

The “Other” Winners

The Excitement of Mock Newberys

STEVEN ENGELFRIED

As we look back on one hundred years of the Newbery Medal, it's fun to revisit the winning titles from past years. Remember when *Out of My Mind* by Sharon Draper won the 2011 award? And wasn't it great when Jonathan Auxier's *Sweep* was announced as the 2019 Medal winner?

Oh, wait. Those weren't the real winners, were they? They were winners of Mock Newbery elections.

While those books didn't get the shiny gold seals on their covers nor enjoy the sales bump that every Newbery medal title receives, I still look at those mock winners, and others from past years, with a bit of extra respect and affection. I know their victories generated considerable excitement among the participants who read, discussed, and voted for them.

Mock elections allow participants to gain insights into literature, develop critical thinking skills, and make lasting connections with individual books and authors. After taking part in at least a couple dozen mocks over the years, as participant and facilitator, with kids and with adults, here are some elements I've found especially interesting, challenging, and rewarding.

Mirroring the Real Newbery Award

The obvious place to start is with the concept itself. Every year the fifteen members of the Newbery Committee select the single “most distinguished” children's book of the year. How fascinating to follow that process independently, following the process of the work of the actual committee where possible. Using similar guidelines and choosing from the same pool of current-year titles adds significance and intrigue to the Mock Newbery process. At the same time, applying the same criteria that the real committee follows can lead to some highly engaging book discussions.

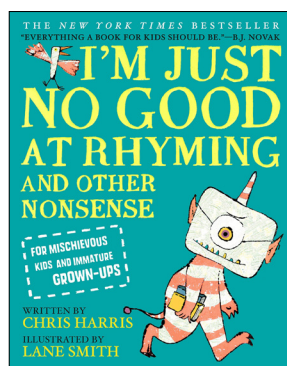
Connecting with the Books

There's also that built-in big finish, when the real awards are announced and the mock participants learn how their choices overlap with the actual results. When my group of fourth to eighth grade students learned that *Following Fake Man* by Barbara Ware Holmes was not the 2002 winner, I was pleased to see how disappointed they were . . . not that I liked



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seeing them unhappy, but it demonstrated how invested they had been in the process and in that particular book.



And on *School Library Journal's* *Heavy Medal* blog, which I've co-hosted for several years, the discussions and analysis by adult readers are much more extensive, but when our mock winner comes up empty, as Chris Harris' *I'm Just No Good at Rhyming* did in 2019, its strongest supporters may be just as let down as the ten-year-olds.

The process can engender real pride in the participants, even when the mock choice doesn't match the real one. One fifth grade group I worked with felt so satisfied with their 2011 choice (*Night Fairy* by Laura Amy Schlitz) that they commemorated it by having one artistic member create a Mock Newbery seal, which still adorns the cover of one of our library copies.

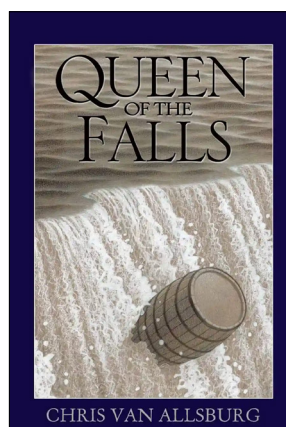
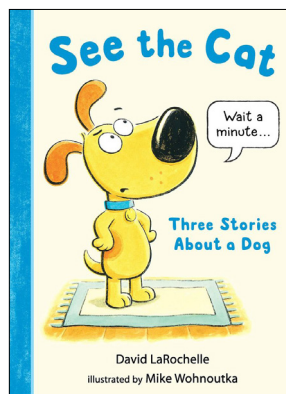
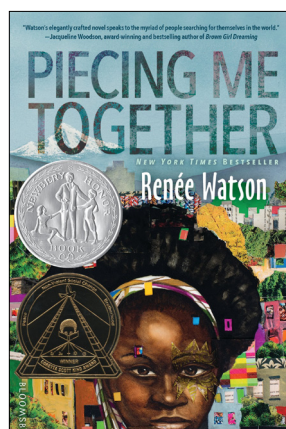
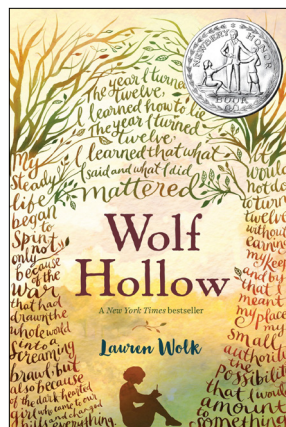
Predicting the Winners

"Will our book win?" is a vital question to Mock Newbery participants, but picking winners really isn't the goal. In a mock election, it's the journey and the process, rather than the final outcome, that matter. At their best, however, Mock Newberys can change the ways participants look at children's books and authors.

