

A Newbery Time Line

The hits! The misses! The highs and the lows of the Newbery over 100 years.

By Betsy Bird

YOU DON'T GET TO 100 without witnessing monumental changes over the years. When the Newbery Award premiered in 1922, the world was a different place. That year, the Tomb of Tutankhamun was uncovered in the Valley of the Kings in Egypt. Mussolini and the Fascist party came to power in Italy. The Bolsheviks won the Russian Civil War. And here in the United States, a New England bookseller by the name of Frederic C. Melcher helped foment the world's first literary prize for a children's book. Until the moment Melcher first stood before members of the American Library Association (ALA) in 1920 and proposed an award for the best-written American books for kids, no literary prize for children's literature existed anywhere.

Since its inception, the Newbery Award has seen its share of highs and lows. Here, then, is a time line that may give you a sense of some of the Newbery's best, worst, and lesser-known moments in literary history.

ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN S. DYKES

1922

Out of 212 nominating votes cast, 163 "librarians engaged in at least part-time work with children," according to Leonard Marcus, vote for Hendrik Willem van Loon's *The Story of Mankind* to win the first Newbery Medal.



1927

Will James wins for *Smoky, the Cowhorse*. James was one of the few Medalists to serve time—in a Carson City, NV, jail for cattle rustling. Later winner Jack Gantos (*Dead End in Norvelt*, 2012) served in a federal prison for drug running, chronicled in his 2003 Printz Honor memoir, *Hole in My Life*.

1928

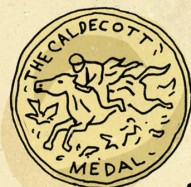
Dhan Gopal Mukerji is the first Indian American author to win the Medal, for his book *Gay-Neck, the Story of a Pigeon*. He believed vehemently in Indian emancipation from foreign rule. It will be 47 years until another person who isn't white wins the award.

1930

Hitty, Her First Hundred Years by Rachel Field is the first Medal to be bestowed upon a female writer. Since then, women have taken the award 65 times. Men have claimed the remaining 35.

1940

Daniel Boone by James Daugherty takes the Medal. The book is the only Newbery Award winner to go out of print due to extreme racist content and perpetuation of stereotypes.



1952

On her way to the stage to deliver her Newbery acceptance speech for *Ginger Pye*, Eleanor Estes pulls a "Jennifer Lawrence" and tumbles after author Will Lipkind's chair leg snags her skirt. At the podium, Estes declares, "All my life since I was a child, and I knew I wanted to be a writer, I have dreamed of winning this award. And what do I do? I fall flat on the floor."



1971

E.B. White writes a friend, "I just heard that 'The Trumpet of the Swan' failed to win the Newbery Award, and that the award went to a book—hold your breath—called 'The Summer of the Swan'.....How's that for a near miss? I just got one word wrong!"

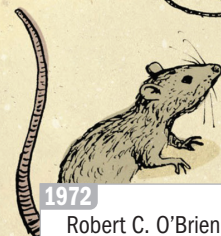
1975

Winning the Newbery for *M.C. Higgins, the Great*, Virginia Hamilton notes, "I am the first black woman and black writer to have received this award. May the American Library Association ever proceed."



1972

Robert C. O'Brien (real name: Robert Leslie Carroll Conly) wins for *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* but is so shy that he asks Jean Karl, his editor, to read his words of acceptance.



1979

Ellen Raskin wins the Medal for *The Westing Game*. This marks the first time that the cover artist of a Medal book (*A Wrinkle in Time*) wins for her own book as well.



2007

Susan Patron's winning *The Higher Power of Lucky* includes the word "scrotum" on its first page. The *New York Times* proclaims, "With One Word, Children's Book Sets Off Uproar."

2009

Margarita Engle's verse novel *The Surrender Tree* earns an Honor. It's the first year a Latinx author is honored by the committee.



2008

Anita Silvey publishes "Has the Newbery Lost Its Way?" (bit.ly/3GI75Ur) in *SLJ*, sparking a debate as to whether Newbery winners are kid-friendly enough. Silvey previously penned "Could Randolph Caldecott Win the Caldecott Medal?" in 1986 in the *Horn Book Magazine*.



2011

The 90-Second Newbery Film Festival is established (90secondnewbery.com). It features mini films by kids from around the country summarizing Newbery Medal and Honor titles. Standouts: *Ramona and Her Father* as Bond flick, a Minecraft-inspired *Millions of Cats*, a "Real Housewives" *Good Masters! Sweet Ladies!*, a musical of *The Twenty-One Balloons*.

2020

Jerry Craft wins for *New Kid*, the first time the Medal goes to a graphic novel. In October 2021, a local petition to ban Craft's award winner resulted in the postponement of his appearance at a Texas school. Craft responded on ALA's Intellectual Freedom Blog by saying, "I hope that readers of all ages will see the kindness and understanding that my characters exhibit and emulate those feelings in their day-to-day lives."

Betsy Bird blogs at "A Fuse #8 Production" (slj.com/fuse8).