

**Diversifying the Children's
Literary Canon: Where Do
We Start?**

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Abstract

Focusing on a person's first encounter with literature, this research examines the legacy of American children's books and how that specific literary canon was defined and maintained throughout history. To understand how books were being created, published, and then promoted to the broader public, I focused my research on three societal systems: libraries and literary awards, publishing companies, and state-mandated education systems. By combing through teaching reports, historical analyses of the publishing industry, and literary awards dating back to the 1950s, I was able to grasp how the three systems have interacted with one another for decades.

Introduction

The goal of my research was to answer one broad and large-scale question: How can America decolonize its literary canon? To start, I must define those terms. First off, *literary canon* will be used to reference a body of (literary) work that is considered "classic" or highly valuable across the United States. These books are constantly being taught at schools thus further reinforcing the idea that these works are extremely influential. *Decolonization* refers to an undoing of colonization, or the framework that the western world continuously upholds and forces upon the non-western world. Decolonization is an **action** or an ongoing practice that demands a deviation from the norms that we are so accustomed to.¹ While literature is supposed to be representative of the world and how everyone experiences life, we are in a society in which we deem certain narratives more important than others. More specifically, the cycles of physical colonization that have occurred and are still occurring bleed into every sector of life, ultimately leading to the dominating white presence in American literature and our system of education.

¹ Andrew Teverson, *The Fairy Tale World*, ed. Andrew Teverson, 1st ed. (Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2019).34.

Decolonizing the literary canon refers to a serious reconsideration of what books are chosen to be highly esteemed and a reassessment of the principles those choices are promoting.

A person will have their first encounter with reading through a world of children books. If students receive the message that some narratives are more distinguished than others, children will continue to believe that into their adulthood. For that reason, I believe the first step in decolonizing the entire literary canon lies in the decolonization of children's books in hopes to avoid the internalization of the valuing (or devaluing) of certain narratives. In other words, I needed to answer another question: *what* books were being taught in schools and *how* they were being taught to children? In trying to answer this question, I quickly began to realize that the teaching of children's books is not an independent variable in the equation to decolonizing the literary canon. Rather, the canon depends on schools and several addition factors such as the publishing industry, libraries, and literary awards. Therefore, this research examines the intersectionality of all these fields to produce viable and systematic steps to decolonize the American literary canon for everyone. Additionally, this research analyzes the John Newbery Medal which is considered the most prestigious awards for children's books.

Background

Education

In recent times the American education system has acted as a major contributor to the children's literary canon, and I fear it would be a complete disservice if I overlooked its immeasurable impact. Like I mentioned earlier, a person's first exposure to literature is during school when teachers give their students a book to read. This action subconsciously signals to the student that this chosen piece of literature has value or it is at least important enough to read during instruction time. Additionally, this valorization replicates the power dynamic that exists

outside of school walls where the academy favors white narratives more than others. However, this way of learning is a relatively recent development. To properly gauge what fuels the literary canon, I tracked how schools performed reading education throughout the years.

Ever since the 1800s, American schools teach reading education or “English Language Arts” (ELA) through *basal readers* or any textbook that teaches reading and writing skills to schoolchildren.² Although lesson plans and textbooks were not standardized across cities (let alone across the country), most English lessons during the 1800s focused on spelling and grammar by practicing drills or engaging in recitation.³ The focus of ELA (or the equivalent at the time) was writing skills so reading was not prioritized.⁴ Teachers usually used basal readers as a primary reading resource and since basal readers did not include entire stories, students in the 1800s found themselves not really reading. Basal readers contained excerpts of stories and short poems, and these materials were not specifically written for children, nor were they classified as “children’s books”.⁵ Curriculum writers found child-appropriate adult stories and put them in the basal readers (an example of this would be *Gulliver’s Travels* or *Aladdin*).⁶

As a result of a shift in societal values, this lack of focus on children’s literature changed in the 1890s when the writers of basal readers started to incorporate more thorough pieces of literature.⁷ At this moment, students found themselves reading full stories or longer poems that were seemingly written for them. To pair, American teachers noticed the shift in textbook materials and started to incorporate supplemental reading in an attempt to foster a more organic

² Martinez, Miriam G., and Lea M. McGee. “Children’s Literature and Reading Instruction: Past, Present, and Future.” *Reading Research Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (2000): 157.

³ Cuban, Larry. *How Teachers Taught: Constancy and Change in American Classrooms, 1890-1980*. Research on Teaching Monograph Series. New York: Longman, 1984: 167.

