

Final Exam

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

Over the course of this semester we have discussed, read, and analyzed a collection of stories to which we can define into certain groups. These books included our own personal “good books”, books that have won or have been honored with awards, and books that are considered classic. As we began to look closely at these genres, it became apparent that many of these stories have been part of our society’s literary history for some time. In the beginning of this course if I was asked to define why a story is considered classic or well known, I would have compiled a list of literary and personal elements that would have contributed to a story’s notability and recognition. While these elements may help elicit appeal and discussions about the novel, I have found over the course of my learning through these genres, the ultimate factor that places these stories into literary history is the choice of individuals who make these selections over time.

We first began our exploration of these choices when we described and shared our own “good book” with the class. There were many reasons why I had chosen *There’s a Nightmare in my Closet*, as my “good book” but the most powerful aspect of this book for me, was the personal connection I had made to the story when I was younger. In comparing our “good books” with the class I saw that there were many similarities between the books, although they were quite different from one another. Many of us chose books that we had made personal connections with, or the story had a certain literary aspect which grabbed our attention. Despite the differing reasons, I think it is important to note that even though these books were chosen for different reasons, these books remained memorable to us for a particular personal reason. We chose these books, despite that they may or may have not earned an award, or be a classic story. Our literary choice, many of which we made as children, secured our book’s place in our own literary history.

Within our short study of a good book, I also found it intriguing that most of our good books were stories that were in fact memorable to our parents in some way. In our sharing with one another, many of our books were our mother or father’s favorite books. In one of our first class postings, I had shared that the reason why, *There’s a Nightmare in My Closet*, was so memorable for me was because my mom had chosen this book and shared it with me so I wouldn’t be scared of the tooth fairy. I think it is fitting to say that most of us, especially little girls with our mothers, are in fact persuaded by one another. I think these factors influence the choices we make when it comes to books. While some of these books may be literary sound and have received awards, others may not. Although *There’s a Nightmare in My Closet* didn’t receive any awards, and was actually criticized by critics, it still remains part of my own personal literary history, based upon my own unique experiences and the choices I have made.

I began to see early on in this course that the choices we make when it comes to choosing literature, molds and forms the framework for not only our own literary history, but our students’ as well. When we began our study of Award Winning Books I suddenly realized the impact our

choices, and sometimes our poor choices in book selection, can have on our students. As we began to look closely at awards that were less well known and then onto more well known awards, I began to see that award winning books serve as a valuable *guide* to make meaningful selections for our classrooms.

Over the first week of our Award Winning Books study I was able to look very closely at the Coretta Scott King, Schneider Family and Orbis Pictus Awards as well as read examples of books that have won these awards. I was not very familiar with any of these awards previously, so as I began to read the criteria of these awards, I was surprised when some of these committees were made up of as few as 10 members. Through our group discussions, we raised our concerns of the subjective and biased opinions that may come into play when choosing the books to be honored. This was an aspect of awards that I had not thought of before taking this course and it truly opened my eyes to the importance of educating oneself about the different awards as well as understanding the criteria of what each award stands for.

While I was impressed with some of the stories that had won these awards such as *The Deaf Musicians* and *Flight*, which won the Schneider Family and Orbis Pictus Awards. I found myself disappointed with the story *Rosa* which won the Coretta Scott King Award. Although the illustrations were engaging and intriguing, I found the higher leveled language used in the story, too advance for younger readers. Reading examples of award winning books further solidified my understanding that we need to be educated in our choices that we make when selecting books. This includes not only for the content of the books, but also for the criteria that these book awards are based upon. Ultimately, I did agree with most of the committees' selections of book choices, however it is important as both an individual and teacher, to take a committee's choice of an award winning book, and decide for ourselves if it is suitable for our classrooms.

