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My Maniac Year: The Newbery Experience

by Michael O. Tunnell

Most everyone who loves children's books would love to have the chance to sit on either the Newbery or the Caldecott committee. I'd like a subway token for every time I've heard a children's literature aficionado say, "Why in the world did such-and-such a book win the Newbery Medal? Boy, if I'd been in charge. . . ." Well, I got my chance during the 1990 publishing year. My chance to serve on the Newbery Committee. My chance to be instrumental in selecting the only "true book" to reign as the 1991 Newbery Award-winner. My chance to gain respect for a difficult, undeniably subjective process.

As most of you know, the Newbery Committee consists of 15 members selected from around the country; however, a Canadian or two have served. Seven of the committee members, plus a committee chair are elected. Seven members are appointed by the president-elect of the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC) which is the arm of the American Library Association (ALA) which oversees the Newbery, Caldecott, King, and Batchelder Awards. All committee members must be members of ALSC.

The committee's charge is to choose the "most distinguished contribution" to American children's literature during a particular publishing year. The Newbery Award Committee Manual explains that "contribution to American literature for children" means the text of a book, not the illustrations. "Distinguished" is defined in the manual as:

- marked by eminence and distinction: noted for significant achievement.
- marked by excellence in quality
- marked by conspicuous excellence or eminence
- individually distinct (ALSC, 1987, p. 2)

To qualify, all books must be original works written by American citizens or residents and must be first published in the United States.

My committee was peopled by a fine group of library and education professionals from all over the country. Part of the reason seven of the members are appointed is to help assure geographic and professional diversity.

I was an appointed committee member and was, incidentally, the only male. At a publisher-sponsored dinner party, one evening during a Midwinter Meeting of the ALA, I met a gentleman who had once served on the Newbery Committee. "What number are you," he asked me. I did not understand what
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he meant. "Oh," he said, "we men are in a real minority when it comes to Newbery. I'm number 21 (I've forgotten the actual number), the twenty-first man to serve since the award began in 1922." I don't know if he spoke truly, but I do know that I was called a "token male" from time to time during my Newbery year!

My Newbery Committee assignment began with a meeting held in Chicago during the ALA Midwinter Meeting in January of 1990. Attendance at this gathering is not actually mandatory, but most of us on the committee were there. We got acquainted and determined the ways in which we would communicate throughout the year. After this meeting, the work began in earnest.

Technically, the Newbery Committee must consider every book that qualifies. Because approximately 5,000 children's books were published in the United States in 1990, the task would seem overwhelming. Of course, there are some titles that can be scanned quickly or automatically set aside: a new Hardy Boys book, a wordless picture book, or a book written by a British author, for example. Still, I'm glad there were fifteen of us reading and that other members of ALA and ALSC could suggest titles to our committee. This helped us cover ground that any one of us might have missed. Every month, each of us faxed to our chair the titles we thought should be considered by the whole committee. As the year progressed, the list grew. Often I would find books on the updated and so-called "nomination list" that I had not found on my own. They were, of course, the next books I'd locate and read.

Early in the year, when there wasn't much to choose from, we found ourselves nominating some books that were embarrassingly mediocre; however, once a book makes the list, it stays there. As the year drew to a close, and the time to chose the winner neared, we found ourselves not nominating many reasonably good books simply because our clearer perspective told us none of them was "the most distinguished contribution." Therefore, the nomination list is kept strictly confidential; otherwise, publishers might make the claim, "Nominated for the Newbery," about some very undeserving titles.

Acquiring the books to read could have been a difficult problem. Committee members are not allowed to solicit examination copies from the publishers; however, the children's publishers are typically anxious to send their books to each committee member. The books began to literally pour into my office beginning in December of 1989 and continuing through 1990. Of course, I got to keep them all!

It will not surprise you when I say that I have never read so much, so quickly and yet so carefully, as I did in 1990. What a joy! A joy to discover a precious gem in the midst of a stack of simple stones. A joy to find treasure within a book earlier tossed aside after a quick perusal, unearthed again because another committee member said, "This is most certainly worth your time." A joy to finally isolate my personal favorites, my Newbery contenders.
Finally, the moment of truth arrived. Our committee had met in the summer, during the annual ALA convention, to engage in some practice discussion about books; but the real, knock down, drag out decision-making sessions occurred at the 1991 Midwinter Meetings. We began our discussions on a Friday evening. One of the first things to be done was deciding which of 89 books on our nomination list should be quickly eliminated. We decided if even one person voted to keep a book on the list, it would stay. Within ten minutes, we had cut our list from 89 to 44! Then, over the next two days in almost non-stop meetings that extended into the evening hours, we wrangled over the remaining 44 titles. I feel our committee was extremely amiable—I’d heard about committees being otherwise. Though each of us would plead, reason, or even get a bit disgusted with others who didn’t see things in the same light, we all really liked one another and our book discussions remained on both a professional and enjoyable level.

