



The Literature Connection by Shari Furtwangler

Every year, I await the announcement of the winners of the Newberry and Caldecott medals like I await Christmas. I am always anxious to see what others deem “Award Worthy.” While I may not always agree, and often do not, the notoriety and sales that come as a result of these prestigious medals are not insignificant. My goal this year was to read each of them and share MY opinions with readers of the ORacle. Unfortunately, the winners took me by surprise, and maybe some of the publishers too, since they were very difficult to find in most bookstores. I am still missing one of the Caldecott winners, although friends do tell me that they have now seen it in stores. Then there is the furor over the word on the first page of *The Higher Power of Lucky*. Honestly, if they had used slang instead of the anatomically correct word I doubt that anyone would have noticed! (If you haven’t heard, I bet I’ve made you REALLY curious and you will now pick up the book!) It is a strange world we live in... *Flotsam* by David Wiesner is a must see, for me a must have. A wordless book with an intriguing story—it would spark some fascinating discussions!

I was pleased that the Newberry awards were geared more toward intermediate readers this year, rather than the older, middle readers of recent years. *Hattie Big Sky* I think is my favorite (so far). The story of an orphan with some ‘spunk’ that makes it on a claim in Montana during World War I is brilliantly written. Each chapter begins with a letter or newspaper article that Hattie has written. And, the book is based on the life of the author’s great grandmother (with some artistic license, of course). Hattie is such a well developed character that the reader may come to believe that she is their very close friend. A great perspective on prejudice in regards to German immigrants during World War II as well. This book may have the ability to spark some great discussions during a book club! I am reluctant to recommend an age group, but I do believe that I would encourage students 5th grade and above to at least check it out to see if it “fits” them.

The major awards, Newberry and Caldecott get lots of attention so I tried to find some “lesser” publicized awards and award winners. Two of my favorite (and I already know that I’ll love the first place winner because I know her other books) are winners of the

Theodor Seuss Geisel Award for the outstanding book for beginning readers. In first place is *Zelda and Ivy: The Runaways* written and illus. by Laura McGee Kvasnosky. While I have been unable to purchase this book yet, the other three Zelda and Ivy books are so wonderful that I am confident that this one is too. If you don’t know them, Zelda and Ivy are fox sisters who have very “sisterly” characteristics and (mis)adventures. I have often used the first two books about Zelda and Ivy to share think-alouds regarding text to self, and text to text connections. They are very rich books! Two of the Geisel Honor books are *Not a Box* by Antoinette Portis, published by Harper Collins and *Move Over, Rover* by Karen Beaumont, published by Harcourt. *Not a Box* actually looks like one (a box). Its illustrations are simple and imaginative showing how we might think something is one thing, only to find out it is something else, radically different. Oh, the follow-up you could do with this book! Brilliant! *Move Over, Rover!* is a cumulative story told in rhyme. In fact, when I shared it with some first graders and kinders yesterday, they had the pattern and rhyme picked out after the first two repetitions and helped me ‘read’ it. In the same idea as the Mitten, many creatures want to join Rover in his home when the rain comes down. There is one critter that joins them though, who is not particularly welcome.

Charlie Cook’s Favorite Book by Julia Donaldson, published by Dial Books for Young Readers, although not an award winner is absolutely delightful. I am always looking for children’s books in which the character enjoys reading and this is such a book. In Charlie Cooks’ favorite book there is a pirate who finds a book in a treasure chest. This book, found by the pirate is about Goldilocks, who is found in bed with Baby Bear’s favorite book about “Sir Percy Pilkington, a bold and fearless knight”. The knight reads a joke he finds in his favorite book about a very well read frog (“Reddit! Reddit! Reddit)... You get the picture. The book finally circles back to a book about Charlie reading his favorite book! A bargain if you purchase this one with eleven books in one! It is so well done with brightly colored illustrations by Axel Scheffler. *Scarecrow Pete* by Mark Kimball Moulton, published by Ideals Children’s Books is another book in which the character loves to read. It

just so happens that the narrator doesn't particularly like books until he "happens" upon a scarecrow who passes each day by reading. In fact, Pete informs the narrator that "...I can go most anywhere by reading a good book." Convinced, the boy joins Scarecrow Pete and they get lost in a number of really good, classic books. Pete travels on, to become a library volunteer and sends letters of his adventures back to the boy. Told in rhyme, the book is enchanting. In *A Story for Bear* by Dennis Haseley, beautifully illustrated by Jim LaMarche and published by Harcourt, a (The) bear finds a book that he is particularly curious about. He takes the book back to his cave. Later, the bear discovers a woman who reads and apparently enjoys books but he doesn't understand what she is doing. He watches, but never allows her to see him. One day while she is gone, Bear looks through one of her books and is discovered by the woman. He runs away, to return later as he is lured to the reader. While he does not understand the words she reads, "Whenever she read, he felt the waves of mysterious feelings carried by her voice." (I wonder if that is what babies feel when they are very young and being read to...) As the weather turns cold, she leaves, but leaves books for 'her bear'. He carefully carries each of them to his cave to "enjoy" during the winter. The story is so beautifully told and has the potential to generate some thoughtful discussions about the 'melody' of language. (Or you can just sit back and enjoy the beauty of the book!)

A new, just discovered book, *Wolf! Wolf!* By John

Rocco, published by Hyperion, is a new twist on the boy who cried wolf. In this case, the poor wolf is quite elderly and unable to hunt or chew much. Told with an Asian flair, the young man does cry "Wolf", but alas there is no wolf. Finally, when a real wolf arrives, the adults don't believe him and do not come. The wolf makes a deal with the goat herder and the rest of the story is a solution that any vegetarian will love! Fun!

One of the wonderful things that "Harry Potter" has done for children's literature is ensuring that kids are no longer as reluctant to pick up "big" books. In fact, some kids now see this as a badge of courage. Brian Selznick, author of *The Houdini Box*, has created what appears at first to be a VERY big book. *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* published by Scholastic measures two inches in thickness. This may even be thicker than Harry Potter—I didn't lay them side by side. The book is a marriage of novel, picture and movie making and is truly one of the most original, unique, brilliant books I have seen in years. It is one you MUST check out. The mystery is solved by reading and attending closely to the pictures. I doubt you will be disappointed. (Although this would be very difficult to do as a read aloud because of the importance of the numerous pictures.)

My hope is to get through the rest of the award winners by the end of the summer and share that and more in the fall. Until then...

Happy Reading!

Shari