Our study of the Newbery Award truly opened my eyes to how the choices we as individuals make can directly relate to how a story can, or can not have, a secure place in our literary history. This was made clear through our study of the two novels, *Secret of the Andes* and *Charlotte's Web*. Despite *Secret of the Andes* being an award winning book, I was relieved when in our group discussions no one else was familiar with this novel. I was curious as to why so many of us were unfamiliar with it, despite it receiving one of the most prestigious awards in children's literature. Even more, why everyone in our group had already read the runner up *Charlotte's Web* when we were children. After reading both stories with an open mind, and delving into a discussion comparing the two books with my group, I came to the conclusion that just because a story like *Secret of the Andes* received an award, (which my group agreed is undoubtedly rich in themes, characters and plot) does not necessarily mean that readers will connect with the story. While it can be honored by a committee of adults as *their* choice for the best piece of literature for children, it does not mean it is the best choice for all children. Furthermore, a classic like *Charlotte's Web* that holds the ability to connect with readers in a unique, engaging way can continue to touch and stay in reader's hearts. The overwhelming amount of readers who continue to choose, share and read this book despite the fifty years that have passed since it was originally written are who have secured *Charlotte's Web* into our literary history.

Individual choice is a very powerful contributor to making a story successful and popular. What causes an individual to pick one book over another? Does it eventually come down to personal preference? I found our week analyzing the Caldecott Award very informative. When given the same story, *The Ugly Duckling*, with two versions with different illustrators, would there be a clear difference in the choices of which version of the story we preferred? Within our

group discussion in Week 4, my group discussed our preferences on the two *Ugly Duckling* stories. All four team members agree that we preferred Vainio's non-winning illustrations over Caldecott Award Honor Pinkney's version. During our discussion we noted that this version made us feel, "peaceful, soothing and less frantic." Weeks later, I can still vividly recall Vainio's illustrations compared to Pinkney's illustrations, whose detail was often lost within the chaos of the spread. This yet again reiterates that while committees can make choices based upon their criteria, and often times their stories are intriguing and deserving of the award, individual choice plays a powerful role in contributing to stories making our literary history.

From our exploration of Award Winning Books we began to examine components of classics. This was a several step process, of selecting our own personal classic book choices, discussing trends we saw among our class choices, and then reading classics. I found it overwhelming at first, how a classic could entail so many different components. However, our class and group discussions during Week 6 turned out to be for me, very meaningful as we debated, questioned and supported each other until we came up with a more precise collection of components of a classic. My original thinking of a classic began as a story that was in a sense timeless. From this notion, my group expanded my thinking that a classic has universal themes that throughout generations can be adapted. It is also universal in the sense that readers of all ages could find meaning within. Often times, these classics reflect a certain time period, however they still have the ability to be manipulated and interpreted over time differently. I think my group said it flawlessly when in closing we noted that classic stories have a certain, "je ne sais quoi" about them. It's something that may be unexplainable, but readers continue to choose and find relevance within these stories over time despite the generational gaps that are prevalent.

Peter Rabbit is a story that we analyzed within the idea of a classic. Many of the attributes of the story *Peter Rabbit* helped reinforce the qualities of a classic that my group generated. *Peter Rabbit's* universal themes of lessons in parenting, mischievous children and the consequences that occur, solidified the idea that stories which are relatable to individuals of all ages help a story to remain popular over time. These universal themes also display how a story, despite the generational gaps, can remain relatable throughout the years. Within our class discussions we also debated what influence mass media has on stories like *Peter Rabbit*, which are considered classic. No doubt these different forms of media can and have affected a story's popularity over time. Despite whether media has marketed the book or not, in the end most individuals still love the story, themes and characters. The fact that the media even chose to market the story, shows me that it is a valued story by a large group of people, and by marketing the story it is able to reach an even wider reading audience.

Little Women is another story, whose universal themes and timeless qualities furthered my understanding of a classic. Through our intensive look at this classic story, I traced one of these universal themes, female independence, as I read. By doing this, I was able to reflect on how Louisa May Alcott's portrayal of the March sisters mirrored the expectations of women during the 1800s. Despite Alcott's desire to depict strong, independent female roles uncharacteristic of the time, Alcott in the end subsided to societal expectations and changed her original vision. Regardless of this outcome, I still believe this universal theme of independence is relatable to today's reading audience. This was portrayed clearly through my group's tracking on how critics have interpreted this novel and theme over time. As time goes on, popular viewpoints of society grow and change. Critics therefore cannot help but view stories and their themes in a different way. It was amazing to me how different a story like *Little Women* can be interpreted over time. I found that the more time that went on, the more deeply and intensely *Little Women*

was critiqued. While early scholars commended Alcott's writing claiming it was an entertaining read, I felt they merely skimmed the surface in terms of analyzing the story's message. Later scholars however, criticize Alcott's decision to change her ending to reflect desirable viewpoints of individuals during the 1800s. The fact that *Little Women* is chosen, critiqued and still reviewed today despite being written over a century ago demonstrates its place within our literary history.

