that award winners do. The main pitfalls being an apparent lack of diversity amongst most minority groups and toxic gender stereotypes. These pitfalls are prevalent in *Peter Pan* by J.M Barrie. *Peter Pan* is the epitome of "classics," a novel romanticized by many. If readers choose to examine this text, they would see that the book displays toxic gender stereotypes and features no diverse characters. There are several books just like *Peter Pan* that present themes that are considered taboo but are relentlessly well-known for being a "classic," this is another example supporting Bernikow's quote.

### **Practice**

Since I was a young child, I knew I wanted to become a teacher. I always loved school, but more importantly, I always loved reading. I was fortunate to see myself in literature, blonde, blue-eyed, and Caucasian, the perfect mix to create one of the most popular characters that fill library shelves everywhere. Granted, I am a female, and suppose I have been a stranger to the idea of toxic gender roles. Still, I was lucky because I was able to find myself and my community represented in literature. This fortune did not occur to me until I entered my undergraduate degree and began studying literature. I suppose I always knew there were not as many novels with diverse characters, but I was unaware that there were indeed so few. Since becoming more aware and my pledge toward moving forward, I have been and will continue to be far more selective when choosing a book for my classroom library. I want a good mix of characters representing all my students, not just the ones that look a certain way. My statement of this also reminds me of what Bernikow said; I am creating my students' and I's literary history by choosing what texts to expose my students to.

Previous to this course, I trusted award-winning books. I assumed them to be reliable and great literary works because I presumed that they were chosen from strict criteria and chosen for specific reasons. I have continuously taught my students to look for those little gold and silver medals on books, to let them know that this is a symbol that it is a good book, but now I think there could be a higher level of discovery for them not to choose one with a medal pressed on the cover. Above all, a good book cannot be defined by an award or a title such as "classic"; instead, it is decided by the individual reader. On a micro level, the reader can find themselves between the pages and feel represented or find someone they have seen, allowing them to create a better understanding of a world outside of their own. On the macro level, where I sit as the teacher, I

am given books to read with my students from a preselected curriculum filled with the books *chosen* by a committee or company, who have all the same influences as an award company selection committee. The influence of money, publishers, and the press will never go away. Therefore, as a teacher, I have to learn how to supplement the curriculum and advocate to add newer books that allow students to formulate their own opinions and not be persuaded by awards.

My students and I are similar in so many ways, often naive, but we do our best to understand the purpose and intent behind why something occurs. After examining “classics” and awards in this course, I am excited to try and have my students investigate "classics" of their own. I currently teach fourth grade and believe that many students would offer interesting viewpoints and provide surprisingly persuasive opinions. I teach my students the world give them what they give it (not always); for example, if you begin with an open mind, there is a better chance for your mind to be opened (this concept works for almost everything). I hope that post-COVID, I will be able to create literacy groups where students can collaborate and decide if they feel their book should be considered a "classic" or not. Similar to how we did just with less open-ended investigations and more parameters. Regardless, it is essential to encourage students, even young ones, to examine and think about the books they are reading. For young readers, it can be simple, for example, what did you like and what did you not like about a book, but for older readers, they can slowly dive into deeper conversations surrounding the influences that accumulate together to alter the selection committee's opinions. From an exercise like the one mentioned above, I hope that my students will begin to think deeper about diversity in text and help foster their literary analysis skills later in life. More importantly, by creating an open platform for children to share their thoughts about a book, they will be better equipped to understand Louise Bernikow when she said, "What is commonly called *literary* history is actually a record of choices." she provokes those who hear the quote to think twice about the how external forces can so easily alter the history of literacy.