

## 13.1 Awards and Classics as Cultural Constructs

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Louise Bernikow states, “What is commonly called literary history is actually a record of choices.” I can relate this quote to my time spent in the course, TE 836, as much of what I learned about award winning and “classic” literature and much of the assignments I completed related to our literary history and were based on choices.

I began the course by identifying and discussing the “best” book from my childhood. This was a sample of my own literary history and it reflected one of the choices of books I had decided to read as a child and the choices that my parents read to me as I was growing up. For example, I chose to designate *Mrs. Piggle Wiggle* as my “best” book. This had been a book that my mom had chosen to give me as a birthday gift as it was a book she had kept from her own childhood and had wanted to pass down to me so that we could read it together. For assignment 1.2 I wrote this about my “best” book, “To be honest I remember very little about the book’s contents yet I do remember how much I loved reading the books...This book series was so special to me because my mom would take the time to read them with me...The first book of the series even belonged to my mom.” Here I refer to the fact that first this book was my mom’s choice for my reading. Yet then it became my own choice as I continued to read the rest of the books in the series. It was one of my favorite chapter books as a young elementary student and it helped to spark in me a love of reading. It was interesting that many of my classmates chose a “best” book for its sentimental value and/or the memories they have of reading the book with someone special as well, which I think is really where most of us began our literary history...listening to someone else read on of their own favorite books to us.

It was also interesting that there were very few repeated titles on our class’s list of “best” books. This could be in part due to the fact that it was a broad range of titles which were appropriate for varied age groups and not a “best” book in a narrower category. Yet everyone’s literary history is going to be different according to the choices we make about the books we read and the books we have available to us. In the 1.5

assignment, I wrote, “Each person brings their own life experiences and education as a diverse background to their thoughts on “good” literature and therefore we evaluate books differently...It depends on many different factors, all of which bring about a unique view by the individual person. These factors can include personal interests, genre preference, life experiences, etc.” In other words, every person has the background knowledge of their own choices and the choices that others (parents, teachers, etc.) have made for us to how they read and evaluate literature. Therefore everyone has a different opinion on what constitutes a “best” book.

Next in the course, we studied some of the awards that are given to children’s literature. This relates to Bernikow’s quote as award winning books, especially those of the prestigious Newbery and Caldecott awards, are part of our country’s literary history and are all based upon the choices of publishers and award committees. Award winning books are often the books that are bought by and read in schools each year and generally relate to important movements in our country’s history. Award winning books though are really just a matter of people’s choices. For instance, publishers must choose which books they will send in to nominate for different awards each year. In addition, once the books are nominated, people are chosen to be on award committees and then the award committees make choices on which books should be winners and honor books each year. This in turn has an affect on consumer’s choices as to which books they will buy that year.

I learned about this process through our award studies as we listed the award criteria, process of nomination, and worked to understand committee choices. For example, when we read *Charlotte’s Web* and *The Secret of the Andes* and worked to determine why the Newbery award committee that year might have chosen *The Secret of the Andes*. My group and I came to the conclusion that it was most likely due to what was happening in history at the time, a push for multiculturalism, and also the opinion of one strong-minded committee member in that she did not care for the talking animals in *Charlotte’s Web* deeming them too whimsical to be in a Newbery award winning book. Committee members, although they have literary expertise, still have their own literary history and life choices that affect their views on the books they read. This committee member’s choice and the choice of our country to more highly pursue books that include

different cultures then had an affect on our literary history as *Charlotte's Web* was only an honor book that year. Yet we see here that consumers also hold the power to make choices which influence our literary history as *Charlotte's Web* is still very popular today where as *The Secret of the Andes* was not even familiar to many of us in the course, so despite it being a winner it has not held its place in our literary history and many have forgotten it. In the 5.1 assignment, I wrote, "I can say that I would not have ever picked up the book *The Secret of the Andes* on my own and if it had not earned the Newberry award and been a part of this course's curriculum I would never have read it and probably many other people could say the same about this book." So sometimes other people's choices, such as Professor Apol in this case, can encourage you to broaden the literature you read by making choices for you about what books you will read.

Assignment 4.4 brought a different light to award winning books and that was to no longer look at the choices of award committees, but to learn about the choices an author makes when writing a book. I read the Caldecott winning picture book titled *Kitten's First Full Moon* by Kevin Henkes and I also read his award acceptance speech. Firstly, Henkes talked a lot about the choices he made when it came to his illustrations in the book, such as by making them all in black, white, and gray as well as deciding on a specific medium. Secondly, Henkes describes what he chose as his inspiration for the book. In 4.4 I wrote, "Henkes describes in his speech that some of the inspiration for this book was his children and the many "firsts" that children go through in their first years of life...When writing and illustrating this book he tried to put himself in the shoes of a child having a first experience." Thirdly, Henkes discussed how his choice of inspiration effected how the character was portrayed and illustrated in order to depict that emotion that would be encompassed during a first event.

