

4-2022

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### Recommended Citation

Paciga, K. A., & Koss, M. D. (2022). “Pockets of Hope”: Changing Representations of Diversity in Newbery Medal–Winning Titles. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 61 (1). Retrieved from [https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading\\_horizons/vol61/iss1/4](https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol61/iss1/4)

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## “Pockets of Hope”: Changing Representations of Diversity in Newbery Medal-Winning Titles

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### Abstract

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Newbery Medal-winning books provide cultural models for children’s developing cultural understandings of themselves and others. This article presents results of a critical content analysis that used sociocultural and historical lenses to examine representations of race/ethnicity, gender, and ability of main characters across the Newbery-winning corpus and how these representations have changed over the history of the award, 1922–2019. Findings present a lack of consistent diverse representation across all fields, with increased diverse representation in the most recent decades. The discussion contextualizes findings against historical events. Understanding the representations of diversity in these texts and the historical contexts within which such texts have emerged provides grounding to problematize the status quo of the curriculum and suggests a need for critical questioning and grand conversations.

**Keywords:** *children’s literature, Newbery Medal, content analysis, diversity*

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The John Newbery Medal is awarded annually to “the most distinguished contribution to American literature for children” (Association for Library Service for Children [ALSC], n.d.-a). Due to their award-winning status, Newbery-winning books are found in many classrooms and libraries. These titles rarely go out of print (Clark, 2003), and their inclusion in classrooms and curricula (Kidd, 2007) provides children with access to these texts in academically supported settings. Newbery books have become a part of the U.S. instructional canon and therefore serve as a logical corpus for investigating representation of privilege and power in the country’s educational system. Depictions of main characters in these books both communicate cultural models and provide sociocultural traces of larger movements in U.S. and world history. As the award spans decades, it reflects morals and values of society across multiple points of time. Considering Newbery-winning titles within the time period in which they were written can impact curricular opportunities for teaching practices of social justice and encourage critical questioning.

A focus of education today is on ensuring equity and inclusion for all students (Polat, 2011; U.S Department of Education, n.d.). Children's literature is often considered a springboard to promote grand conversations (Eeds & Wells, 1989), including those related to diversity, equity, and social justice. According to Freire (1970), education is liberation, and including diverse literature in classrooms is critical as literature can provide insight into one's own culture as well as an awareness of the cultures of others. The terms *diverse* and *diversity* are used in this article broadly to reflect the range of social groups and characteristics to which people belong, including aspects of race, ethnicity, gender, and disability. Beyond the parameters of this article, *diverse* and *diversity* refer to myriad components of cultural identities and the ways these components intersect (Crenshaw, 2005; Nelson & Nelson, 2016). Individuals simultaneously belong to multiple groups, and their identities reflect their unique lived experiences. *Diverse* does not mean non-White or able-bodied, as these identities are included in the larger taxonomy of diverse identities. Consideration of the ways diverse, intersectional identities are depicted in the curriculum and classroom materials is essential.

Connecting to literature impacts students' engagement, academic growth, and proclivity to become a reader (Johnston, 2019). Also impacting engagement, and the development of empathy, is students' ability to relate to characters, settings, and situations relevant to their own lives (Leland et al., 2017). The inclusion of books with diverse characters has the potential to connect to a range of identities reflected in groups of children and promote empathy for others. Who is represented in children's books often parallels who is privileged (Nurenberg, 2011). The visibility of privilege within a corpus of award-winning titles relates to the sociocultural, political, and historical contexts that shaped these works.

This article provides the results of a descriptive content analysis of race/ethnicity, gender, and disability across the corpus of Newbery-winning titles. It anchors and connects depictions of main characters and their narratives within their sociocultural, political, and historical contexts to help demonstrate the forces that have impacted the Newbery corpus throughout the award's existence. The goal is to help make teachers and readers aware of the Newbery award, what and whom it privileges, and how that privilege is changing. The application of a critical historical frame has potential to shape the ways teachers and students examine texts in school contexts, thereby setting up the possibility of a pedagogy of hope (Freire, 1994; hooks, 2003).

### Theoretical Framework

Literature is shaped by the values and priorities of the historical era in which it is created. As such, Newbery-winning titles are reproductions of "the dominant values of a culture at a particular time" (Bothelo & Rudman, 2009, p. 8). The writing, illustrating, and publishing of these titles also are shaped by the sociopolitical contexts of that historical time.

