The "Academy Awards" of Literature for Children

Gabi Kupitz
The “Academy Awards” of Literature for Children

by Gabi Kupitz
Librarian
Harold B. Lee Library
Brigham Young University

Librarians galloping across the carpeted convention center’s approach to the escalators is a sure sign that something “big” is happening. It is a dismal drizzle of a New Orleans winter Monday morning. Arriving on foot, by shuttle bus, or via taxi, these men and women quickly beat a path to NOC 37-40—the gigantic meeting rooms on the second floor of the New Orleans Convention Center. Promptly at 9:00 a.m., January 12, 1998, Elizabeth Watson, president of the American Library Association’s Association for Library Service to Children, is ready to announce the 1998 winners of the John Newbery and the Randolph Caldecott awards: the “Academy Awards” of literature for children. Not only are librarians in attendance, but the conjoined, cavernous rooms are filled with bibliophiles, representatives of numerous publishing houses, book vendors, and members of the press; the audience is as diverse as the books the various awards committees have dealt with over the past months.

The air is rife with anticipation. Most people do not take notes, having been assured that copies of a press release will be waiting on the tables in the hall. Even the regular ALA newspaper, ALA Cognotes, distributed daily during annual and midwinter ALA conventions, is always “on hold” until after the children’s literature awards are announced. How the printers fail to leak the news is a well-kept secret; but all things point to the prestige of the Newbery and Caldecott awards and the clout enjoyed by children’s literature.

Watson whets literary appetites by first announcing the Coretta Scott King Awards, given by the ALA to African American authors and illustrators of outstanding books for children and young people. Holding up each book, Watson gives a brief synopsis of the work. The oversized monitor to Watson’s left allows even those in the very back of the hall to see the book covers. Applause and friendly verbal outbursts accompany various titles. Then the Coretta Scott King Award Committee members are introduced. As they stand, polite, but enthusiastic applause acknowledges the time they have spent reading many outstanding works, the hours of discussion and difficult decision-making in choosing one particular title worthy of honor and recognition. At the podium, Watson hands off the books, and they are arranged on tables to either side of her.

More people enter the hall. No one leaves. The next honor to be awarded is the Margaret A. Edwards Award. Sponsored by School Library Journal and administered by ALA’s Young Adult Library Services Association, this award honors the lifetime contributions of an author who has penned books of a fine literary quality that are popular among teenagers. Watson calls out the name: Madeleine L’Engle. The prolific author of books for children and young adults, L’Engle is possibly best known for the Austin Family Series and for A Wrinkle In Time, the 1963 Newbery Medal winner. Applause follows the announcement. L’Engle deserves the honor.

On to the next award. Well-known to readers of School Library Journal, editor-in-chief Lillian N. Gerhardt garners the honor of delivering the 1999 May Hill Arbuthnot Lecture. Arbuthnot was a leading authority on children’s literature and reading. Likewise, Gerhardt is known as “an individual of distinction in the field of children’s literature.” The Lecture Committee stands and is applauded.

Latino writers and illustrators are next to be honored. The Pura Belpre Award is presented to recognize the strength of the Latino culture in the literature for children. Like the Coretta Scott King Awards, the Pura Belpre Awards have one literary winner with additional honor winners and one illustrator winner with additional honor winners.
winners. The awards are administered by the ALA Association for Library Service to Children and by the National Association to Promote Library Services to the Spanish Speaking. Awards are given biennially.

After applause and enthusiastic shouts of affirmation from the audience, Watson hands off the books, which now form a queue of children’s literature “greats” on the tables to either side of her. Introduction of the Pura Belpre Award Committee members wins more applause.

To keep people in their seats, Watson continues with the Mildred L. Batchelder Award, which honors a book originally published in a foreign language and country and then translated into English for publication in the United States. Thus the award honors the book as well as the publisher. Because these are foreign books, most people have neither heard of nor read any of the titles. The applause is polite. Interestingly, this year all three books thus honored were first published in German. However, one book took a circuitous route. The Batchelder Honor Book, Hostage To War: A True Story, was actually first published in Russia and then in Germany from whence it took its route to the United States and the Scholastic Press.

Only two more awards stand in the way of the “big ones.” Watson doesn’t waste time announcing the Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Children’s Video: Willa: An American Snow White. Tom Davenport produced and directed this visual delight, from which Watson plays a short clip on the oversized screen to her left. The audience is happily engaged for a minute or two and claps enthusiastically.

