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Diary of a Caldecott Committee Member

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Members of the Caldecott Award Selection Committee agree to “maintain a high degree of confidentiality regarding the committee’s discussion.” (Association of Library Services to Children, Caldecott Award Committee Manual, 1994, p.12.) We are free to discuss books that we like, but not to specify titles or lists of titles under consideration or to disclose the number of ballots necessary for the selection of the Caldecott Medal winner or the vote tabulation for any ballot.

November 30, 1994 Today’s mail includes a letter from ALSC (Association of Library Services to Children) with November 18 postmark. The letter from Executive Director Susan Roman reads: “Virginia McKee, President, has asked me to invite you to serve as a member of the 1996 Caldecott Award Selection Committee for a one-year term. . . .” I am stunned and excited. “If you can, please complete the enclosed forms and return them to me by November 30, 1994.” Near panic; that’s today. A quick acceptance call to the American Library Association and a promise that the forms will be in Chicago on Monday—so begins what will be a fourteen-month adventure in professional growth.

December 1994 The Caldecott Award Committee Manual arrives—seventy-four pages of background information, membership responsibilities, sample press releases, and background preparation materials. This assignment is going to take some time. I feel under-prepared and start reading books on children’s illustrations and reviewing prior medal and honor books.

January 28, 1995 The first picture book from a publisher arrives. The topic is nursing—actually the breast-feeding habits of mammals. Truly an undistinguished book. This may turn out to be a long year.

February 4, 1995 Philadelphia, a horrific blizzard, and the first committee meeting with introductions and a review of responsibilities. Of the fifteen committee members, I already know five. Others have familiar names. The chair and seven members are elected, and seven members are appointed to serve on the Caldecott Award Selection Committee. Julie Cummins, Director of Children’s Services at New York Public Library, serves as the chair. I begin to wonder, why did I get an invitation to serve? Someone must have recommended me to Virginia McKee (ALSC President). Of all my friends and colleagues who have served on previous committees, who spoke my name at the right time?
March 1995  I have browsed through several new releases in bookstores and in the library, and the new spring books begin to arrive from publishers. Four in this box, nine in that box. Box after box, sometimes three or four a day. Hey, it's beginning to feel a lot like Christmas.

April 1995  With more than 200 books on my office shelves, I have devised a system that allows me to review, evaluate, and record my impressions. My three basic categories: (1) not-a-chancers; (2) noteworthies; and (3) favorites. I write nothing about not-a-chancers; record titles and brief comments about noteworthies; and write a paragraph-long justification for favorites.

May 1, 1995  Committee members begin submitting titles for the consideration list.

May 11, 1995  A packet from Julie Cummins arrives with a compiled consideration list of eighty-four titles and committee members' justifications. One committee member has submitted more than forty titles; everyone else, three to seven. My task for the remainder of the month is to review the eighty-four titles to determine which ones to add to my favorites and to examine the new arrivals.

June 1, 1995  The second deadline for submitting titles for consideration. I saw some truly fine books in the spring releases, but I don't think the winner has appeared yet.

June 16, 1995  Now the consideration list numbers 135 titles. I must review the list and prepare for committee meetings.

June 23-25, 1995  Fly to Chicago. The Committee discusses each title on the consideration list. A few books are removed because they do not meet the criteria (such as books with illustrators who are not U.S. residents). Only the person or persons who suggested a book may withdraw it. About twenty titles are removed. Titles are added; forthcoming picture books are identified.

July 1995  While I am adding books to the review shelf, it gives way, sending 300+ books bouncing to the floor. With the help of my secretary, Rachael, we re-install the shelf and replace the books—some now have crunched corners. As the last three books are added, the shelf gives way again, adding injury to insult. My feet are bruised, my fingernail is ripped off, and my sense of competency is damaged. Alternative solution: move the books to Rachael's office where they can sprawl across five shelves instead of clustering on one.

August 1995  Communication from the chair reminds me that we may submit new titles for consideration by the first day of September, October, November, and December. Two ballots, one in October and one in December, must be submitted to form a recommended list. The fall books begin to arrive.
September 1995 I make no new suggestions for the consideration list. The revised list arrives mid-month with 131 entries. I locate and review each added title and believe that only two might make the final list. I add them to my favorites. More new books arrive.

October 1995 The consideration list now has 165 titles. Time to review the added titles and evaluate the boxes of new books. Publishers have submitted more than 500 titles. I continue to browse bookstores and my library for titles I have not examined. My Caldecott notebook is bulging with correspondence and notes. The deadline for a first ballot approaches. Each of the fifteen members will submit three titles for a new recommended list. These titles may be drawn from the consideration list or may be newly found books. Which three? I labor over this decision for three days. Nine days after submitting the first ballot, Julie sends the recommended list containing twenty-two titles. Some of us are thinking alike. I review all the books on the list and find three new favorites.

November 12, 1995 The consideration list has grown to 185 titles. More books arrive. With fifteen people on the committee, I wonder how many hours are employed each year in the selection of the Caldecott Medal and Honor Books? Does it take a longer time commitment for the Newbery? What about Notable Books for Children? Members of the Notables committee may serve for as many as four years.

December 12, 1995 It’s time to select the three books that I will nominate on the second ballot. These choices are much more difficult than the first ballot. I select one title with unique fabric relief—an early favorite that I want to bolster; one title about transformation with wonderfully powerful illustrations; and one title that uses photography and hand-tinting.

December 28, 1995 A mailing from Julie with ballot tallies and justifications. There are now fifty books on the recommended list. Telephone calls from two small publishers: is it too late to send titles? No, submission may be made until December 31, which is a Sunday.

December 29, 1995 I receive two final books via overnight delivery.