After studying award winning books, we moved to looking at classics of children's literature. Here I discovered that classics are in a way choices that generations have made about what books are their favorites as far as what books have been popular and iconic over time, have been recognized by literary scholars, have been purchased greatly by consumers, and have been idolized into merchandise for children. Books being deemed literary "classics" are determined to be that by multiple factors which include some common criteria, such as the fact that the book has been around for an

extended length of time and has still remained popular, it includes a universal theme chosen by the author, it relates/connects to the lives of the children who read the book, and exemplifies high literary quality. One question I came upon during this module of the course was: If generations choose to no longer read a previously deemed “classic” due to outdated language, low ability to relate/connect to current child readers, etc. then is it no longer considered a “classic”? Just as *Peter Pan* is hardly ever read anymore, yet it is viewed in film versions and read through more modern versions of the book, the question remains, can it still be considered a classic because new generations enjoy the story in different ways, such as through films?

We watched and wrote about three films based off of the classic *Peter Pan*. The films depicted first of all choices made to impact our literary history by making a book into a film in the first place. Also, the multiple versions which were based off of the same book depicted the choices that the directors of each film made to show their vision of the story and therefore how their life experience and choices impacted how they interpreted the book and how they felt it could be best portrayed as a film. The choices for how to portray the characters and storyline in the films were impacted by what was happening in our country’s history during the decade each film was made. For example, we see in the Disney film that choices were made to depict the Native Americans very offensively, which is done today would be considered awful. This is an image of how our country viewed the Native Americans and their culture which is disgraceful and disrespectful today.

Now that I have responded to Bernikow’s quote about literary history and how it relates to the reading, assignments, and discussions we’ve done in this course, I will now talk about how this learning can be applied to my own teaching in the Kindergarten classroom. First of all, as a Kindergarten teacher who is either continuing my students’ literary history or beginning it for some students, I feel it is necessary to get to know the literacy routines in my students homes (who is read to at home, how frequently, etc.) as well as what their interests are (what their favorite book titles, book topics, etc. are). I like to send out a survey before the start of the school year to get an idea of each child’s literacy background. This gives me an idea as to the choices (by the students and their parents) that are being made in my students’ homes regarding literature. After I know

what my students have already been exposed to, I can then determine what I need to introduce them to as far as what types of literature they would benefit from.

I believe that award winning books and classics do and should play an important role in the classroom as they are examples of “good” literature. I think it is important to include award winning literature and classics in my curriculum as it is age appropriate due to the fact that those books are of high literary merit and generally are good examples of well done character development, greatly descriptive settings, etc. which help my students be better readers and writers as well. Yet, in 5.1, I wrote, “As a teacher, I have learned that even though award books are generally known as “the best” of literature, they are not the ONLY “great” literature available and they should not necessarily be used instead of other books simply because they were award winners.” I still believe this to be very true. I think there is such a great variety of literature that it would be unfortunate if we, as teachers, only read award winning and classic books to our students. First of all, students make choices about their interests and what they want to learn more about and this is a great motivator for reading.

As an adult who selects books for children, I view that role slightly differently now. I am now more careful about not only choosing books that are popular (about their interests and intrinsically motivating to read) but also choosing books that will get my students thinking and talking thoughtfully about literature. For example, SpongeBob and Lego books are of high interest to my students and are to them, very popular book picks when students are able to bring favorite books from home. I feel they have a place as books that meet reader’s interests and encourage students to read for enjoyment, but I still wonder do/should we really view them as quality literature simply because they are popular in the minds of our students? And is it more important to provide access to books that are on topics of interest to our students or to provide books that will help them be more critical thinkers as they read, such as award winning and classic books?” I tend to feel that there needs to be a balance of both, student chosen books as well as teacher chosen books as they fulfill different purposes.

As teachers, we influence the choices are readers make by the books we choose to make available to them in our classrooms, the books we assign for homework, and the books we read aloud to them. I think teachers (and parents) tend to choose books

for their students/children that they enjoyed as children, but I think it is important to not only read our own “best” books from childhood and those books that we have made connections to and love but a variety of books because our students may not relate to the same books as we did when we were young. Children need to read and listen to a great number of different quality books in order to develop minds that appreciate literature.

In addition to introducing my Kindergarteners to award winning literature and age appropriate classics, I feel that some movies adapted from classic literature would be a good way to introduce them to some of them in a way that they would enjoy and connect with. Overall, I feel that the films have modernized books over the years and help current readers better relate to the storyline and/or characters. When we read *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, I even noticed there was a website dedicated to the book as well as an i-pad app, which I mentioned in my 6.2 assignment. Technology like this helps to keep classics up to date and exciting for current readers and I plan to use some of those sources to expose my students to older classics in a modern way.

Some of the things I will do differently now concerning literature: When choosing award winning books I will try to find the award speeches as I think they provide a great deal of background information as to the choices the author and/or illustrator made while writing and/or illustrating the book and why. I feel it really opens up my eyes more to the details in the text and/or pictures and helps me to interpret the book from another perspective. I will also encourage some open ended discussion on literature and help to facilitate deeper discussion on books and our opinions rather than just scrape the surface as to what was your favorite part, etc. I will also go more in depth to not only discuss a book’s text but also talk about the illustrations and how they add to the story and/or send a message to the reader.

In conclusion, this course has taught me that “good” books are subjective and based on individual peoples’ choices. I learned about how award books are chosen and how books become classics. This course showed me that each child’s literary history is impacted by the choices that they make as well as the choices that the adults in their life make. Therefore it is so important to take seriously the teaching of literature that will

hold a child's interest yet still challenge their mind to think further. Every child deserves to have fostered a love of reading and teachers are one stepping stone on that path.