

# And the Newbery Goes To . . .

## A Picturebook?

MARY SCHREIBER

In 2016, the top prize for the most distinguished contribution to American literature for children went to a picturebook: *Last Stop on Market Street* by Matt de la Peña. Previously, only one other picturebook had won the Newbery Medal.

As a member of the 2016 Newbery Award Committee, I had a voice in selecting a picturebook for the coveted Newbery Medal. But after the announcement, I started to wonder just how many picturebooks had received either the medal or the honor title in the past.

At the airport in Boston, I ran into Dr. Marianne Martens, a professor at my alma mater, Kent State University's School of Library and Information Science. She told me about a conference the School of Library and Information Science was starting, the Marantz Picturebook Research Symposium.<sup>1</sup> Dr. Martens encouraged me to submit a proposal for a poster presentation on the topic of "Newbery as Picture Book." This article springs from that research.

My first thought was to look for a list of Newbery picturebook winners, but I had no luck unearthing such a list that was up to date. The most recent list I found was included in a 1999 article written by Martha Parravano.<sup>2</sup> Thus, I began research to add on the titles from 2000 to 2016.

From the ALSC website, I printed off a list of all Newbery Medal and Honor Books.<sup>3</sup> As of January 2016, this list included 403 known titles (94 winners, 309 honors) but will continue to grow each year as more awards are handed out. Indeed, it has already expanded since my initial evaluation. With the announcement

of the 2017 winner and honor books the grand total is now 407 known titles (95 winners, 312 honors).<sup>4</sup>

My method of whittling the list down involved checking each title in one of three online library catalogs: Cuyahoga County Public Library, SearchOhio, and OhioLink. From there, I looked at the number of pages recorded, and I ordered in anything under eighty pages. I narrowed the list down to nine titles—two winners and seven honors (eight after the announcement in January 2017)—that I believe are the most picturebook-like Newbery recipients. They include:

### Newbery Winners

2016—*Last Stop on Market Street* by Matt de la Peña, illustrated by Christian Robinson (Putnam/Penguin)

1982—*A Visit to William Blake's Inn: Poems for Innocent and Experienced Travelers* by Nancy Willard, illustrated by Alice and Martin Provensen (Harcourt)



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## Newbery Honors

2017—*Freedom over Me: Eleven Slaves, Their Lives and Dreams Brought to Life* by Ashley Bryan (Atheneum Books for Young Readers)

2011—*Dark Emperor and Other Poems of the Night* by Joyce Sidman, illustrated by Rick Allen (Houghton Mifflin)

2006—*Show Way* by Jacqueline Woodson, illustrated by Hudson Talbott, illustrated by Rick Allen (Putnam)

1985—*Like Jake and Me* by Mavis Jukes, illustrated by Lloyd Bloom (Knopf)

1983—*Doctor De Soto* by William Steig (Farrar)

1972—*Annie and the Old One* by Miska Miles, illustrated by Peter Parnall (Little, Brown)

1934—*The ABC Bunny* by Wanda Gág (Coward)

1929—*Millions of Cats* by Wanda Gág (Coward)

But how is a picturebook Newbery even possible? That's where the Newbery Award manual comes in. When speaking to groups of adults and kids during my reading year, I always stressed the broad range of reading with which I was tasked. I was reading and evaluating picturebooks, fiction, nonfiction, graphic novels, and first readers, and the books were for young children, beginning readers, chapter book readers, middle grade readers, and yes, even teen readers. The expectation to read widely is depicted in the Newbery Manual, which states:

**Definition #2** A “contribution to American literature for children” shall be a book for which children are an intended potential audience. The book displays respect for children’s understandings, abilities, and appreciations. Children are defined as persons of ages up to and including fourteen, and books for this entire age range are to be considered.

And

**Criteria #2** Each book is to be considered as a contribution to American literature. The committee is to make its decision primarily on the text. Other components of a book, such as illustrations, overall design of the book, etc., may be considered when they make the book less effective.<sup>5</sup>

As the saying goes, what happens during Newbery committee discussions, stays with that Newbery committee. However, speaking in broader terms, it has been whispered over the years that someone might have typed up the words from an illustrated work (specific titles not mentioned) so they could judge it by the merits of its text alone. This is one way to interpret the above language.

Another way of looking at this conundrum was presented to the 2016 committee at our meeting during the ALA 2015 Midwinter Meeting. Newbery chair Ernie Cox invited past Newbery member and chair Nina Lindsay to share insights into the process. Her perspective was captured in the minutes, as this is one of the few moments that is not considered confidential in a Newbery committee’s time together. Lindsay imparted words of wisdom, which she later clarified for the context of this article.

She said, “The Newbery criteria ask us to focus on the text and only pay attention to other elements if they detract, but nowhere do they tell us the text has to stand alone, or be considered separate from the graphics. If part of the text’s job is to stand back and let the pictures tell the story—that’s doing its job.”<sup>6</sup>

So how does one go about evaluating a picturebook without discussing the illustrations? Lucky for reviewers and award committee members alike, K. T. Horning has written *From Cover to Cover*, which she last updated in 2010. Chapter 5 tackles picturebooks and breaks it into two sections: text and pictures. Horning provides a great checklist of questions to ask when looking at picturebook text.

She writes, “Do the pages seem to turn in the right places? Does the text flow naturally when you read it aloud? Are there sentence or plot structures that make the story predictable?”<sup>7</sup> Even if a picturebook can check all these boxes, it still must also fit the criteria for the Newbery, including excellence in aspects like plot, characters, setting, style, etc.

The Newbery Manual’s Criteria, Terms, and Definitions can be interpreted to include picturebooks, but as of 2016, only about 2 percent of Newbery winners and honor books have been picturebooks. The next logical question is—why doesn’t it happen more often?

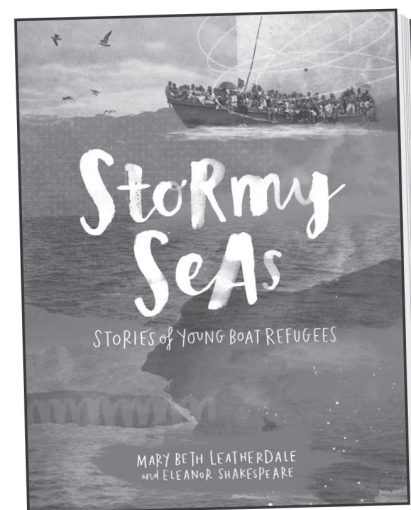
I think the answer lies in the fact that the committee changes every year, and so do the books under consideration. Truly, it is up to each Newbery committee to interpret the guidelines as they see fit. After rigorous discussion, the books they feel are the most distinguished rise to the top of the ballot.

It is amazing that ninety-five years later, guidelines that were first used in 1922 can still be interpreted so that books like *Last Stop on Market Street* and *Freedom Over Me* can be recognized for their distinguished use of language. Picturebooks can be Newbery Medal winners! 🎉

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