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**" What is commonly called *literary history* is actually a record of choices." --Louise Bernikow**

Before taking this course, I always thought of children's literature awards as good indicators of great stories to use in the classroom and at home. I thought of books with the notorious metallic seals as obvious choices for my classroom library and home bookshelf. In many ways, I saw books that had been awarded or considered classics as guaranteed quality books. Before this course, I also thought of awarded books and classics as interchangeable. I never really thought of the difference and instead figured that books that were awarded the prestigious Newbery or Caldecott (or another lesser known award) must also be "classics."

I now realize this was somewhat of a naive viewpoint. While many awarded books are also considered to be "classics" by many, the terms for winning a medal are a bit more set in stone than they are for being viewed a "classic." I have learned about the subjective process for both awards and "classics," and have come to realize the differences between the two.

In the first weeks of the course, we developed a class list of what we

considered to be the great books in our minds. While some of us shared similar favorites, there was a wide range of books that fell in this category. Even more interestingly, it was mentioned that the list differed from previous years, indicating that many of our favorites change over time. Most of the reasons for why each of us selected the books we did had to do with an influence from a parent, former teacher, or another loved one. It became clear that our favorites stemmed from an older generation's favorites, which were most likely chosen from a list of "classics" at the time or awarded books. This goes to show that "literary history is actually a record of choices." The books that were chosen to be awarded a particular medal or were chosen to be on a list of classics were consequently added to many people's list of favorites. In many cases, if it hadn't been for an award, the book might not have received as much attention.

When inspecting specific awards, including the two most prestigious (Newbery and Caldecott) as well as some awards that I had never heard of before this semester, we found that each is awarded based on a list of criteria. There are specific components that are examined in order to determine the quality of a book, however, it is still a subjective process. The group evaluating books' merit has not always represented a diverse group of cultures, backgrounds, and viewpoints. Instead, the evaluators might represent similar values, which directly

impacts the books that are chosen to win the awards. This is interesting to me as the goal of many of the awards as well as of many individuals is to promote diversity in children's literature.

One main reason we closely inspected children's literature awards was to realize that often times these awarded books are more often found in schools, libraries, and households than books that did not win an award. Librarians are likely to keep their shelves stocked with award winners and other books written by authors that have been awarded in the past. On the other hand, books that have not been awarded are not as easily found in classrooms and libraries. Both children and adults are more likely to read books that are frequently displayed on shelves and recommended to them based on their award seals. Hence, the choices these teams of evaluators make directly affects "literary history."

I still see the award seals as an important tool to help me find quality books to teach concepts in my classroom as well as recommend to my students, as many times the seals are a good indicator of an excellent literary work. However, I now realize that there are many other exceptional books that exist that might not have received the recognition they deserve. Awards are helpful in that they recognize many excellent books and authors, but I now recognize that

the awards do not always represent diversity.

In the second module we turned to look at “classics,” another list of books that is also subjective and is ever-changing. While there are criteria used to determine “classics,” the standards are a bit more subjective and what some people consider “classics,” others do not. While most agree that “classics” are books that discuss themes that span across time and are relevant to various cultures and backgrounds, through this course we discovered that many times there are more current books with similar ideas and themes that are easier for children of today to relate to. While books like *Peter Rabbit* and *Little Women* do incorporate themes that are relevant today, they also have language that is outdated and difficult to understand. There are so many quality books that are available and many that discuss very similar themes while at the same time are more current and relevant. This was eye-opening for me to see that books that were once considered “classics” might not always remain on the majority of people’s own list of “classics.” It seems that the only way these old “classics” stay around is when older generations that grew up with these stories recommend them to their own children and grandchildren. Teachers also influence their students’ book choices by introducing them to books they love and enjoy. Once again, “literary history is actually a record of choices.”

As a teacher, I think it is critical to recognize this realization, that “literary history is actually a record of choices.” We need to keep in mind our professional goals and the importance of exposing our students to a diverse collection of books as well as ideas. I will continue to use award seals and lists of “classics” as references when choosing books for my classroom library’s shelves as well as for mini lessons. However, I now know that these books were many times chosen by groups of people representing very similar viewpoints and values. Of course I also hold my own values and beliefs and while I want to instill positive morals in my students, I know how important it is to expose them to a wide variety of cultures, backgrounds, and time periods. Understanding how choices that have been made across time have influenced literary history will help me as a teacher to expand the book selection in my classroom.

Through this course, I can say I have a greater awareness of how books have come to be known as quality and excellent pieces of literature. The insights I have gained this semester through reading and discussing various aspects of award winners and classics will strengthen my ability as a classroom teacher.