January 1996 The final consideration list with 210 titles arrives. How will we ever winnow to a winner? I review all titles except the three that I cannot find. Two I add to my noteworthy category. There are 587 books on the book shelves in the office and a dozen or so at home. One more look. If I don’t remember a book, I pull it off the shelf to see if I’ve missed something. The first book I received is still the worst—or maybe it’s the one with the rearranged alphabet, that places MARSHA as the first six (five?) letters of the alphabet. Deciding “worst” is much easier than deciding “best".
January 11-17, 1996 In addition to personal notes, I carefully review the fifty recommended books and complete notecards for each.

January 18, 1996 Fly to San Antonio—what a wonderful, warm spot to make a decision and a memory. Tomorrow begins thirteen hours of scheduled meetings.

January 19, 1996 The committee gathers for dinner. Two members are missing. One arrives, but the other is snowed in. She’ll try tomorrow. Julie reminds us that if our missing committee member cannot make it, a member of the Notables Committee will be brought in to discuss the books and vote. From dinner, we go to our first two-hour session. The police give us a bang-up start as they discharge flare guns to shoo the roosting pigeons from the trees outside the hotel. We review instructions, make procedural decisions, and accept assignments. I will serve as one of the three tellers who will count the votes after balloting. To be awarded the Caldecott Medal, the book must have eight first-place votes (worth four points) and have eight more points than the book with the next highest number of points (Association of Library Services to Children, Caldecott Award Committee Manual, 1994, p. 25). We begin to discuss all eligible books and eliminate books from consideration.

January 20, 1996 In three and one-half hours, we discuss every book that remains under consideration. We each have an opportunity to comment on the books we recommended. We also note any problems or concerns we have about any book. New insight and new understanding grow, and the list of books shrinks. One committee member is still missing. If she does not arrive this afternoon, another person must replace her. How sad—to work all year and not be able to participate in the decision. How difficult—to be a new person added to the group without the hours, weeks, months of preparation. At an evening party, I meet our missing member. After trying airports in two states, she was able to fly. Julie has arranged to review the committee’s progress with her before tomorrow’s meetings.

January 21, 1996 Our formerly missing member discusses her recommended books and voices her opinions about any book she wishes. The morning is spent talking, testifying, defending, supporting, balloting, and finding the winner. What a rush to serve as a teller—part of making history. By noon, we have our winner, four honor books, and a champagne toast. Afternoon is time to write annotations for the five books, biographical statements for illustrators, and submit information for the press release. I pass my copy of Officer Buckle and Gloria and ask each member to sign one star on the end papers that contains their favorite safety rule. To honor the Medal winner, we decide to adorn ourselves with stars when the official announcement is made. We fashion stars from foil paper, just as kids would do, and hold a secret that the world will know tomorrow morning.
January 22, 1996  At 7:30 a.m., we gather in the ALA Offices at the San Antonio Conference Center to telephone the illustrators. Julie is at the speaker phone. One after another we awaken creative minds; one spouse screams sporadically in the background; one illustrator seems sleepily subdued; one graciously thanks the committee; one thinks this is a prank call and refuses to believe until the editor verifies the news; and one illustrator could not be reached prior to the official announcement. We applaud and cheer. At 8:55 a.m. we enter a room filled with 600 children's literature bibliophiles and press representatives. Finally, the Caldecott is announced. Star-time. Photographs. Plans for the Caldecott/Newbery Acceptance Dinner in July in New York City. Farewells.

Office Buckle and Gloria, with its unity of text and illustration, vitality, and humor, reflects many qualities found in Randolph Caldecott's own picture books. And although kid appeal is not a criteria in selecting Caldecott Medal winners, this winner has ample kid appeal.

February 1996  The Caldecott experience has brought me a year of significant professional growth and an unforgettable memory. Was the year long? Yes. Was the work worth it? Yes. Did it feel like Christmas everyday? Almost everyday. What about doing Newbery or Notables? In a heartbeat.

Of the 600 books sent by publishers, I have selected about 110 books to keep and am donating the remainder to libraries. During the year, I did discover who said my name to the right person at the right time. I've just telephoned her to once again express my thanks. She tells me that the picture books of 1995 will be ever in my mind and always part of my life. She's right.

The 1996 Caldecott Books

Medal Winner
Office Buckle and Gloria by Peggy Rathman. Putnam.

Honor Books
Alphabet City by Stephen Johnson. Greenwillow.
The Faithful Friend by Robert D. San Souci, illustrated by Brian Pickney. Simon and Schuster.
Tops and Bottoms by Janet Stevens. Harcourt Brace.
Other Favorite 1995 Picture Books that Were Not 1996 Caldecott Books

This list includes books that I enjoyed for story and illustration. Some titles were not eligible for consideration as a Caldecott book.

Always My Dad by Sharon Dennis, illustrated by Raúl Colón. Knopf.
Bad Day at Riverbend by Chris Van Allsburg. Houghton.
Color by Ruth Heller. Putnam.
The Empress and the Silk Worm by Lily Toy Hong. Whitman.
Grandfather’s Trolley by Bruce McMillan. Candlewick.
The Long Silk Strand: A Grandmother’s Legacy to her Granddaughter by Laura E. Williams, illustrated by Grayce Bochak. Boyds Mills Press.
Mary Had a Little Lamb by Sarah Josepha Hale, illustrated by Salley Mavor. Orchard Books.
Math Curse by Jon Scieska, illustrated by Lane Smith. Viking.
My Mama Had a Dancing Heart by Raúl Colón. Orchard.
My Ol’ Man by Patricia Polacco. Philomel.
Shadowville by Michael Baartalos. Viking.
The Selfish Giant by Oscar Wilde, illustrated by S. Saelig Gallagher. Putnam.
Three Cool Kids by Rebecca Emberley. Little, Brown.
Zoom by Istvan Banyai. Viking.