Has the Newbery Lost Its Way?
Snubbed by kids, disappointing to librarians, the recent winners have few fans

By Anita Silvey

Illustration by Tim Bower

Right before the announcement of this year's Newbery winner, I had two surprising encounters. First, a librarian at my local public library confessed that she had no interest in learning "what unreadable Newbery the committee was going to foist on us this year." Then, a few weeks later at an education conference, I was startled to hear several teachers and media specialists admit they hadn't bought a copy of the Newbery winner for the last few years. Why? "They don't appeal to our children," they explained patiently.

I've always been extremely proud that the one literary prize that can dramatically boost book sales isn't awarded in Sweden (Nobel Prize) or overseen by Columbia University's School of Journalism (Pulitzer Prize). No, the prize with the most clout is run by the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC), a division of the American Library Association (ALA). Of course, a well-chosen Newbery winner does more than ring the cash register: it sets the standard for aspiring children's book writers, provides talented authors with a steady stream of income, and enables editors to pursue their own publishing visions. And over the years, Newbery medalists have often been the first choice of parents and educators in search of trustworthy titles.

But those critical comments made me wonder: Are children, librarians, and other book lovers still rushing to read the latest Newbery winners? Or has the most prestigious award in children's literature lost some of its luster? To answer those questions, I spent the last few months talking to more than 100 people—including media specialists, children's librarians, teachers, and booksellers—in 15 states across the country. Although most spoke on the condition of anonymity, all of them were eager for me to share their insights. Here's the gist of what I learned.
Although some public librarians can’t afford to buy more than a single copy of the Newbery, they say the last four winners—Kira-Kira (S & S, 2004), Criss Cross (Greenwillow, 2005), The Higher Power of Lucky (S & S, 2006), and Good Masters! Sweet Ladies! Voices from a Medieval Village (Candlewick, 2007)—have been particularly disappointing. “I think I know books, but because of the subject matter, these wouldn’t be the ones I’d naturally choose to introduce to my kids,” said a children’s librarian. “Possibly the committee has too many ‘experts’ on it, and not enough working, small-town public librarians.”

School librarians say they simply don’t have enough money to spend on books that kids won’t find interesting—and in their opinion, that category includes most of this century’s Newbery winners. Cash-strapped teachers, who spend part of their paychecks on paper, pencils, and other classroom essentials, say they can’t afford to buy any books. But the only recent winners they enjoy teaching are Bud, Not Buddy (Delacorte, 1999), A Single Shard (Clarion, 2001), and The Tale of Despereaux (Candlewick, 2003).

Book critics and reviewers offered the harshest critiques. “Recent Newbery committees seem dismissive of popularity, a quality which should be an asset,” said one reviewer. “They appear to be hunting for a special book—one with only a few readers, rather than a universal book,” offered another. “They search for a book that makes the committee powerful, because they were the only ones to think of it,” reasoned a critic. When asked what she didn’t like about these titles, one reviewer responded, “There is so little right about these completely forgettable books.”

Book aficionados frequently used the words “odd,” “unusual,” or “unconventional” to describe the latest Newbery winners. It’s possible in an age of sequels that committee members have unintentionally gravitated toward quirky offerings. But valuing uniqueness over universality has often led judges down the wrong road. Case in point? A member of the 1993 Newbery committee, which chose The Secret of the Andes (Viking, 1952) over E. B. White’s masterpiece, Charlotte’s Web (Harper, 1952), confessed that she preferred the former because she hadn’t seen any good books about South America.

When I asked former ALSC judges about their choices, they all offered the same rationale: the committees work very hard—and if their top picks aren’t exciting, that means there were “no good books” to choose from that year. One part of that statement is certainly true: committee members do work long hours reading, evaluating, and attending meetings. Plus, they often have to pay their own way to attend conferences. They deserve to be recognized for their service. But although great books are rare, there are always a handful of them each year. And the committee that crowned the unremarkable ...And Now Miguel (Crowell, 1953) worked just as hard as the one that selected Bridge to Terabithia (Crowell, 1977), a choice that combined inspiration with perspiration.