The Laura Ingalls Wilder Medal is next to be announced. Given to an author or illustrator of books published in the United States whose works have made an undeniably lasting and substantial addition to the wealth of children’s literature, the 1998 Wilder Medal goes to a deserving Russell Freedman. Cited for doing “impeccable research” and being “a marvelous storyteller,” Freedman has also been honored with the 1988 Newbery Medal for Lincoln: A Photobiography and two Newbery Honor Books: The Wright Brothers: How They Invented the Airplane (1991) and Eleanor Roosevelt: A Life of Discovery (1993). A well-spring of unabashed applause follows the announcement, as well as the introduction of the committee members.

And now . . . Watson introduces the Newbery Medal, the most prestigious award in children’s literature for writing. But first, much like the Academy Awards or national beauty pageants, Watson introduces the so-called runners-up, or Newbery Honor Books. Gasps and applause follow the announcement that Lily’s Crossing, Ella Enchanted, and Wringer are the three Newbery Honor Books. A slight pause follows and then Watson announces that Karen Hesse’s Out of the Dust, the story of “withering . . . of finally taking root . . . of fierce spirit and growing self-understanding” is the 1998 Newbery Medal winner. Much applause greets the announcement and the introduction of the Newbery Award Committee.

As people start inching to the doors (where rows of telephones wait in the halls), Watson laughingly credits Steve Herb, past president of ALA’s Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC), with a precedent-setting move which Watson will repeat this year: introducing the Caldecott Committee members first, before announcing the awards. Otherwise, as in years past, the committee members are literally left in the dust of the throng as, wavelike, it flows out of the room in one massive convulsion. All want to be first to grab a press release, call their colleagues, editors, publishing houses, the outside world.

Watson announces the Caldecott Honor books to gasps and applause. Then the Caldecott Medal, the most prestigious award to honor illustration of a work for children published in the United States during the previous year, is announced. Rapunzel by Paul O. Zelinsky wins the honor of the Caldecott. A moment of thunderous applause and happy cheers welcome the announcement, and then the room magically clears.

Swept along by the hallway throng, I manage to put my hand on a press release, one of very few remaining on the hallway table, which is completely obscured by a flock of grabby Newbery/Caldecott announcement attendees. Sure
enough, there is not one unattended telephone in sight. At the bottom of the escalators, the ALA Cognates are waiting to be picked up. The exhibit hall is full of folks flocking around the Scholastic Press exhibit booth, as well as the Dutton Children’s Books, Delacorte Press, HarperCollins, Farrar Straus Giroux, Viking, Atheneum Books for Young Readers, Hyperion Books for Children, Lee & Low, and other exhibit booths catering to children’s literature book enthusiasts. Idly standing by, systems vendors envy the attention lavished on these booths. Experienced vendor representatives are acquainted with the phenomenon; their inexperienced colleagues and cohorts are amazed.

The convention center’s giant windows mirror the rain falling outside. It is almost 10 a.m.

The 1998 Children’s Literature Awards of the Association of Children’s Services

Newbery Medal:
*Out of the Dust* / Karen Hesse (Scholastic Press)
A young, motherless girl relates through free-verse form her frustrations and hopes while enduring the dust-bowl years of the Depression on her family’s farm in Oklahoma.

Newbery Honors:
*Ella Enchanted* / Gail Carson Levine (HarperCollins Publishers)
Ella’s childhood fairy curse is that she obey all orders given her, but she struggles to defy that situation.

*Lily’s Crossing* / Patricia Reilly Giff (Delacorte)
Changes to Lily’s perception of her life and World War II come about because of her friendship with a young Hungarian refugee.

*Wringer* / Jerry Spinelli (HarperCollins Publishers)
Young Palmer has a dilemma: to participate in killing pigeons during his town’s Pigeon Day or to muster enough courage to take a different social stance.

Caldecott Medal:
*Rapunzel* / Paul O. Zelinsky (Dutton)
In this folktale, a beautiful long-haired girl, imprisoned in a tall, lonely tower by a sorceress, is found by a handsome prince, who is blinded by the sorceress, but whose eyesight is restored when Rapunzel’s tears of love fall into his blinded eyes. Together, the two (and their children) live happily ever after, and so will this beautifully illustrated book with notes on the story’s origin.

Caldecott Honor Books:
*The Gardener* / Sarah Stewart; pictures by David Small (Farrar Straus Giroux)
Lydia Grace takes her Grandmother-inspired love of gardening with her, when because of her father’s unemployment, she is sent to the city to live with grumpy Uncle Jim for a while.

*Harlem: A Poem* / Walter Dean Myers; pictures by Christopher Myers (Scholastic Press)
The people, sights, and sounds of Harlem are celebrated in poetic form.