⁴ *ibid.*, 167.

⁵ Martinez and McGee, “Children’s Literature and Reading Instruction.”: 157.

⁶ *ibid.*, 157.

⁷ *ibid.*, 157.

love for literature. Even though this mentality changed once again in the 1910s (there was a societal shift and scientific research skills became prioritized in the ELA department), the importance of reading left its mark and supplemental reading materials continued to be incorporated in the American schooling system.

Publishing

Specifically in the 19th century, the demand for the mass production of children's books was virtually nonexistent. As I mentioned, the idea of implementing full books into school curricula was unfathomable until the 1890s so the only system that would have really had a need for children's books would be the local libraries. This (profit-wise) was not enough incentive for writers to put the time, energy, and money into writing children's books. In addition to the low demand, writing for children was seen as degrading or "lowbrow" thus many writers refused to write children books for the sake of their career.⁸ People wrote for children and adults alike and there was very little departure from this standard until the early 20th century when middle-class white women began to get involved in the children's literature scene.⁹

As the development of children's literature started to become more popular through the mid 1900s, authors found themselves subconsciously or consciously following a "formula" or a type of story that they knew would sell in the marketplace.¹⁰ Unfortunately, this formula excluded the presence of non-white characters. In her 1965 report, *The All-White World of Children's Books*, author and former President of the International Reading Association Nancy Larrick tells the story of a woman that wrote a long letter to a local newspaper about the book, *Little Golden Goose Rhymes*. The mother writes:

⁸ Kenneth Kidd, "Prizing Children's Literature: The Case of Newbery Gold," *Children's Literature* 35, no. 1 (2007): 170.

⁹ *ibid.*, 171.

¹⁰ Nancy Larrick, "The All-White World of Children's Books," *The Saturday Review*, September 11, 1965: 84.

I was horrified when I was reading to my innocent young child, and, behold on page 15 there was actually the picture of three small children in a basket together and one was a little Negro! I put my child and the book down and immediately called the owner of the drugstore and [demanded he] take all the rest of his copies of the book off his shelves.¹¹

The book was then taken off that drugstore's shelves. Larrick writes how the sales manager of that publishing house explained the reasoning behind having stories with all white characters by asking: "Why jeopardize sales by putting one or two Negro faces in an illustration?"¹² The point of this anecdote is to demonstrate the volatile nature of the publishing industry. I see it like a mirror: the values of the publishing industry reflect those of the public. Just as when there was no supply of children's books when there was no demand for them, Larrick shows that public opposition to characters of color was reflected in publishing houses as they maintained that All-White World of children's books.

Libraries and Literary Awards

Dating back to the 1920s, there have been limited contributions to the sphere of children's books as there was a lot of stigmas that came with being a children's book author. So, to be a successful children's book writer, an author felt like they had to follow the unspoken textbook rules. Additionally, writers found that literary awards help with sales and elongate their books' shelf life.¹³ The most prestigious awards for children's books are awarded by the American Library Association (ALA), a group consisting of primarily white women.¹⁴ Historically, the ALA tended to honor and award their peers (other white women) in an effort to

¹¹ *ibid.*, 165.

¹² *ibid.*, 165.

¹³ Kidd, "Prizing Children's Literature.": 168.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, 171.

expand the network.¹⁵ They also had an intention to honor major contributions to “American literature” which meant that, for over 50 years, any deviation from “American values” would be overlooked for the award.¹⁶ More critically, this meant that something so subjective- the narrative of the American identity- was judged and defined by a group of older white women. In short, there were many different reasons that contributed to the silencing of people of color in the children’s literature genre. This cycle of exclusion is repeated and sustained in the education system, as librarians/ libraries often work together with public schools to create supplemental reading programs or booklists for the school libraries.

Research on the John Newbery Medal

Reasoning

Established in 1922, the John Newbery Medal (created by the American Library Association) is seen as America’s most prestigious award for children’s literature. Ever since its creation, teachers have had the tendency to look to this award for guidance in any reading materials to be used in the classroom.¹⁷ So, the Newbery Medal is a good way to gauge what books were being included in classroom for the past few decades.

Studies have shown that diverse and authentic reading materials in ELA have numerous benefits on a student’s academic and personal future. Children engage more thoroughly and critically when they can connect to the materials through either their identity or common experience. Additionally, research shows that culturally responsive education has a positive impact on both white students and students of color.¹⁸ A curriculum with rich diversity leads to a decrease in school dropout rates and suspensions and an increase in grade point averages,

¹⁵ *ibid.*, 171.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, 177.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, 168.