There's great potential for high level book discussion with kids. In a typical mock election, participants follow the official Newbery terms and criteria, which direct participants to be thorough and objective in their book evaluation process. Participants must identify distinguished examples of plot, setting, and other literary elements, even when the books under consideration might represent wildly varied forms, styles, and intended audiences.

This focus on literary quality over personal response is especially helpful for kids, as the shift from searching for their *favorite* book to finding the *best* book is a key step in critical thinking. And identifying the qualities that contribute to a book's excellence is another big leap. Not all kids are ready for this, but using the Mock Newbery process can lead them to approach literature with higher levels of appreciation for excellence in writing.

To be fair, that leap from reading enthusiasm to critical judgment can be equally challenging for grown-ups. Adult readers of kids' books tend to make strong personal connections with the books they love, and those connections can get even tighter when they're placed in competition against other titles.



There's also the intrinsic challenge in evaluating children's books that's faced by the real committee as well as mock groups. How does the age of the audience impact the qualities of a distinguished book? Most adult readers have an easy time identifying excellence when the writing is more sophisticated. Writers such as Lauren Wolk (*Wolf Hollow*) and Renée Watson (*Piecing Me Together*) use prose aimed at children, but excellent in ways that are recognizably similar to adult writers.

It's harder, though, to figure out what distinguished prose for six-year-olds looks like. On my blog last year, I wondered if a practically perfect early reader like David LaRochelle's *See the Cat* might earn Newbery consideration. Its style and humor were outstanding for the intended audience, but it lacked the complexity of books for older readers. Applying the same critical criteria to books with such disparate standards of excellence is fascinating, but can make evaluation and comparison tricky for both Newbery and Mock Newbery participants.

Reading Outside Your Lane

Mock Newberys can also expose readers to excellent books that they wouldn't normally consider. More than one fifth grader in my 2012 mock commented that *Queen of the Falls* by Chris Van Allsburg didn't seem to fit in with the other books, but it turned out to be one of the group's most appreciated titles; the kids identified its literary qualities that held up quite nicely alongside the longer novels on our list.

On my blog, participants often note that a particular book or genre is not what they would normally read. That's a valuable observation that often leads to even stronger analysis. When

you're less fully immersed as a reader, the shift to impartial critical evaluation can come more naturally.

Making the Case

Discussing books in a Mock Newbery setting can engender levels of discussion that more conventional book groups lack. Your goal isn't just to share what you thought of a book. Instead, you apply the specific criteria and literary elements and try to articulate your evaluation in a way that expands, and possibly changes, the way others in your group see that particular title. It's really not enough to just decide what books you'll vote for; you want to convince others of a title's virtues (or flaws) so they will also vote for it (or not).

This can result in some exhaustively detailed analysis, where every choice an author makes can be up for discussion. For example, when we discussed Christian McKay Heidicker's *Scary Stories for Young Foxes* on the blog in 2019, I was thoroughly impressed with plot, style, and setting.

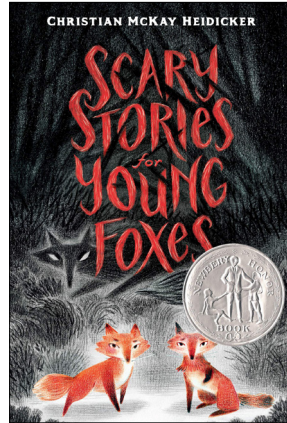
However, others saw things that I had missed. Those different insights, backed up with examples from the text, helped us all look at the book more carefully. In the end, I still rated that book as one of the best of the year, and it earned a Newbery Honor from the real committee, but the mock discussion exemplified that rigorous examination of every aspect of a book that can lead to the fullest and fairest evaluation.

Assembling the Mock Committee

To successfully explore the benefits of Mock Newberys, start with willing participants. I've led various types of book groups for kids over a couple decades as a youth librarian, and Mock Newberys have elicited the widest and most engaged participation. Even for serious young readers who love to talk about books in any setting, that added framework of the Newbery process adds appeal.

The mock structure also generates a stronger commitment for kids to read all the books on the list. They know that even if there's just one title they hope will win, its chances increase when they can talk convincingly about the ways in which the other books fall short.

Adult Mock Newberys can come in all kinds of formats. Some are a single-day event, in which participants read in advance, then discuss and vote for a winner. At the other end of the spectrum is the year-long process we follow on the blog, which includes monthly reader suggestions, three months of in-depth discussion, another month of looking even more closely at a list of finalists, and finally a Mock ballot.



