

And the Winner Is . . .

Launching a Mock Ezra Jack Keats Award Program

RAMONA CAPONEGRO, JOHN SCOTT, AND CAROLINE WARD



Awards abound in youth literature, and over the past few decades, mock award programs in which students and patrons evaluate books according to award criteria and select their own winners within their communities have become fixtures in school and public libraries.

We have found that the Ezra Jack Keats (EJK) Award readily lends itself to a parallel mock award program. The EJK Award champions “illustrators and writers, early in their careers, who create extraordinary books that reflect our diverse population, the universal experience of childhood and the strength of family and community.” Launched in 1986, the award is administered by the Ezra Jack Keats Foundation (EJKF), in partnership with the de Grummond Children’s Literature Collection at the University of Southern Mississippi. The corresponding Mock EJK Award program also celebrates diverse picture books by early career creators and can be easily adapted to encompass different audiences, goals, and time spans.

Drawing upon the experiences and insights of librarians and educators at Friends School of Baltimore and in Connecticut and New York, the EJKF developed a Mock EJK Award toolkit, available on its website. The toolkit includes background and planning

materials, and upon request, a list of eligible picture books to consider for your Mock EJK Award program. These materials aid enormously in designing your program, and as we’ll demonstrate through the following descriptions of our Mock EJK Award programs, you have ample room to adapt the program to fit your library and community.

Describe your work with a Mock EJK Award program.

John: At Friends School of Baltimore (FSB), I worked in collaboration with educators Frances Morrissey, Diana White, and Andy Hanes to find a book project that would engage readers and particularly get students examining new picture books with a focus on diversity. The EJKF responded with enthusiasm and support, and currently kindergarten and second-grade students participate in the project. My new school, Powhatan Elementary in Baltimore County Public Schools, has participated for the last two years.

Caroline: As a public youth librarian, I was inspired to start a Mock EJK Award while serving on the “real” committee, and it was such a fulfilling experience I have continued to conduct mock awards with several local schools. A Mock EJK Award is an ideal



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program for students to encounter the remarkable quality and diversity of picture books and engage in critical thinking skills while experiencing a fun award selection process. This year, I am working with a private school in Westport, Connecticut, where a group of third and fourth graders are participating.

Ramona: As a professor of youth literature and now youth services, I held my first Mock EJK Award program in several courses at Eastern Michigan University. Through the program, I was able to include the same sample of diverse picture books in multiple courses, while shifting the focus of the program to fit different courses' objectives. In two classes, university students were able to read and discuss books from our Mock EJK Award program virtually with kindergarten and second grade students at FSB and with second through fifth grade students in a local after school program. Hearing the younger students' insights into the books enriched my students' understandings of picture books and their audiences. This year, I'm including the program in an early childhood literacy materials and story programs course at the University of Alabama.

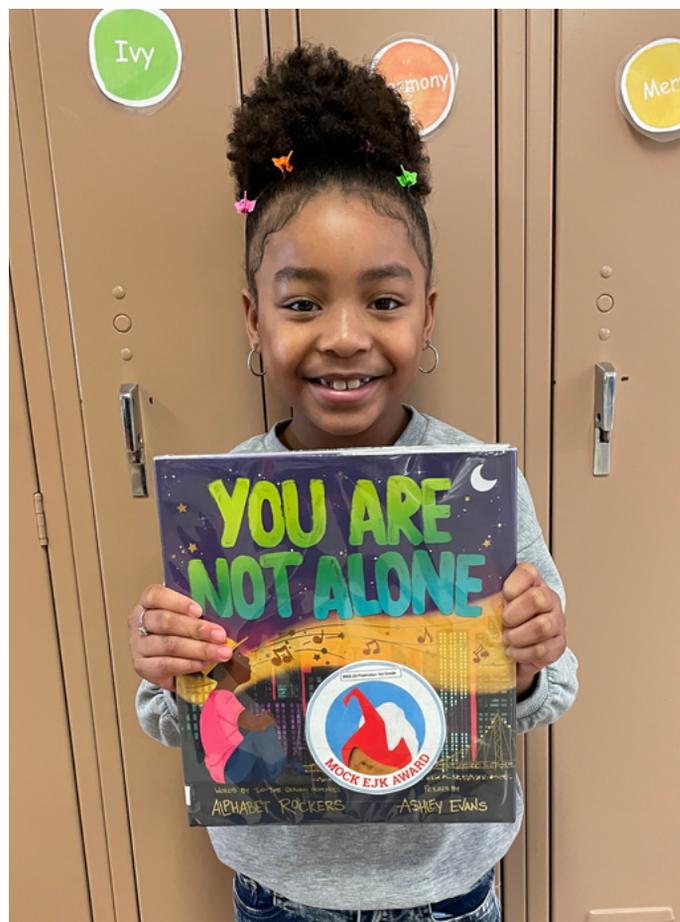
How long does your Mock EJK Award program run, and how do you plan for it?

John: At FSB, we started the project by learning about Ezra Jack Keats himself, then the award and past winners, before reading and evaluating for the current year. The program ran approximately from October through March. At Powhatan Elementary, the project has followed a similar pattern. Students enjoy being members of the award committee, and the sense of pride at the award ceremony is palpable. For a school librarian, the opportunity to get students actively analyzing text and illustrations in a way that engages critical thinking hits many goals of my curriculum.

