

Making the Mock Newbery Their Own

A School/Library System Collaboration

ALPHA S. DELAP AND CECILIA MCGOWAN

It was a warm June Chicago night, and we were talking about Mock Newbery programs in public and school libraries over dessert. After a bite of dark chocolate mousse, Cecilia said to me, “Well, what if we partnered on a Mock Newbery program this Fall?” I clapped my hands like one of my second grade students and said, “Yes, please!” I had dreamed of this moment for a long time. “Let’s be in touch at the end of the summer and see what is possible.”

I teach at an independent school, St. Thomas School, preschool through grade 8, across Lake Washington from Seattle. In the past, I have run small Mock Newbery programs, like a traditional lunch book club. We have used the already curated book list from our local public library, which is part of the King County Library System, and usually a handful of fifth grade students participate.

Our library buys two to three copies of each book, and students share them and read voraciously. Right before the annual announcement of the ALA Youth Media Awards, we hold an election and present the results on a bulletin board display and announce our top three books in the school e-newsletter.



This year was different. Since Cecilia was the chair of the 2018 Newbery Committee, she had copies of hundreds of books at her disposal, and she generously let us borrow them. In the beginning of October 2017, she arrived with her first set of six boxes, and that’s when I began the St. Thomas School Mock Newbery meetings in our main library. I took off the dust jackets of each book and kept the book and the dust jackets on a separate shelf in my library supply closet.

There was great enthusiasm and support for the program, from our head of school to faculty, many of whom offered to help. Our committee was made up of fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth graders. Instead of six or seven students, interest surged to twenty-five students eager to find out about this new “book evaluation committee.”

The Practicalities

In keeping with my pedagogical philosophy, I balanced structure with opportunities for experimentation and flexibility. The first order of business was to begin the nomination process. Each individual student committee member was



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Sophie has found some new books to read!

responsible for selecting and nominating two of their favorite books that fit the ALSC Newbery criteria by the middle of December. In the third week of January, students planned to present their list of fifteen books to Cecilia formally. They needed to be able to explain why their books fit the specific award criteria.

Unlike past programs, the process of whittling down the selections themselves was an integral part of the experience. The students began by reading the blurbs and short aspects of the text and asking themselves, “Is this an example of the very best literature written for children this publishing year? Does it stand alone or is it part of a series? Is the audience for this book under or over fourteen years of age?”

With books piled and spread throughout the library, students met eight times to select, read, and analyze materials. Setting their lunch plates of food aside, they talked, laughed, and debated—evaluating more than four hundred books over a three-month period.

The Presentations

In the middle of January, I asked each student to prepare a short presentation about their favorite book and why it should be included on the Newbery ballot, making sure to mention the criteria itself.

“Are we allowed to ask Ms. McGowan for an autograph?” one student asked. I smiled and said, “I think that autographs



Sam has a knack for book evaluation.

might need to wait.” However, I loved the respect and honor this question implies.

When the students presented their picks, many prepared PowerPoints; all of the students were ready and clear about their selections.

The Possibilities

Parents stopped me in the hallways and on the stairs to tell me how excited their children were about being part of the Mock Newbery committee. One mother paused for emphasis and said, “I just can’t believe how much my son is reading! I absolutely love this program!”

In a postelection debriefing, students told me why they enjoyed the experience so much: “You let us make our own decisions about what we liked.” “We really got to understand the Newbery Award criteria.”

The key to the success of the program, besides access to the sheer volume of materials, was the commitment that we made in allowing the students autonomy in their evaluation, nomination, and election process. Ultimately the book that ended up winning was Laurel Snyder’s *Orphan Island*, with Catherynne Valente’s *The Glass Town Game* and Laura Ruby’s *York* receiving honors. Though these titles did not get called out during the Youth Media Awards announcements this year, the St. Thomas School students now have the confidence in their own evaluation tools in ways that open up completely new programming possibilities. ☺