

Anna Walters

TE 836

5.1 Awards: Synthesis and Reflection

What makes a book “good”? What does it take for a student to really enjoy a book? Is it the story, the writing, the characters, or the connection it makes to the student that is reading the story? How are the award winning books chosen and are they really books that students would enjoy reading? Should teachers first and foremost choose these “chosen” books for their curriculum? For the past four weeks these questions have been asked, debated, and questioned. As a classroom teacher you want to provide your students with a variety of literature that will broaden their minds and make them life-long readers. However, the books available vary just about as much as the personalities of the students in the classroom differ. So, how can I apply what I have learned these past weeks to ensure my students enjoy reading as much as I do?

First and foremost, just because I enjoy a book does not mean my students will enjoy it also. Each student is different and enjoys different types of literature. Throughout these past weeks I have learned the reader needs to make a connection to what is being read. The connection, whether it is to the characters or the plot, engages the reader and provides that push that tumbles the reader into the story and makes it more enjoyable. Now, I will have twenty-four students in my classroom. Each student will bring into the classroom a different background, a different personality, and different interests. Then, most importantly, roughly half will be girls and half will be boys. Right there creates another obstacle to be hurdled. Therefore, right from the start I am handicapped as to what books will engage the majority of my students. How can I choose a book the majority of my students will connect to and enjoy? To answer this question I will have to assume I can choose the book and that there is not a standard curriculum book already picked for my grade level.

I feel as a teacher I would first consider the students I have in my classroom that school year. Every year will bring a new batch of students to mold and sculpt. Do I have a large group of students from a certain culture or economic situation? I would consider these things before choosing the books for my students to read. Most importantly I would consider their input and offer them a choice of a selection of books displayed for them. When students feel they have a say in what they read it may make them more susceptible to enjoying it. However, as a teacher I do not get that much freedom because most of the time a group of books has already been chosen that the students should read.

When I was in school I mostly did not like the books I was made to read. Looking back, I have no idea why. Why was I not open to these books the teachers had me read? As an adult I have re-read some of the books and really enjoyed them. It makes me wonder if it was the

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“forcing” that discouraged me from enjoying the book or that I did not have the appropriate background information that is needed to really enjoy the book? During the past four weeks my group discussed why some of the books students are asked to read are not liked. Again, the most common answer was that a connection was not made between the reader and the book. However, I feel an introduction to the story with background information (whatever is applicable to the story) would help kick start the book. For instance, if my students are reading Little Women I would provide information on the background and throughout the story add other little tidbits about the time period. I also think my enthusiasm for the book (or lack of) would influence my students. As a teacher presenting books to my students I would hopefully demonstrate what I would want my students to learn: a love and an open mind for different types of literature.

So, what books are the ones that seem to appear the most in the curriculum for schools? What are the elite books that are high on the reading list? The books that have the shiny sticker attached to them are for the most part, the ones on the reading lists that are sent home in the backpacks. Most notably it is the books that have the Newbery and Caldecott medals attached to them. Is this a good thing? How can fifteen people know what the “good” books are that students should read? When I was younger I usually ran from the books that had the sticker plastered on it. Yet, with age comes wisdom and I now see the opportunity these award winning books can provide for teachers, parents, and students.

The Newbery and Caldecott award selection, I think, is a great way to open some minds of students. Instead of telling the students, “these are the ‘good’ books” and you should like them, I feel it can be used to ask the students, “are these actually good books?” and “did you really like the book.” Get the students to debate and compare the books that are chosen. The assignment we had to do in class that compared the two books, Charlotte’s Web and Secret of the Andes, is a perfect example of a lesson, if delivered just right, could engage the students in the story and also teach them about the award process. Why did one book that has grown in popularity over time and can be found at book stores ended up a runner up to a book that can not even be found at a book store? The books that have the awards can be just an opener to another lesson that will teach the students how to critique, compare, and pick apart literature. I will show them that they do not have to like a book but will have to explain why.

One of my team members, Angela, mentioned that she tells the students it is okay not to like a book as long as you have a good reason. I want my students to know I am not expecting them to like the book; I am expecting them to think about the issues and topics the book

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provides and relate that to their life and background. If you do not like the book tell me why? Then I want them to ask themselves what made this book an award winner? Why would a committee of fifteen pick this book over a book that is more popular at the time? What was it about the book that turned them off of it? I would make sure there was ample time for discussion of the book and opportunity for the students to be able to pick apart and debate their different ideas regarding the books content. Instead of just talking about what is happening in the book and “summarizing” the story the students will be able to critique the story. I feel though, as a teacher, I need to be more open to the books I read and lead by example.

Before taking this class, when I went to the book store, I bought books that were popular (yes, I mostly shop in the young adult book section because they are my favorite) and strayed away from the classics or award winning books. However, this class has now opened my mind to selecting different types of books. I am now curious about the books that are chosen for awards and also the books that end up being honor books. Next time when I go to Barnes and Noble and they have the classic books on display I will pick out a few to read. If I want my students to experience the books that have been labeled with the awards then I need to be open to experiencing them also.

However, now that I am more open to the Newbery am I missing out on other literature that is not marked with an award or is popular among the readers? One of the problems that have been discussed the past four weeks was the limitations the Newbery seems to hold when choosing their books. The books that have been awarded seem to fall under the same category: a fiction novel with a heroine or hero that is challenged in some way and must overcome that challenge. What about the other types of literature like poetry, or historical fiction or non-fiction? I wonder how I can find well-written literature of all genres.

In summary, for the most part these past four weeks I learned that there are books that are good in the readers’ minds. These books are the ones that the reader falls in love with and can read them over and over again. I have a few of those books, most notably the Harry Potter series. These books take the readers on an adventure, which the reader does not want to end. I also feel that it is important make sure that students find their “good” book because those are the books that keep the reader reading. Then there are the award winning books (I am not implying that an awarding winning book can not also be a student’s “good” book. I immensely enjoyed The Westing Game and would consider that a “good” book).

The award books, specifically Newbery, are the books that provide the students with an opportunity to dissect, discuss, critique, and to read about topics and issues that they may not have considered reading

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before. These books could be considered boring to some students but it is important that the approach the teacher takes in introducing the book provides a foundation that will make the book appealing to the reader.

I also have learned that if the award process just named books that were popular among students then these less popular books would not be read and a whole other aspect of reading, the critiquing and analyzing portion, would be lacking. It seems so weird for me to admit this, coming from someone who despised reading these books, but the popular books will be chosen for book reports and will not be lost on the book shelves. Let the books with the Newbery medal be read also, even if they sometimes can be looked at as un-enjoyable, if the right approach is taken my students may just enjoy the book.