

When Caldecott Met COVID

A Most Unique Awards Committee Experience

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The 2021 Caldecott/Newbery/Legacy virtual banquet just ended, and I'm a mix of emotions. Normally I'd be all dressed up and in a hotel ballroom, and this year, I would have been sitting with my Caldecott committee colleagues.

But here I am in my comfy chair at home, wearing an embarrassingly old T-shirt and yoga pants. But I'm with my colleagues—and many others—online as we just listened to and viewed the award recipients. And the bonus of viewing this event via livestream is everyone who was logged in was able to read and contribute to the very busy chat.

Illustrator Michaela Goade, winner of the Caldecott Medal for *We Are Water Protectors* written by Carole Lindstrom, stole the show. I could not have been more overwhelmed by her stunning talk and striking appearance against a gauzy and luminescent background. I was entranced.

The impact of the 2021 Caldecott Medal and Honor books will continue, but my participation in the selection of the Medal and Honor books has concluded . . . a journey that began in fall 2019.

November 2019

Ohio weather for a Sunday afternoon in early November was especially pleasant. Warm and sunny, it was just right for preparing my gardens for winter. But when I pulled my phone from my jacket—wait, what was this? A message specifically to me from the American Library Association? With the word “Caldecott” as part of the subject line?

The weather wasn't so warm that I was dazed from the heat. Was this message really an invitation to accept an appointment to the 2021 (Randolph) Caldecott committee? I was astonished to be offered a dream come true—a chance to help select the most distinguished American picture book!

January 2020

Publishers would soon send books for consideration, and I was enthused for the book blitz to begin. I cleared off an entire bookcase and set up a workspace prioritized for picture



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books. I met all the committee membership criteria . . . whew! I read and re-read the Caldecott manual on the ALSC website.

Soon the end of January was nearing, which meant travel to the ALA Midwinter Conference. The flight from Ohio to Philadelphia isn't that long, but still I had that "Are we there yet?" impatience. The conference highlight for me was arriving to the room where the members of the 2021 Caldecott Committee convened. I met committee chair Annisha Jeffries and other colleagues. It was an auspicious group, and I knew we would soon be fast friends.

At the Youth Media Awards (YMA) program on Monday morning, I mentally transported myself forward one year. I imagined sitting close to the front of a large auditorium with my fellow Caldecott committee-mates, maybe wearing a customized T-shirt or hat. In the very early hours, the award recipient and honor-winning illustrators would have just received their phone calls with the news, which would then be announced to everyone in the room, and the media. Exhilarating!

February—March 2020

Books slowly began to arrive on my doorstep, and for my own record-keeping, I logged them on a spreadsheet, adding notes and other pertinent data. I visited the public library, browsing

the new children's books. My calendar was marked with dates to submit the monthly recommendations to our chair, and I had taped a list of the Caldecott criteria above my desk. We were off and running! Woohoo!

And then the pandemic took over.

March—June 2020

Around the end of March, COVID shut down much of daily life. Libraries closed. Schools went online. And, of course, publishing was affected. Books stopped arriving.

The pandemic was a game-changer for the Caldecott committee. I can only imagine the behind-the-scenes work our committee chair was enduring. If she ever had any doubts that we would not be able to complete our work, it didn't show. She was calm and in control and led us forward.

We met several times virtually, not to discuss books of course—that would come later—but to review our procedures, ask questions, and also bond with each other. As committee-mates shared, the Zooms helped us solve and work out concerns and provided additional group time to learn Caldecott criteria together. Nevertheless, how would our committee meet at the ALA Conference in June? The answer to that

question was . . . we wouldn't. As we now know, both the Annual Conference and Midwinter Meeting were canceled.

But committee work continued. I experimented with my virtual home "studio" to determine which background was best, completely realizing there were more important concerns. By mid-April, publishers were informed that ALSC award committees would be able to receive digital versions of books. A stopgap, but of course with the understanding that we would be able to hold finished copies of the books in our hands by the end of December, at the latest, for awards consideration.

We did our best to keep up with reading and examining, as well as keeping our own lives safe and sane. Only minor adjustments were necessary to our Caldecott schedule of nominating books we believed worthy of deliberations in January 2021.

June—December 2020

We persevered. We were fortunate to balance families, jobs, and life routines with our committee duties. We continued to nominate books. Zoom meetings fostered our camaraderie, and as committee members agreed, helped us get to know each other better. While committee work was the first order of business, we also were virtual visitors in our colleagues' homes and offices. It was a unique and rare opportunity to build stronger relationships, enhance listening and talking with one another, and grow friendships while focusing on our charge. And, of course, there were financial savings, which could open the process to others in the future.

Slowly, books began to arrive again. The joy in the midst of this difficult and sometimes heartbreaking time, often with dire daily news, was the books themselves. *The books!* The ever-present sense of surprise when the box or mailer showed up. Opening the package was like opening a gift, which indeed it was. The marvel of holding new books, touching dust jackets, feeling the paper, literally paging through the book quickly to enjoy the rapid salvo of images emerging. And if more than one book arrived, repeating that process to a fullness of spirit. And then to slowly savor all, over and again. Delving into the books was a welcome respite, and a safe and captivating place to be.

January 2021

By the first week of January 2021, our committee members were ready to deliberate! We had read, scrutinized, and nominated titles for our discussion list, added sticky notes to certain pages, and kept track of our ideas.

We spent a week in our own environments, inviting our fellow committee members into those environments via Zoom. Each committee member had been assigned specific titles to introduce for daily discussing, sharing, and showing.

My dining room was Caldecott central, the table laden with stacks of delicious books and pages of notes. I appreciated the deliberations schedule. There was time to personally debrief at the end of the day and to prepare for the next day's burst of stellar perspectives and insights shared. At least one committee member appreciated being at home with tea and snacks, dressed comfortably, and not in a hotel!

And at the end of the week, we voted. I can still put myself in the moment I held my breath while the votes were being counted and we revealed the winner and honors.

I probably wasn't the only committee member to feel both elated and relieved, yet also trying to absorb the idea that we had completed our charge.

And then a realization hit me . . . all of the 2021 medal and honor illustrators were women, representing various races and ethnicities, including Goade as the first woman of color and first Indigenous woman to win the prestigious medal.

The next sensational event was informing the winners. We scheduled an evening Zoom meeting. All committee members were on board, and publisher representatives were at the ready. ALSC liaison Jordan Dubin phoned the winners and honorees. Being on the virtual scene to see the reactions of the recipients was priceless.

Viewing the subsequent Youth Media Awards from afar was still breathtaking. Even though my committee companions and I were not in a huge auditorium with excitement rippling from one end of the room to the other, it was still a spirited event. And those of us who could, participated in a private committee afterglow with yet another Zoom.

And now the pandemic Caldecott year was over . . . almost.

June 2021

While the Caldecott/Newbery/Legacy Banquet didn't happen in person, our committee shared an auspicious prelude three days prior to the virtual banquet. During a celebratory Zoom, our chair raised an eloquent toast, complete with sparkling wine. I'll savor this moment forever. &

In addition to the author, the 2021 Caldecott Committee included Chair Annisha Jeffries, Carmen Lynette Boston, Christine D. Caputo, Edith Irene Ching, Alec B. Chunn, Melissa Zymboly Depper, Shannan LaTrece Hicks, Gaye Hinchliff, Hanna Lee, Erin Ford Nguyen, Sarah Okner, Sarah Frances Rodriguez, Mary Schreiber, and Catherine Elizabeth Sorensen.

View the 2021 Newbery-Caldecott-Legacy Virtual Banquet online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kPORSdaxsaE>.