If you’re searching for a perceptive, entertaining take on the Newbery, then head for the Allen County Public Library’s Web site (www.acpl.lib.in.us/children/newberyranking.html). The Fort Wayne, IN, library’s “totally biased group of readers” ranks its top 87 Newbery favorites—and these opinionated pros aren’t afraid to occasionally tell the Emperor that he has no clothes. Since most of us tend to be more enthusiastic about the latest titles rather than their predecessors, you’d think the list would favor recent winners. But 5 of its 10 most popular Newberys—The Giver (Houghton, 1993), Out of the Dust (Scholastic, 1997), Number the Stars (Houghton, 1989), The View from Saturday (S & S, 1996), and The Midwife’s Apprentice (Clarion, 1995)—were published in the 1990s, and its least popular winner from that decade, Walk Two Moons (Harper-Collins, 1994), is ranked No. 53. Contrast that showing with this century’s selections, which begin at No. 12 (Good Masters! Sweet Ladies!) and slip to No. 55 (Criss Cross) and No. 63 (The Higher Power of Lucky). It’s clear these Midwesterners prefer the 1990s picks over those of the 21st century.
B o o k s e l l e r s t o l d m e t h a t s e l l i n g a
Newbery winner during the 1990s was
as easy as picking an apple off a tree,
because the choices usually excited them. But
“in the past few years,” explained one veteran,
“we haven’t sold a single copy of the New-bery.” While a young bookseller conceded it
was a snap to sell a classic like The Lion, the
Witch, and the Wardrobe to 9 out of 10 of her
customers, only 1 in a 1,000 seemed intrigued by the recent Newbery winners. Today’s kids
are just as discerning. Until a few years ago, said a chair of a book award selected solely by
children, whenever the Newbery medalist was added to the master list, librarians complained because it was a shoo-in to win. Not anymore. These days, the Newbery winners “get very few votes from children.”

Do sales figures support the contention that ‘90s Newberys have a leg up on the more recent gold medalists? According to Publishers Weekly’s annual children’s best sellers lists (available from 1991 to 2006), many of the best-selling Newbery winners of the 1990s—The Giver, Holes (Farrar, 1998), Number the Stars, and Maniac Magee (Little, Brown, 1990)—are still going strong, making appearances on the best-seller lists year after year. For example, in 1999, the year Holes won the Newbery, it sold an impressive 323,000 copies. And to date, Holes and The Giver each sell anywhere from 200,000 to 750,000 copies annually.

With few exceptions, the fate of recent Newbery winners hasn’t been as rosy. Christopher Paul Curtis’s 2000 Newbery winner, Bud, Not Buddy, shows steady sales, as does The Tale of Despereaux. But Richard Peck’s 2001 Newbery winner, A Year Down Yonder (Dial, 2000), never landed on any best-seller list. Winners such as Crispin (Hyperion, 2002) and Kira-Kira appeared the years of their victory but then vanished completely—like other recent Newberys, they lack staying power. On the other hand, potential classics like Hoot (Knopf, 2002) and Because of Winn-Dixie (Candlewick, 2000), both Newbery Honor books, and The City of Ember (Random, 2003) and Freak the Mighty (Scholastic, 1993)—titles that combine quality writing with exciting pacing and heart-tugging characters—remain perennial best sellers even though they never captured Newbery gold.

H istorically, which books have been the best Newbery winners? Although literary tastes vary from person to person, in general, public and school librar-
ians, teachers, booksellers, critics, reviewers, authors, and publishers all crave the same thing—a book that we can enjoy, admire, and recommend, without reservation, to children. The strongest Newbery winners have always been ideal for a wide range of readers and have always worked in a variety of settings, including classrooms, homes, and book clubs. Superb selections like Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry (Dial, 1976), A Wrinkle in Time (Farrar, 1962), Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH (S & S, 1971), and Sarah, Plain and Tall (Harper, 1985) have stood the test of time and set the standard for excellence in children’s literature.

In the humble beginnings of the Newbery Award, its founders clearly sought a book that would have broad appeal. As children’s book historian Leonard Marcus reminds us in Minds of Make Believe (Houghton, 2008), back in 1922, when the first Newbery was awarded, ALA allowed any librarian who worked with kids—even part-time librarians—to nominate one title. The Story of Mankind (Liveright, 1921), nominated on 163 of the 212 ballots, won that year. Obviously, the founders cared deeply about the opinions and needs of those who worked directly with children.

Even the name of the award provides clues about the vision behind it. John Newbery, a highly successful publisher, believed that children’s books should offer readers delight and instruction in equal measure. So he searched for materials that would be both popular and profitable. I have no doubt that he would have published most, if not all, of the 1990s Newbery winners. But what about the more recent ones? To my mind, most of these selections have moved away from the spirit and philosophy of those who established the award.

As a critic, I admire the individuality and creativity of the recent Newbery winners, and I’m always happy for their writers and publishers. But I know that the good is often the enemy of the best. The Secret of the Andes is a good book; Charlotte’s Web, the best. Recent Newbery committees seem to be hunting for the former—when they should be desperately searching for the latter. I hope this trend is short-lived. I’d hate to see ALSC’s dedicated professionals undermine what generations of librarians have worked so hard to create—the unrivaled power and prestige of the Newbery Award.