This focus on literary quality over personal response is especially helpful for kids, as the shift from searching for their favorite book to finding the best book is a key step in critical thinking.



Videoconferencing software such as Zoom, Skype, and Google Meet expands the possibilities. In January 2021, for example, we held our first live discussion/ballot on Heavy Medal, which allowed us to get even closer to mirroring the real committee process.

Choosing the Books

While the real committee members spend a full year reading hundreds of books, a Mock Newbery group works with a much smaller number, typically between six and twenty titles. If you're planning a Mock, try not to worry too much about trying to predict the winners with your list.

For one thing, it's hard. The 2021 slate, for instance, included a nonfiction title, a history book in picture book format, and two books by the same author, none of which are typical based on past years. Beyond that challenge, creating a list that includes a balanced variety of genres, styles, and age levels leads to fruitful and enjoyable discussions. The real committee's title lists are confidential, but year-long Mock

Newbery sites like Heavy Medal, Good Reads, and others provide suggestions of possible contenders that can be useful to mock groups developing reading lists.

Finding Enough Copies

Also consider if the books are readily available. On Heavy Medal, which runs from September through January, our reading recommendations are weighted towards Spring and Summer releases, since many readers won't be able to

get their hands on books that are released in October or November.

Neal Shusterman's *The Toll* received rave reviews and concluded a very popular trilogy. The book was on our final 2020 list, but with a November publication date and a long waiting list, some participants (including myself) barely had a chance

Tips for Successful Mock Newberys

- **Use the CCBC Book Discussion Guidelines** (or something similar) to set the stage for effective discussion, in terms of book analysis and communication. <https://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/literature-resources/ccbc-book-discussions/ccbc-book-discussion-guidelines/>.
- **Discuss the Newbery criteria.** These guide participants towards literary analysis, rather than personal opinion, and also keep things close to the real committee’s work. Sharing examples of how past winners met specific criteria for distinguished writing can help foster strong discussion. Newbery criteria can be found online at <https://www.ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/bookmedia/newbery>, click on the Newbery Medal Terms and Criteria tab.
- **Share the basics** about how the committee reaches its decision, including suggestions, nominations, discussions, and voting.
- **Share your results.** Every year, the ALSC Blog (<https://www.alsc.ala.org/blog/>) invites mock groups from all over the country to share their results. It’s fun to see how the other winners stack up against your own.

to finish it before our final discussion in January. These kinds of logistics can influence the final content of the Mock Newbery book list.

Selecting the Winner

Most Mock Newberys follow the official process for voting in some fashion. After all discussion ends, real Newbery Committee members each cast a ballot with their top three titles ranked. Every first-place vote receives four points, second place votes get three, and third place receives two points. Once points are totaled, a winner is declared only if the top vote-getter receives at least a simple majority (eight of fifteen) of the first-place ballots and leads the runner-up by at least eight points.

This level of complexity, and the potentially multiple re-ballots that can follow, isn’t necessarily needed in a mock election, but

it’s fun and instructive to follow the weighted ballot process. It leads participants to ponder strategy, such as, “Should I vote for my second-favorite book that has no chance to win or favor my third favorite, which seems to have more support from others?” And with any Mock Newbery group, the revelation of the final totals is always an exciting climax to the process.

Continuing the Tradition

In this centennial anniversary year, anticipation for the announcement of the Newbery winner will be as high as it’s ever been. As always, there will only be one medal book, and it will be justly celebrated. But it’s also fascinating to think about all of the other outstanding children’s books that will have been named as most distinguished by countless groups of kids and adults around the country, all of whom have devoted significant amounts of time, energy, and passion by taking part in Mock Newbery elections. &

More Mock Newbery Resources

ALSC’s digital Mock Newbery Toolkit, at <https://www.ala.org/alsc/mock-newbery-toolkit>, provides direction, context, and suggestions for holding a Mock Newbery with patrons, students, and readers of any age. Detailing the most important aspects of the award selection process, the toolkit provides an accessible framework for communities to practice and enjoy the discussion of distinguished books. Drawing from the experience of ALSC members, including past Newbery committee members, the toolkit is based on the real criteria and procedures found in the Newbery Manual.

The Mock toolkit webpage also includes

- **Newbery Trivia**—A Powerpoint containing Newbery trivia questions that can be used for all trivia needs, including an ice breaker for mock election participants or a fun activity for learning about the award in preparation for a mock election program.
- **Mock Newbery Discussion Guides**—Created by ALSC member Susie Isaac, the guides can be used as a resource for leading Newbery discussions or creating your own activities.