



From Runners-Up to Honor Books

A History of the Books with the Silver Medal

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If you ever talk to a member of the Newbery Committee some time in December, as they are approaching the final discussions to choose the Newbery winner, chances are you will find them stressed out, still frantically reading, and worried they may miss a distinguished book—perhaps THE most distinguished book of the year.

The specter of *Charlotte's Web* looms large. The 1952 novel by E.B. White, the now classic and arguably the most significant American children's novel of the twentieth century, was famously missed by the 1953 Newbery Committee. The committee instead selected *Secret of the Andes* by Ann Nolan Clark as the most distinguished contribution to children's literature published in 1952.

Except the Committee *didn't* miss *Charlotte's Web*. It was a runner up that year, specifically the first runner up, meaning that *Charlotte's Web* had been considered, thoroughly discussed and, when the votes were calculated, had come in second. We know this because until 1971, the Newbery Honor Books were true runners-up, and until 1964 were listed in preferential order.

If you look on the ALSC website's list of past Newbery Medal winners, you'll notice that the Honor Books of the first four

decades seem to be listed willy-nilly in a haphazard order. They're not alphabetical by author or title.

Instead, what you see in this alphabetical chaos is a bit of Newbery history. By looking at the lists of Honor Books, we can get some insight into each committee's final vote. Returning to the 1953 Newbery Medal books, for example, we can see that after *Charlotte's Web*, *Moccasin Trail* by Eloise Jarvis McGraw comes next, meaning that it took third place in the final vote.

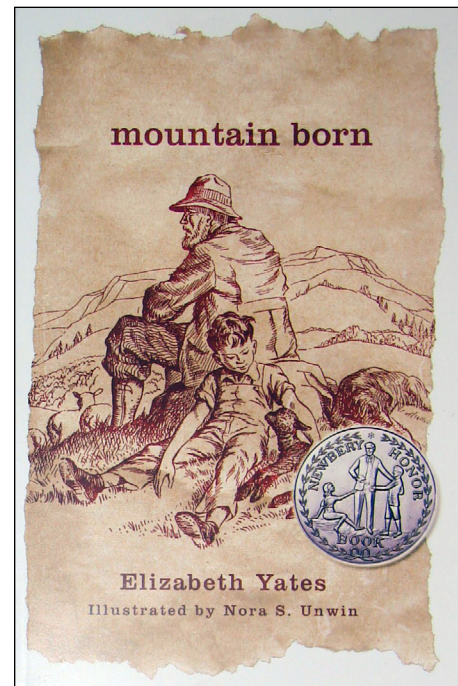
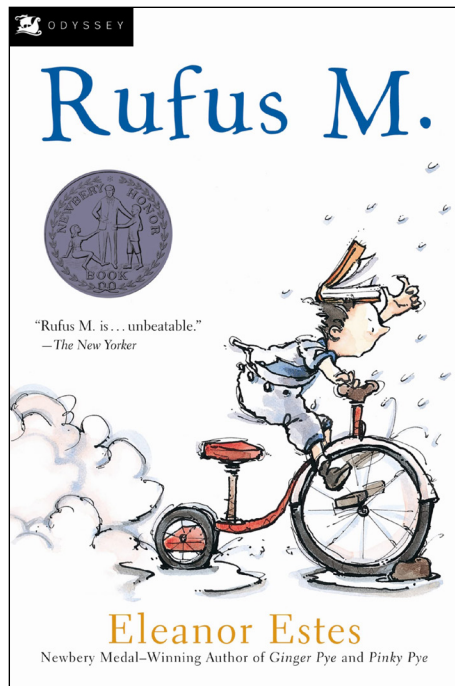
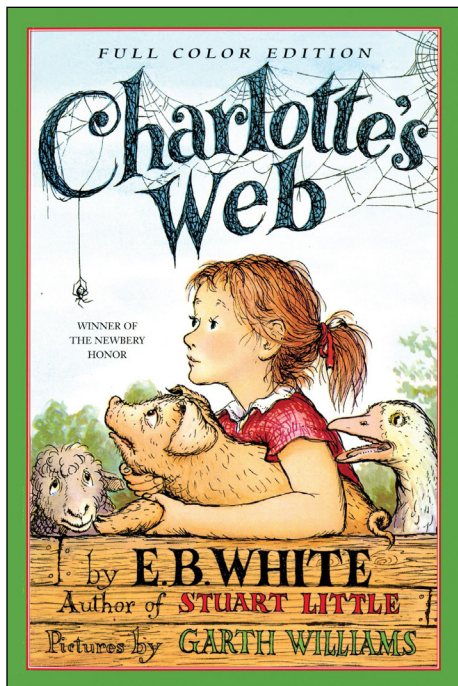
After that *Red Sails to Capri* by Ann Weil came in fourth, *The Bears on Hemlock Mountain* by Alice Dalgliesh came in fifth, and *Birthdays of Freedom*, volume 1, by Genevieve Foster, came in sixth. Today, this sort of information about the final Newbery votes is kept secret.