Caroline: After a school agrees to work on the project, I meet with the media specialists and classroom teachers to plan the timeline and activities. We generally run the program from January through March, typically mirroring the timeline of the "real" committee that announces its winner in early March. We select twelve books from the suggested list of eligible titles offered by the EJKF; we have found that this is an ideal number to be read and evaluated by third and fourth graders during the allotted time. We select a range of art styles and themes; this year's exciting and diverse contenders include a picture book biography of Prince, a graphic-influenced story about a boy working for his father, and a rousing tale set in Armenia.

To familiarize students with the program, we begin with an overview of Keats and his work as an accomplished artist and a well-known creator of beloved children's books. Students are introduced to the award criteria with past EJK Award winners to give a criterion like "Words and Pictures Go Together" a clearer context.

Ramona: For different courses, I've run the program in two or six weeks, using fifteen picture books from the list provided by the EJKF. The books are the same in each class simultaneously



Harmony shows her school's pick for their mock EJK award.
Photo by John Scott.

participating in the program, and I make sure to include the books read by our elementary school partners. Each program begins with an introduction to Keats's work and its reception in the field, an overview of the "real" and Mock EJK Awards, and previous EJK Award winners. Then, depending on the course objectives, we may focus on comparative analysis of the books, drawing from the toolkit's criteria, and/or on creating story times. With the program's flexibility, I can adapt it to fit each class's objectives, while still building community and excitement around an experience shared by multiple classes. My students are always particularly eager to know which books the elementary students selected!

How do you present the award criteria, and what's your process for sharing and evaluating your selected books?

John: Students work directly off the criteria in the toolkit. We read the books together during library class time and engage in conversation to model critical thinking and book analysis. We use paper ballots and Wixie (a computer application) to help students capture their votes. After months of reading, the narrowing process is a wonderful challenge for students to re-evaluate their voting and to deepen their connection to the criteria.

Caroline: The criteria in the toolkit are a great basis for evaluating the books. In working with third and fourth graders, criteria

considered by the “real” committee, such as “originality of language,” are also introduced as students are frequently able to express how a book meets this more sophisticated criteria. In a second meeting, the twelve books are distributed, and we engage in an interactive discussion examining the illustrations, design, and the theme or focus of each book. We review the criteria, and I point out qualities to look for in the books. The books are left with the media specialist or classroom teacher, so the students have time to read each book and engage in further discussion. I often return before the voting to hear how the deliberations are progressing. Ideally, the books are widely available to the students: in the classroom for independent reading and in their library period for more formal reading and discussion. Personal journals, made and decorated by the “judges” and listing each book, have been a helpful way to keep track of their responses.

Ramona: We discuss and compare the official award criteria and the Mock criteria in the toolkit before voting with the Mock criteria shared with our elementary student partners. Before and after class discussions, the students read the books and complete any program-related assignments individually or in small groups. The students working directly with the elementary schoolers also participate in shared readings and book discussions with our partners via Zoom or Google Classroom.

How do you determine and celebrate your winners?

John: We vote in two rounds. First, we narrow down to a short list of seven titles, going back to the criteria and looking at the wide range of books we have read and examined throughout the program. We reread the shortlisted books and discuss them again. Then a final round of voting takes place, and winners (one winner and multiple honor books dictated by the voting results) are announced at our award ceremony. Our winning books are highly circulating titles in the years that follow as students connect closely with the winners and take pride in showing off our medal-wearing titles.



The 2024 Ezra Jack Keats Award winners were Anne Wynter for *Nell Plants a Tree*, illustrated by Daniel Miyares (writer award) and *The Only Way to Make Bread* by Cristina Quintero, illustrated by Sarah Gonzales (illustrator award).

Caroline: After the books have had sufficient discussion, the students review their responses to the twelve books one last time, and voting takes place. The “judges” understand that not everyone’s favorite will win and that they can select honor books. Voting is completed on a simple tally sheet, with each student choosing a first, second, and third choice. “We have a winner” is usually announced to great cheers. Schools have invited special guests to attend the award ceremony.

Ramona: At the end of the program, we vote via Google Forms, with each student selecting the book they thought best fit the award criteria as the winner. They are also able to select up to three titles as honor books. Once the votes are in from each class (and the partnering elementary school programs if applicable), I share the results, which are met with a great deal of animated discussion. The students are particularly interested in if/how their selections differed from the elementary schoolers’ selections, and it’s incredibly beneficial if the teachers, librarians, and/or university students working with the elementary schoolers can document their evaluation processes, either by recounting group discussions or sharing written/recorded examples of the younger students’ responses to the books. The elementary schoolers are excited to be participating alongside university students in the program and are eager to hear about their selections, too.

While our individual programs differ considerably, they share the essential through line of celebrating diverse books by new picture book creators. Moreover, through our Mock EJK Award programs, our students develop stronger critical thinking and book evaluation skills, as well as a sense of community. They also show a deeper enthusiasm and joy in the process of evaluation and the gift of an incredible picture book. &

For more information about the Ezra Jack Keats Foundation and the award, visit www.ejkf.org/about-the-ejk-award/. For access to Mock EJK toolkits, visit www.ejkf.org/mock-ejk-award-toolkits/.