¹⁸ The NYC Coalition for Educational Justice. “Diverse City, White Curriculum.” NYU Steinhardt: 1.

participation in the classroom, critical thinking skills, and graduation rates.¹⁹ Furthermore, an adequate representation in course materials allows students to develop a stronger sense of self and more confidence when engaging with the community.²⁰ I cannot stress enough how important authentically diverse reading is in the classroom. Because the Newbery Medal has such an influence on a student's reading education, I felt it was crucial to study the diversity in the award as it is then reflected in the school curriculum.

Methods

Starting with publications in 1950, I went through the list of books that were both awarded and honored by the John Newbery Medal. I annotated the list for motifs or repeating storylines (an example of this could be problems with environmental factors, family troubles, poverty, etc.). Then, I proceeded to note the racial and ethnic background of both the authors and the characters in all the stories. By this method, I hoped to understand what messages were important to the children's literary canon and what values were being promoted in the school system.

As I continued this process, I noticed that my annotations were not addressing the concern of good representation. In addition, research about the diversity of the Newberry award has already been studied. The main issue that I had not seen addressed, nor had my method properly addressed, is the idea of authenticity. When authors write about unfamiliar cultures, it is imperative that they do research or consult with people of said culture for guidance. When they fail to do so, authors open the door to misrepresentation or an inaccurate portrayal of that identity. With misrepresentation comes misinformation and the inauthentic text and produce dangerous ideas that would spread amongst consumers. In other words, my method did not

¹⁹ *ibid.*, 1.

²⁰ *ibid.*, 1.

determine if the text was positive or harmful for student consumption. Even if all the awarded books were about people of color, the possibility remains that all the books could contain harmful stereotypes thus rendering the representation obsolete. So, to account for this, I created definitions to account for authenticity and annotated the list using the following terminology:

1. An **authentic POC text** is determined by whether the author is
 - a) a person of color
 - b) of the same racial or ethnic background as the narrator or main character in the story and therefore has had the same lived experience.

Note: an example of an authentic POC text is a book about a black character that is written by a black author
2. An **inauthentic POC text** fails to complete both standards above

Note: an example of an inauthentic POC narrative is a book about a black character that is written by any **non-black** individual. A person of color *can* produce inauthentic materials if they write about a race that is not the same as their own racial identity.
3. A **person of color** is any individual that identifies as Black, Indigenous or Native American, Asian, Latinx, Middle Eastern, or Multiracial.²¹
4. A **white person** is any individual that does not identify with any of the ethnic or racial groups above.²²

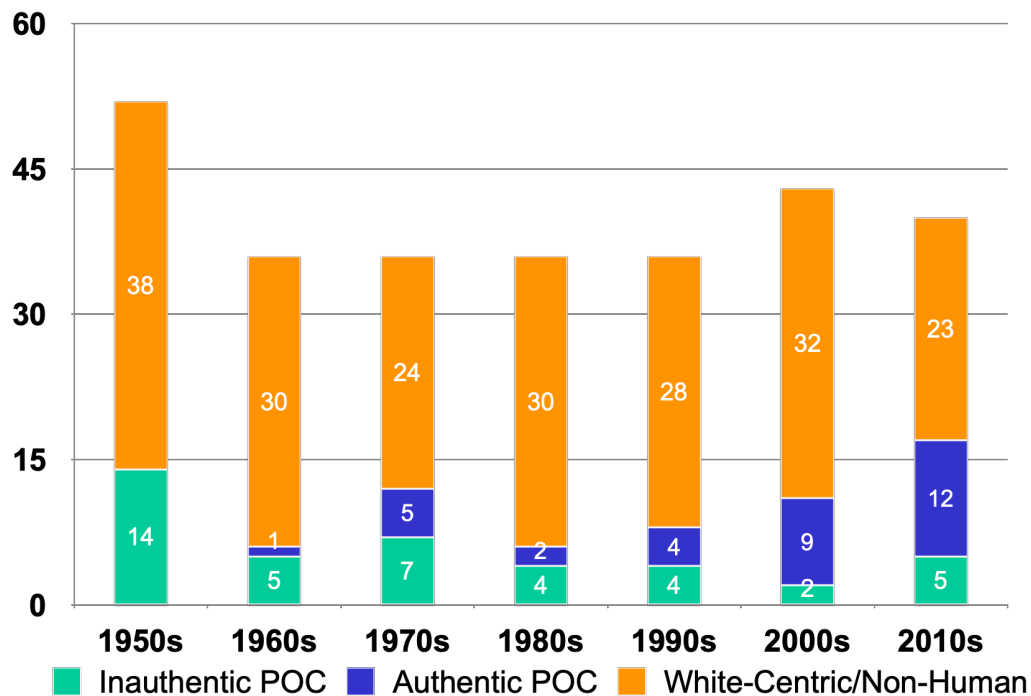
²¹ Koss, Melanie D, and Kathleen A Paciga. "Diversity in Newbery Medal-Winning Titles: A Content Analysis" 16, no. 2 (2020): 9.