*There Was an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly* / Simms Taback (Viking)
Famous 1940s American folk poem/song outrageously illustrated.

Coretta Scott King Author Award:
*Forged by Fire* / Sharon M. Draper (Atheneum Books for Young Readers)
Gerald, a teenager, tries to overcome a home environment of abuse and keep hope alive for his own future.

Coretta Scott King Author Honor Books:
*I Thought My Soul Would Rise and Fly: The Diary of Patsy, a Freed Girl* / Joyce Hansen (Scholastic)
Patsy’s diary reveals thoughts regarding the end of the Civil War and the freeing of slaves.

*Bayard Rustin: Behind the Scenes of the Civil Rights Movement* / James Haskins (Hyperion Books for Children)
Biography of Rustin, a force in the civil rights movement whose ideas influenced Martin Luther King, Jr.
Coretta Scott King Illustrator Award:
In Daddy's Arms I AM TALL: African Americans Celebrating Fathers / Javaka Steptoe (Lee & Low Books)
Poems honoring fathers.

Coretta Scott King Illustrator Honor Books:
Ashley Bryan's ABC of African American Poetry / Ashley Bryan (Atheneum Books for Young Readers)
African American poets describe an aspect of the Black experience with each letter of the alphabet represented by a line from a poem.

Harlem / Walter Dean Myers; illustrated by Christopher Myers (Scholastic Press)
The people, sights, and sounds of Harlem are celebrated in poetic form.

The Hunterman and the Crocodile: A West African Folktale / Baba Wague Diakite (Scholastic Press)
The importance of living in harmony with nature is a lesson learned by a West African hunterman.

Margaret A. Edwards Award:
Madeleine L'Engle

Pura Belpre Award for Narrative:
Parrot in the Oven / Victor Martinez (Joanna Cotler, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers)
A poor Mexican American wrestles with his social position and his father's alcoholism.

Pura Belpre Honor Books for Narrative:
Laughing Tomatoes and Other Spring Poems / Francisco X. Alarcon; illustrated by Maya Christina Gonzalez (Children's Book Press)
Poems about family and one's place in society. Text in English and Spanish.
Spirits of the High Mesa / Floyd Martinez (Arte Publico Press)
A coming of age story in which a boy is torn between the ways of the past and the advent of a modern society.

Pura Belpre Award for Illustration:
Snapshots from the Wedding / Gary Soto; illustrated by Stephanie Garcia (G.P. Putnam's Sons)
A flower girl in a Mexican American wedding describes the events of the day.

Pura Belpre Honor Books for Illustration:
Gathering the Sun: An Alphabet in Spanish and English / Alma Flor Ada; illustrated by Simon Silva (Lothrop, Lee & Shepard)
Spanish alphabet in poetry.
The Golden Flower: A Taino Myth from Puerto Rico / Nina Jaffe; illustrated by Enrique O. Sanchez (Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers)
The origins of the sea, forest, island of Puerto Rico are explained.

In My Family = En Mi Familia / Carmen Lomas Garza (Children's Book Press)
Non-fiction depiction of growing up in a Texas Hispanic community.

The Laura Ingalls Wilder Medal:
Russell Freedman

May Hill Arbuthnot Lecture Award:
Lillian N. Gerhardt

Mildred L. Batchelder Award:
The Robber and Me / Josef Holub; edited by Marc Aronson; translated by Elizabeth D. Crawford (originally published in German in 1996; Henry Holt)
An orphan knows that a man accused of robbery is innocent and tries to muster up the courage to involve his uncle in recognizing the truth.

Mildred L. Batchelder Honor Books:
Nero Corleone: A Cat's Story / Elke Heidenreich; translated by Doris Orgel (originally published in German; Viking Publishing)
A comfortable Italian tomcat is transported to Germany by vacationers who have become enchanted with his sister.
Hostage To War: A True Story / Tatjana Wassiljewa; translated by Anna Treter (originally published in German; Scholastic Press)

World War II and the aftermath as experienced by a Russian teenager (the author) from 1941-1953.

Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Children’s Video:
Willa: An American Snow White / produced and directed by Tom Davenport; distributed by Davenport Films

For additional information, consult:
http://www.ala.org
http://www.ala.org/alsc.
http://www.lib.byu.edu/~catalog/juvlit
http://cbpr.lib.byu.edu

For an article on the joys and travails of being an ALA Caldecott Committee member, consult:
Broadway, Marsha D. “Diary of a Caldecott Committee Member,” Children’s Literature and Play Review. 16:5 (1).