Viewing the 1933 and the 1994 movie versions of *Little Women* furthered my understanding of how interpretations of themes within a story can change over time. As I compared the two versions, it was clear that both took on different universal themes portrayed within the story based upon what would be most relatable to the audience during the time. For example, the 1933 version focused more on the hardships of war, and the burdens this caused within the family, as audience members who were going through the Great Depression could easily connect with. This movie portrayed ideologies of family and togetherness that audience members could be optimistic about. In comparison, the 1994 version takes a more feminist role in portraying the independent roles of the individual March sisters. Likewise to how the 1933 version reflected its time period, the 1994 version mirrored women during the 20th century. Women were seen in the same playing field as men during this time and took on much more independent roles within their careers and away from the household. The choices that these directors made reflect how classics can be interpreted in a variety of ways, and yet can still be relatable to the modern reader. This not only demonstrates a classic story's true depth but shows that the choices that mass media makes can help to keep a century old story relevant, meaningful and part of a current generation's literary history.

In our final weeks, my group chose two stories to participate in a literature discussion with. One award honor book and another book which would be considered classic. In choosing which books we wanted to read, it seemed that *Anne of Green Gables* was a story that we had all been familiar with, had a desire to read, and yet none of us had read it. I wondered why none of us had chosen to read this story before? Why did we choose other stories in its place instead of *Anne*? I know for me, I remember thinking it was too long when I was a child. When I never was required to read it in school, it seemed to slip through the cracks on my reading list. I also was intrigued when no one from our group was familiar with the honor award book, *The Great Gilly Hopkins*. Nonetheless, I was looking forward to reading both of these stories with a predetermined task so that my group could closely analyze this classic, and honor award novel.

Reading *Anne of Green Gables* as well as *The Great Gilly Hopkins* with a designated purpose proved to be very meaningful for me. Despite that we were individually following our own tasks; we offered extending ideas and even new ideas to think about with one another which allowed a deeper understanding to form. I felt my group's discussions were more heartfelt and we were able to gain a more versatile understanding of both stories. Although both stories portray a young girl's experience with adoption, we couldn't help but discuss the two stories in terms of our notions of a classic and an award winning book. *Anne's* universal themes, messages and numerous interpretations that still prove relevant today, lends itself to a classic. Whereas, Patterson's powerful characters, plot and messages in *The Great Gilly Hopkins* allowed it to be recognized by a committee as an honored book. After our discussions, I couldn't help but think about the author's choices in their stories and the effect of these choices in terms of our literary history. While all four group members were familiar with *Anne*, we all lacked this familiarity with *The Great Gilly Hopkins*. Montgomery's choice of creating a powerful, unique, and elaborate protagonist, Anne, whose optimistic love of life touches reader's hearts, causes *Anne of*

Green Gables to take a place in our literary history. In comparison, Patterson's choice of creating a powerful portrayal of the rough, pessimistic Gilly, whose use of inappropriate language caused many to refuse to read the story, ultimately caused it to disappear from readers' minds and our history.

There are several reasons why we may choose one book over another. Perhaps the title or illustrations trigger a personal memory, or perhaps it has been recommended by a friend or members of society. While sometimes these stories may be award winning, or classic, other times they may just be a story that simply speaks to us, or our students. Bernikow's quote, I feel, speaks volumes to the expanding knowledge I gained over my coursework. While we as individuals are given the power to make these choices that form our literary history, it is monumental that we chose these stories with fidelity. While a committee may recommend a story, this may not be the best fit for me, or my students. Whatever the scenario, the choice comes down to the individual. In the end, one's literary history or record may be different from another's. But it is we who make the ultimate choice, as the generations before and after us will continue to do.