Back when the Honor Books were runners-up, there weren't any special rules or procedures for choosing them. They were literally the books that got the next highest vote tallies. And, in the first year at least, it didn't take that much to make the cut.

For example, in 1922, *The Story of Mankind* by Hendrik Willem van Loon, was chosen by a popular vote of the entire



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membership of ALA, and it garnered a whopping 77 percent of the vote. The five Honor Books that year were simply all the books that got two or more votes.

In her *History of the Newbery and Caldecott Medals* (Viking Press, 1957), Irene Smith noted the vote tally as follows:

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| 1. <i>The Story of Mankind</i> | 163 votes |
| 2. <i>The Great Quest</i> | 22 votes |
| 3. <i>Cedric the Forester</i> | 7 votes |
| 4. <i>The Old Tobacco Shop</i> | 5 votes |
| 5. <i>The Golden Fleece</i> | 4 votes |
| 6. <i>The Windy Hill</i> | 2 votes |

The point spread here between the winner and the next highest book is so large that, by today's standards, there wouldn't have been any Honor Books named at all. Nor would the final vote counts have ever been published or even mentioned in casual conversation due to the confidentiality rules that have now been in place for most of the Newbery Award's existence.

In the first few decades of the Newbery Award's existence, the runners-up actually didn't get much attention at all. In 1923, 1924, and 1927, they weren't even recorded, so the runners-up for *The Voyages of Dr. Dolittle*, *The Dark Frigate*, and *Smoky the Cowhorse* are lost to history.

Voting was conducted by mail then, and the chair of the Newbery Committee (who, at that time, was also chair of the Children's Librarians' Section) tallied the final votes. Perhaps, as with *The Story of Mankind*, the wins were so resounding that the 1923, 1924, and 1927 chairs didn't feel a need to report. More than likely, however, they just didn't feel it mattered.

The indifference toward the runners-up is evident in the lack of press coverage they received. They were rarely included in the annual announcements of the Newbery (and later, Caldecott) winners. The 1942 runners-up, for example, were not mentioned at the Newbery-Caldecott Banquet where the Newbery winner was announced. Instead, they were announced a few days later by acting-chair Clara Breed at the very end of the CLA's business meeting, and then only in passing, after all the committee reports had been read, and just before adjournment.

In the June 1944 issue of *Top of the News* (the precursor to *Children and Libraries*) the runners-up got a bit of press coverage, but just barely. "Esther Forbes received the Newbery Medal for *Johnny Tremain*. *These Happy Golden Years* and *Fog Magic* were among the books considered for the award." That's it. No mention of the other two runners-up in 1944, *Rufus M.* by Eleanor Estes or *Mountain Born* by Elizabeth Yates. Both of these slighted authors would go on to win Newbery Medals in the next decade.

Fanfare Ramps Up

By the 1950s, the runners-up began to get a little more fanfare. They were now routinely mentioned in the library press, typically in the last paragraph of a lengthy description of the year's Newbery Medal winner. Beginning in 1964, they were no longer listed in preferential order so that each runner-up would be given equal standing.

Finally, in 1971 the term "runner-up" was replaced with the term "Honor Book," and applied to all of the previous runners-up retroactively, although the preferential order from 1922 to 1963 has been maintained. At the same time, silver facsimile

