

### 12.1 Final Paper

Choice is the optimum word in Bernikow's quote. "What is commonly called literary history is actually a record of choices." In a way my journey through this course reflects a record of choices, not just the choices I made with each assignment but rather a combination of choices that I made along with choices that I witnessed others having made.

We all began this journey by discussing the best book we have ever read. How that connects to this issue of choice is that as a fifth grader I made a decision to read *The Hobbit*. It was my choice, not an assignment or someone else's choice, such as my teacher, but rather it was my choice. I made that choice because I was bored and did not have anything else to do, but it was a significant choice because I still remember it and as I stated in assignment 1.4 I read it 'because I was bored, but I finished it because I was hooked.' That choice helped me become an avid reader and a lifelong learner and is now a part of my literary history.

As a class we discussed the reasons for our choice of best books. The reason for my choice was the same as many of my classmates and that was we felt that our choice was made because we identified with or made a connection to our best book. In some way our best book was deeply meaningful to us in a way that provided some kind of connection to the story or a character. The other significant reason our class felt was a reason for a book to be a best book was the memory of a parent reading it over and over to them. Lots of memories about loved ones were remembered. What is interesting here is that our literary history is impacted by choice, not ours as a child but rather the choice of the parent to read that book to their child. As I discovered later in the course with the topic of reading classics, we see that the choices of another, in particular an adult, influence the experiences we have. This in turn impacts the choices we make as an adult. If my teacher exposed me to the classics and was able to cover the material in a way that brought meaning to that reading for me, then as an adult I am more likely to be in favor of reading the classics. My choice has been influenced by my experiences and my experiences were shaped by the choices of an adult. For example, in fourth grade I read Macbeth. I did not enjoy it, it was a chore to read and understand and quite possibly not appropriate for a fourth

grader. This of course was taught because it was a classic and we needed to be exposed to Shakespeare. One negative effect is that I have no interest in Shakespeare and therefore have not been a positive influence in the lives of my children when it comes to their reading Shakespeare. However, for books that I did enjoy, and still do, and that were presented in a way that meant something to me I have been very encouraging of my children when it happened that they were reading them. The Red Badge of Courage I remember reading in eighth grade and The Grapes of Wrath and Catcher in the Rye I remember reading in tenth grade. I enjoyed all of these books and certainly felt more mature and smarter for having read them, especially the two in tenth grade. As my two older children have grown and had the opportunity to read these books in High School I very much wanted to be a part of that experience with them. I wanted to discuss these books with them, to hear what they had to say, to see how it influenced them. Fortunately for me I can do this again as my two younger children grow older and enter High School. In a way our family literary history has been influenced by choice, my own choices and the good and bad choices of my teachers.

During the second week my understanding of choice grew. As we reviewed and discussed awards and the award winners I came to understand more about the politics of awards and the influence of awards on people's choices. What I found to be of interest is that award committees are very conscious and deliberate in their choices for award winners and one could argue that they make a lot of fine choices, however, there is somewhat of a lack of choice, a lack of independence in what they do. They are inhibited by who they are. Their social backgrounds, educational achievements, financial status, cultural history and even their gender all are factors that influence committee members as they decide upon the award winners. These factors are beyond their control but nonetheless are a part of the process. They are factors in the choices they make and therefore are factors in our literary history.

The conclusion I came to at the end of the second week was that 'awards are a good guide for finding a good book. However, we do have to be responsible for determining whether a book is good or not.' I still believe this ten weeks later but my understanding of the importance of this has deepened because it is only now at the end of the course that I realize how important it is that we make our own decisions. If we rely on award committees to make our choices then we are getting two things. First, we

are getting their expert judgment on what is a quality piece of literature, which is a plus. Secondly, however, we are getting the context of their personal lives, culture, gender, etc... that impact their choices, which can be very limiting. An upper income single white male is going to have a hard time relating to and therefore completely understanding a piece of writing that is based on a low-income, large extended family headed by an African American female. Consequently, his choices for awards will favor that which he is most familiar with. This means that awards unfortunately favor some types of writing over others and misses out on good writing that is new and unusual to the committee members. I am not saying to ignore awards but rather use awards as a guide to begin looking for quality literature so that we can make informed choices.

Reviewing the Newbery and Caldecott winners highlighted the fact that award committees can and do pick quality books. While it was reassuring to discover this again what was most interesting about studying these awards was I learned from Eric Rohmann, Caldecott winner for *My Friend Rabbit*. He said in his acceptance speech that “the story is incomplete without the reader, and therefore making a picture book isn’t only about what you put in, but also about what you leave out. Making a book is a collaborative act.” Reader choices have an impact on the story; if it is a collaborative act as Rohmann states then could there be any more important level of choice? I think not and this may very well be the most important piece of literary history and yet one that is not recorded because as we read a picture book over and over again the story can change over and over again and it change because of us, the reader. There is no permanent record of this remarkable achievement, but it still has an impact because we are reading picture books to our children and our students and in turn we are influencing their future choices by helping to mold who they are now.

