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The Newbery Medal and Honor Books: 1922-1981

Marilyn Leathers Solt

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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Marilyn Leathers Solt (bio)

On June 29, 1981, in San Francisco, California, for the sixtieth time the

Newbery Medal was presented "for the most distinguished contribution to American Literature for Children." The recipient was Katherine Paterson for her novel Jacob Have I Loved. The first Medal was given on June 27, 1922, in Detroit, Michigan, to Dr. Hendrik Van Loon for his history, The Story of Mankind. With growing prestige, in each of the years between, the award has been made for the book that was considered the "most distinguished" of that year. All types of fiction and nonfiction have brought the Medal to various authors. Over the years an additional 205 books have been named Honor Books, a considerable distinction in itself. This essay reviews by genre the characteristics and trends of the Newbery Medal and Honor Books chosen from 1922 through 1981. While the decades run 1922 through 1931, 1932 through 1941, etc., the first decade is referred to as the 1920s, the second decade as the 1930s, and so forth.

Traditional Literature

This category includes the titles classified as folk tales, fables, legends, epics, and hero stories. Traditional literature has had fewer representatives among the Newbery books than most of the other genres. Moreover, more than half the titles in this category appeared in the first two decades.

Folk tales make up one of the major divisions of traditional literature considered particularly suitable for children, and half of the Newbery titles classed as traditional literature appear in this group. Beginning with the collections of the Grimm brothers early in the nineteenth century, scholar after scholar [End Page 22] recorded the folklore of his own region. It might seem that a hundred years later there would be none left to take directly from the oral tradition. Surprisingly, this is not true. Parts or all of most of these collections came from oral sources. Often the tales recorded were told to the reteller when he or she was a child in another country. For example, Padraic Colum related tales he heard in his native Ireland in The Big Tree of Bunlahy (1934). The years following the book titles are the years they became Newbery books. The books were

published the preceding year.) and Isaac B. Singer retold tales he heard as a boy in Poland in Zlateh the Goat (1967) and When Shlemiel Went to Warsaw (1969). The most recent title in this group, Anpao (1978) is a folk history of the Indians of America by a Native American.

Fantasy

The books of fantasy make up a smaller group than the biographies and other books of information. Although fantasy has been represented in every decade, it has the largest number of titles in the first, fifth, and sixth decades. Six of the ten books appearing in the first decade are out of print, but most of the books from the 1930s on remain in print.

Animal fantasies, comprising nearly one-third of all the books of fantasy, appear in every decade. Among them is Charlotte's Web (1953), perhaps the best-loved book of the twentieth century. The animal subjects range from such small, commonplace, and multitudinous creatures as spiders and crickets to such fanciful creatures as a yellow and blue striped baby dragon and a 70,000 year-old Great Glass Sea Snail. While some stories have fairy-tale-like settings and events, all inspire belief by being closely linked to reality. All show originality of invention, humor, and light hearted moments. They are well-written. In addition, all demonstrate small universal truths, with several, including Charlotte's Web and Rabbit Hill (1945), conveying larger themes.

The two types of fantasy that predominated in the first decade have appeared infrequently since. These were literary fairy tales, stories that followed the pattern of the traditional folktale; and stories in which history was blended with fantasy. Most of the former are out of print and all but one, Hitty (1930), of the latter.

In the 1960s and 1970s the Newbery authors of fantasy began to employ different elements of traditional literature. Utilizing components found in old hero tales, Lloyd Alexander, in The Black...

inhumanity of life on a slave ship while Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry suggests the more subtle forms of prejudice evident in the twentieth century. Katherine Paterson's two winners, Bridge to Terabithia (1978) and Jacob Have I Loved (1981), deal with family life and the unequalled demands a talented child puts on a family. The need for acceptance by friends, siblings and parents is explored. Joan Blou's A Gathering of Days: A New England Girl's Journal, 1830-32 (1989) is also a book in which changing family roles and acceptance are scrutinized.

Two books are unique among recent winners. One is Ellen Raskin's The Westing Game (1979). With delightful wit, Raskin takes the reader on a gleeful search for an unusual murderer. In the face of bizarre events, each of her characters finds the courage to face himself, and the intrinsic rewards found are far greater than the monetary rewards offered. The other unique winner is a fantasy, Susan Cooper's The Grey King (1976). This book is part of a series which portrays the eternal conflict between the forces of good and evil. Great courage is demanded.

It seems apparent that the social themes explored are not of themselves unusual. What is unusual is the sensitivity and compassion of the exploration. The courage displayed by the major character in each of the books is both rare and heartwarming. In her 1978 Newbery acceptance speech, Katherine Paterson referred to her books as bridges which span diverse times, cultures, and human behaviors. This could be said of all the winners of the last decade. Each portrays characters who are warm and alive. Readers cannot help being caught up in their problems—shedding tears at their sorrows and smiling with relief at the resolutions. While endings may not be happy, the lessons are those of real life. Courage prevails!

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(Barbara A. St. John is Consultant for the Gifted and Talented Programs of Lenawee County, Michigan, and a member of the Graduate Faculty at Sigma Heights, Adrian, Michigan.)

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The Newbery Medal and Honor Books: 1922-1981*

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