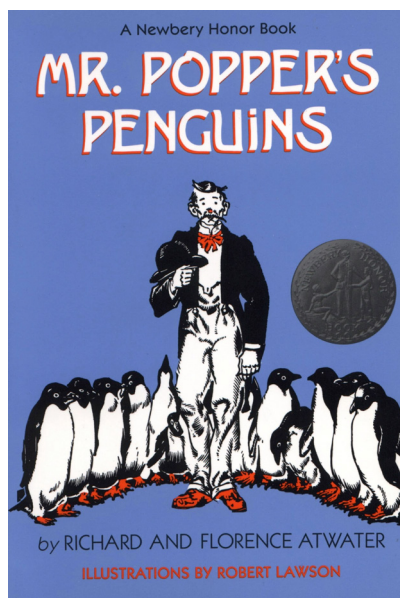
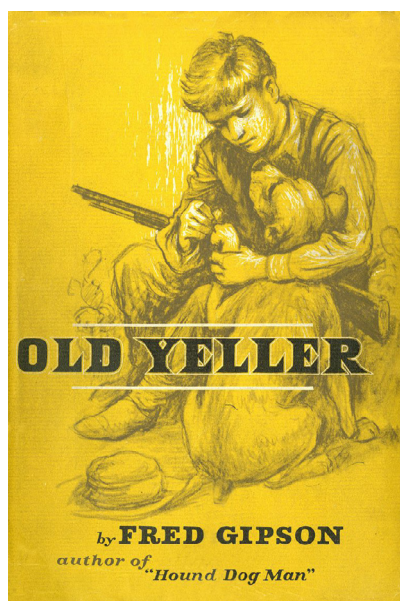
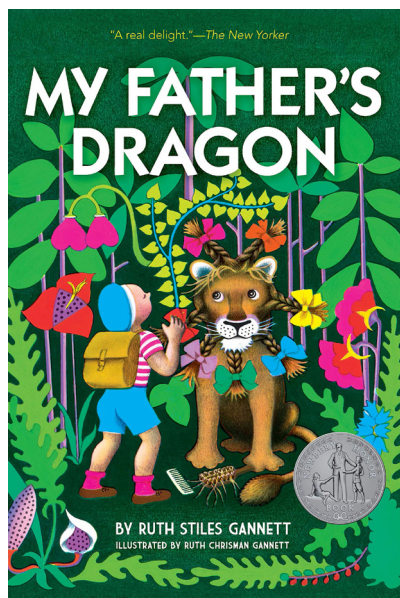
seals were created that could be placed on the covers of the Honor Books to give them higher visibility.

The Newbery winners are selected by a well-defined process. When it comes down to balloting after thoroughly discussing all of the final Newbery contenders, each committee member must vote for their first, second, and third place choice. These votes are tallied, giving each first-place vote four points, each second-place vote three points, and each third-place vote, two points. For a book to be declared the winner, it first must have simple majority of first place votes—at least eight of the fifteen committee members. In addition, there must be at least an eight-point spread between the top book and the next highest vote-getter. If no book reaches that form of mathematical consensus, then all the books that received at least one vote are discussed again, and a second ballot is taken. And then it's repeat and discuss until the committee reaches the requisite number of votes and point spread.

When it comes to selecting Honor Books, the Newbery Committee has much more leeway. There is no set number—the committee can choose as few or as many as they want to. The first order of business is to discuss whether they want to name *any* Honor Books. So far, no Newbery Committee has ever chosen not to (unless, of course, we assume that was the case in 1923, 1924, and 1927). If the committee decides to name Honor Books, they can choose to just go with the next highest vote getters.

There may be a clear cut-off point of, say, two or three books after the Newbery winner has risen to the top, and the committee can simply decide to name those books as the Honor Books. This method is the method used by all of the Newbery Committees until 1977. That year, the ALSC Board voted to allow the committee to ballot specifically for Honor Books.

This method, once the newly proclaimed Newbery Medal winner has been removed from the mix, can completely shake up the order of the remaining contenders, as now all fifteen committee members are also voting for their fourth-place choices. Or they might be changing the ranking of the books they voted for earlier after having heard further discussion.



While the committee has quite a bit of freedom in choosing Honor Books, one requirement is clear—the Honor Books must be considered truly distinguished, rather than merely strong contenders.

Let's be real. In American children's literature we have an embarrassment of riches each year. There's always going to be more than one distinguished book, but the Newbery Committee must select "the most distinguished" one. The Honor Books allow them to say, "But look at these books, too. They also stood out this year as distinguished."

What Is Distinguished?

What's considered distinguished in children's literature has changed over the years. The Newbery Medal winners don't always stand the test of time. There are few, if any, Newbery winners from the 1920s to 1950s that I'd recommend for contemporary children.

What I like to recommend to children instead are the Newbery Honor Books from the past two or three decades. Among them you'll find a lot of great books, as well as a greater diversity of style, of genre, and of authors than you typically find among the Newbery winners. You'll find more folklore, memoirs, picture books, easy readers and transitional fiction, nonfiction, high fantasy, graphic novels, and short-form fiction. You'll also find a wealth of great authors, including Kathy Appelt, Ashley Bryan, Margarita Engle, Grace Lin, Walter Dean Myers, Gary D. Schmidt, Steve Sheinkin, Rita Williams-Garcia, Jacqueline Woodson, and Laurence Yep, to name just a few.

And among the older Honor Books, of course, you'll find *Charlotte's Web*, standing next to a few other perennial favorites that seem to have transcended time—*Millions of Cats* (Newbery Honor, 1929), *Mr. Popper's Penguins* (Newbery Honor, 1939), *My Father's Dragon* (Newbery Honor, 1949), and *Old Yeller* (Newbery Honor, 1957). Each one of these has outlasted the Newbery Medal winner of its corresponding year. And chances are, there are Newbery Honor Books from the twenty-first century that will do the same thing for the generations to come. &