When we reconvened after dinner on Sunday evening, we had run out of time for discussion. It was voting time. (However, one committee member handed out Mars Bars to each of us just before the voting began, a meaningful bit of politicking that will be understood by those who have read our winner!) The procedures for choosing the Newbery and the Caldecott are public knowledge, but the decision-making meetings are closed and certain bits of information are kept secret, i.e. the number of ballots required in choosing a winner, the tallies on the ballots, and, of course, the discussion on the books. I may tell you that each committee member is asked to select—on a secret ballot—a first, second, and third choice for the award. When the ballots are tabulated, 4 points are assigned to each first choice, 3 points to each second choice, and 2 points to each third choice. In order to win the Newbery (or the Caldecott) a book must receive 8 first place votes and must have an eight point lead over the book receiving the next highest point total. In some cases, the balloting goes into the early morning hours, vote after vote—in between which committee members try to sway one another—until finally the proper vote total is achieved. The winner must be announced the next day at a press conference, so the decision must be finalized early Monday morning.

I will also reveal that our committee did not spend too much time in the balloting process. We were a little surprised, and terribly pleased, that *Maniac Magee* by Jerry Spinelli surfaced rather quickly as our choice for the 1991 Newbery Medal! However, we only had a moment to celebrate; our work was far from done. Choosing the Honor Books proved to be a time-consuming affair. Committees have quite a bit of flexibility when it comes to how many (if any), and in what way Honor Books are chosen. Half our committee felt we should start over with the balloting. Others felt that the winning vote clearly showed two books to be the front runners; therefore, we already had our winner and a single Honor Book. Suffice it to say that after some arguing, some balloting (which wasn’t very conclusive), and some time, we ended up with a
single Honor Book: *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle* by Avi. I was pleased with the choice of Avi’s book, but I personally still feel we should have selected perhaps three other Honor Books.

After the balloting smoke had cleared, we went to one of our hotel rooms to celebrate and to call Jerry Spinelli and Avi to congratulate them. Of course, it was nearly midnight Chicago time, which means it was even later in the East where both authors live. It was a great deal of fun to get these folks out of bed to give them such good news (a practice that is no longer allowed by the ALA—what a shame!). As it turned out, we were unable to reach Avi, but here is how Jerry Spinelli describes the blessed event:

> The phone is in the hallway. I leap up. I am in my underwear. In a flurry of modesty I blindly grope for my bathrobe. Am I afraid a stranger had entered the house and is peeping from the top of the stairs? . . .

> Bathrobe in hand, I lurch into the hallway, flick on the light, dive for the phone, kill the ringing, gird myself for the bad news, pray everyone’s alive.

> "Hello?" I say.

> The voice that responds is unfamiliar to me. A doctor? . . . It says something like, "We want you to know that we have been very careful not to let the facts get mixed up with the truth." It says the word *Newbery*.

> The rest is fuzzy . . .

> I’m not sure I even had the presence of mind to say thank you . . . .

> We say goodbye. We hang up. The screaming begins. (Spinelli, 1991, p. 428)

After a few hours sleep, selected members of the committee gathered to write the press release in preparation for the press conference where the winners would be announced. After the press conference—in which the atmosphere is always charged with anticipation—and after the photographs of the committee were taken, I felt a surge of relief and exhaustion. The work was over—let my year of celebration begin. However, there are always those critics who would dampen one’s spirit of celebration, those who think the committee has blundered once again. Just after the press conference, I was in the exhibit area looking at new children’s books when I heard someone say, "Why don’t you ask Mike? He was on the committee." Immediately my body tensed, and I turned to find a woman staring at me vehemently. "How can you justify choosing a book like that for the Newbery?" she cried. I decided not to mount much of a defense, so I merely answered that this was a committee decision and one I supported. "But," she sputtered, "why do you people always choose young adult novels? It’s just not right." "Wait a minute," I replied. "Maniac Magee is an eleven-year-old kid. *Maniac* isn’t a young adult book." Her face washed with
confusion, and then she said, "Oh, I guess I'll have to read it then." Ah, those who are too quick on the draw!

The next big event in my Newbery career required no work, just celebrating: the Newbery and Caldecott Awards Banquet. In June of 1991, my wife and I packed our bags and headed for Atlanta, Georgia, site of the Annual ALA Conference. There were all sorts of receptions and parties given for Jerry Spinelli and Avi, but the Awards Banquet itself was the most spectacular affair. Jerry Spinelli gave a witty, heartfelt acceptance speech. David Macauley, Caldecott winner, was an equally captivating speaker. Even Robert McCloskey of Make Way for Ducklings fame was present (though he seldom travels these days) to accept special recognition from the ALA and a standing ovation (which brought a tear to his eye) from an adoring crowd. By the way, in Spinelli's address (1991, p. 426) he says that Maniac Magee (who is an orphan) must feel that "he now has fourteen new moms and a dad. (Referring to the make-up of our committee)" and that makes me Maniac's pa!

Since my Newbery year—my Maniac year—has ended, I've continued to have great fun sharing Maniac Magee and The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle with my students. I've found Maniac to be a wonderful read aloud and have been gratified by reports from teachers that kids love the book. However, there were a number of books we considered for the award that I feel were worthy contributions. Some should have been chosen as Honor Books. So, to conclude this casual bit of reminiscing, I'd like to present a list of the books I think were the best offerings from among those considered for the 1991 Newbery medal. Maybe you'll agree. Then again, maybe you'll say, "Why in the world did he think these should have been considered for the Newbery Medal? Boy, if I'd been in charge. . . ."

Tunnell's List of Newbery Contenders

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References