As we began week five I wrote about my expectation for the course when it began and that was to gain a better understanding of makes up quality children’s literature. At this point in the course I knew that that was not an easy answer. No formula would suffice, even though some think that award winners are formulaic. Again I was at a point where I thought that it would be problematic to rely solely on award committees to determine what is and what is not a good book. Committees pick award winners, they have made a choice. Teachers and parents’ choice to read award winners, they have made a choice. We, however, have to be aware that these teachers and parents are ceding their choice to the awards committee. We must not give

up this choice because there are many good books out there to read and I would suggest that if we rely on committees then we are losing opportunities to discover good books that have not won awards. As we saw with reading *Charlotte's Web* and *The Secret of the Andes*, the award winner is not always the better book.

As a Head Start Director I found myself in week five thinking about the impact that adults can have on preschoolers. We are in a position where we have the ability to influence choice. We should not choose for these children, but at the same time in a way we do because we choose which books are kept in our classrooms. In this manner we are impacting their choices. There are also other ways to impact choice. If we choose to read to our children a lot, then we expose them to more words and the greater the number of words a child is exposed to the greater their degree of success in school and in life. Something very simple, yet so very important can have an enormous impact on the life of an individual. Choice can also be a reflection of a lack of choice. For low income families their access to books and the importance they place on literacy is an important factor in the growth and learning of their children and unfortunately this lack of choice ends up being a reinforcing factor in the cycle of poverty. It is the exception not the rule that truly breaks the cycle of generational poverty. So when you consider issues such as poverty our literary history is a record of choices and also a record of a lack of choice.

Halfway through the course in week six I wrote 'I do not believe there are absolute classics of children's literature, because I think that even the timeless 'classics' will become the victims of time.' At this point I was really getting a sense that each generation has choice when it comes to what is a classic. Each new generation can and is influenced by individual and generational experiences. Individual experiences, such as, children having adults read classics to them reinforce what is a classic. However, generational experiences, such as, the hippie movement in the 1960s may very change a whole generation and move them away from traditional literature and have looking for something new. A classic that is more reflective of their generational experiences. In both situations though we are still seeing a combination of expert opinion and popular opinion in the determination of what is a classic. Experts and consumers must decide together the true classics. It is just as true to say that a popular book will not be a classic if the experts deem it to be of poor quality as it is to say that an award winning book is a classic if it does not sell and thus is not popular.

Having determined that it takes experts choosing quality and consumers choosing with their pocketbooks, by purchasing books, I would add that consumers are more important in this relationship. I say this because I think it is probable that popular books that were initially determined to be of poor quality by the experts may very well be re-evaluated by the experts to see if they missed something special. It would be rarer for an award winning book that never became popular to be re-evaluated by the consumer. The choice has been made and the time has past.

Reading *Little Women* continued my learning about choice. While not consciously thinking of it this way I had previously discussed choice in terms of teachers and parents not relying solely on the designation of 'award winner' to determine what good books to read. I also discussed choice in terms of each generation needing to determine what a classic is. With *Little Women* we have a very specific example of a classic that I thought might become a book that would not be read very much at some point, as new readers find it hard to connect to I suspect that fewer people will read it. If a classic is no longer being read is it still a classic? A choice has been made by the consumer; they are no longer reading the book, so I would say it would have to be described as a book that was once considered a classic. As the reading of the scholarship on *Little Women* in week eight made clear there are some very different opinions about this classic. Opinions that have changed with time and just reinforce the point that each new generation of readers will always take a fresh look at a classic and make their own choice about how it should go down in literary history. In fact, what we see with *Little Women* is that we start with a book that was read by girls and boys, women and men when it first came out. Now we see that it is hardly every read by boys and probably only read by men when they are taking a class on children's literature. How this book is viewed has changed over time and it is conceivable that the scholarship on it will also continue to change with time.

As we entered final stretch in this course we viewed two movie versions of *Little Women* and what we see here are the choices that the directors made in how they wanted to make their movies, how they wanted to portray this story. Their choices were impacted by society as it existed at the time and therefore shows how perceptions change with time. The 1994 version really needed to show women as strong and independent otherwise it would not have connected with its intended audience. In a way society exerted an influence on the director to make particular choices on how to make his

movie. It is interesting how the course got us to this point of viewing how society influences choices. We began with experts making choices, choosing award winners and then we moved on to where the reader made a choice. The choice being made was what makes a classic, and then we get into the influence of time on that choice. Time really shows that society can impact choice. Society changed over time and the scholarship on *Little Women* changed as well. Supporting this concept is the fact that two different movies made about this book have significant differences in manner in which they tell their story but they also show that society caused that difference and also that society influenced any differences between the book and the movies.

When thinking of Bernikow's quote it is interesting to think of the way the course closed. My team read *Anne of Green Gables* and *The Great Gilly Hopkins* and at first I thought about the choices we made in reviewing and discussing the book. The use of literary discussion groups and how the use of this method furthered my own understanding of the books, but then I realized it was more significant than that. The main characters in these books made choices that had an impact on their lives. Ann with all her mistakes, but never a mistake that she seemed to repeat and Gilly with her purposeful behavior designed to keep people at bay, so they cannot get too close emotionally and hurt her. When looking at this course through the lens of this quote it seems as if we have built upon this issue of choice. We started simply and grew more complicated, but at first I thought we ended with something very complex; the literary discussion groups. Alas I believe I was wrong in thinking that, instead we have ended simply with two girls making simple choices that impact their lives and impact their own histories.