²² *ibid.*, 9.

5. **Non-human texts** involve characters or narratives about either an inanimate object or animals. The book does not center humans thus is considered a separate entity in this research.

Findings

The Diversity of the John Newbery Medal Winners and Honorees



Regardless of decade, the number of white narratives has continued to surpass any type of POC narrative (whether it be authentic or inauthentic). Although the number of inauthentic POC stories seem to decrease as time progresses, the ratio is still in favor to the presence of white narratives. It is important to note that the inclusion of non-human stories is limited (there were, on average, three non-human narratives awarded every decade) thus the number of white narratives continued to have a dominating presence over everything.

Even though it wasn't until the 2000s where the number of authentic POC narratives surpass the inauthentic narratives, the shift in ideology starts in the 70s and 80s when there was a slow rise in authentic POC materials. I believe this is in correlation with the end of the Civil Rights Movement and Vietnam War when the definition of what it means to be American was constantly changing. Because the ALA is a committee of Americans, their opinions of "American-ness" were changing with the times as well. Additionally, the 70s and 80s marks a rise in the creation other literary awards (such as the Coretta Scott King Award or the Ezra Jack Keats Book Award) which ultimately led to a reexamination of the Newbery Medal's value.²³ More specifically, other awards were indeed highlighting the authentic materials that the Newbery constantly overlooked thus rendering this award insignificant to certain authors of color.²⁴ In response to the increased discourse concerning the award's merit, the ALA slowly began to diversify the winners and honorees of Newbery award.

Next Steps

Concerning next steps, I would like to look at the Randolph Caldecott Medal winners and honorees. Because this award is given to distinguished picture books, that type of content tends to cater to younger ages (grades K-3) while the Newbery Medal tends to cater to older children (grades 4-8). This way, I could get a more comprehensive understanding of popular reading materials for grades K-8. I also would love to work with non-profit organizations that work more directly with the publishing and library systems. My goal would be to amplify the voices of authors of color through book drives, author promotion events, or even book donations to local public schools.

²³ Kidd, "Prizing Children's Literature.": 182.

²⁴ *ibid.*, 182.

Conclusion

I think writer Bonnie Miller said it best in her essay, “What Color is Gold?”: “When a body of literature with the power of Newbery gold lacks even one text by a minority writer or about a minority lead, the message sent to children is that the ‘most distinguished’ protagonists and authors are white”.²⁵ This should not be case, especially in the year 2022. This year marks a 100th birthday for the John Newbery Award yet (easily remediable) inequity persists. Although I cannot argue that there has not been progress made, but a pressing issue remains even 100 years later. The point of this research is not to encourage every author to write people of color into every single narrative nor is it to say that all of the honored inauthentic materials contained harmful messages. I am simply advocating **proper** representation in Newbery Awards regarding both the characters in the stories as well as authors writing these tales. Decolonizing the literary canon starts here when we start giving a spotlight to authentic POC materials. White narratives should not dominate the literary sphere. Instead, there should be representation of every racial and ethnic background because that would be reflective of the American population. There are wonderful authentic books being written everyday- it is the job of the American Library Association to find and highlight them for true literary equity to exist.

Moreover, it is vital that we understand how the literary canon is formed and how societal systems have created the standards that decide what is deemed a “classic”. It is not a mistake that authors of color have been historically ignored as possible recipients of this award. Those systems purposefully disregarded them in order to maintain its structural power. To continue with the utmost clarity: diversifying the literary canon is an act of rebellion and a point of activism. If progress is made with diversifying children’s books in schools, or we start including

²⁵ *ibid.*, 182.

and highlighting authentic POC materials, young individuals of color can grow and learn with equal confidence that white children have been privy to for decades.

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