The theoretical frames of historical criticism (Pollard, 1920) and new historicism (Malpas, 2013) invite readers to examine text alongside historical evidence, or as a function of the context in which a work was written. In their academic discipline, historians recognize that a single text may not provide a full representation of the past (Shanahan et al., 2016). One text may, for example, contradict another in terms of the significance of a particular character or event, or even in the details of the person or events themselves. Such nuances identified while reading across texts muddy the novice reader's ability to interpret a text's purpose, audience, and perspectives (Alexander, 2000) and therefore the

novice reader's ability to identify power and privilege in text. New historicism approaches allow the reader the possibility (freedom) to see that there is no single story—that a historical account is an ongoing discussion (Mathis, 2017). Moreover, a new historicism approach affords readers the opportunity to examine the ways in which people have been acknowledged, marginalized, or omitted historically: “Contradictions and gaps become significant as close inspections of history ‘complicate generalizations’” (Gillespie, 2010, p. 86, cited in Mathis, 2017, p. 123).

Rosenblatt (1978) proposed that the meaning readers create from their experience with a text is a function of their positions or purposes in reading. She further suggested that readers adopt efferent or aesthetic stances as they read. In the efferent stance, readers focus on the information in a text. In the aesthetic stance, readers focus on the experience. Historical texts are commonly integrated in K–12 contexts with the goal of extracting key points of information: What happened when? To whom? By whom? Under what circumstances? In this way, teachers invite children to read historical texts efferently. Narrative texts, frequently integrated into English language arts, provide ample opportunity for children to connect aesthetically: How did a character feel? In what ways does the use of language or visual content contribute to the reader's understanding?

Narrative texts, such as those predominantly included in the corpus of the Newbery Award winners, are not history in and of themselves. The realistic fiction titles depict and subtly integrate reflections of contemporary events and issues. These reflections present as metaphor, allusion, character tropes, or symbols. Historical fiction, biographical, and informational titles offer readers more explicit and straightforward reflections of history. Identifying the historical situatedness of text (Short, 2017) and its relation to representation “allows us to better understand the texts, conventions, and assumptions in our current world” (Stevenson, 2011, p. 192).

This study situated the main characters of the Newbery corpus historically, and so required looking at trends in character representation as contextualized in a sociocultural and historical situational frame (Bradford, 2016). Specifically, this study examined the races, ethnicities, genders, and abilities of main characters in Newbery-winning titles and asked:

1. What populations are represented within the main characters across categories of race/ethnicity, gender, and disability?
2. How have these representations changed across time?
3. How have sociocultural, historical, and political contexts shaped the way racial, ethnic, gendered, and/or able-bodied identities are privileged in the corpus?

### **Method**

This study was a systematic content analysis (Cohen et al., 2007) of the human main characters in Newbery-winning books from the inception of the award in 1922 through 2019 ( $N = 98$  books). A full list of the Newbery Medal-winning titles is available from ALSC (n.d.-a). Four analytic phases were enacted to answer the research questions.

#### **Phase 1: Identifying Main Characters**

In the first phase of analysis we, the two authors and a research assistant, coded each Newbery title for human main characters. A human main character was defined as a person who may or may not be the narrator of the story but must be central to the story.

As Short et. al (2018) indicated, main characters often are round, rather than flat—a “complex individual with both good and bad traits, like a real person” (p. 28). Main characters often experience a transformation of character or significant change of perspective. Coding allowed for a maximum of four main characters per title.

We read each of the 98 Newbery titles and determined main characters based on the above criteria. Eighteen percent of the titles were coded by the first author, 86% by the second author, and 19% by a research assistant (involved in reading and coding). Inter-rater agreement was established in dyads first, ranging from 91% to 98% among all codes and across all coders. Disagreements were resolved to consensus through discussion. All three researchers coded 7% of the titles, with 94% agreement.

Similar to methodologies employed by Poarch and Monk-Turner (2001) and Weitzman and colleagues (1972), main characters were coded for character type: human, animal, object, and so on. Only titles with human main characters were included in the study. Of the 98 Newbery titles, 85 contained human main characters, with a total of 120 main characters. Sixty-two books had one human main character, 15 books had two, four books had three, and four books had four.

## **Phase 2: Coding Representations**

An a priori coding system (Weber, 1990) was developed from previously used instruments (Koss, 2015; Koss et al., 2018) and modified to reflect the parameters of the Newbery Medal (see Koss & Paciga, 2020). Titles were coded for race/ethnicity, gender, and disability. Table 1 provides definitions for each variable coded, recognizing and acknowledging that race/ethnicity, gender, and disability are not always apparent. We recognize that the classifications in Table 1 are social constructs and as such are nuanced and complex. We drew on previous content analyses of children’s literature to use similar terms. Classifications were gleaned from identifiable text references (e.g., narration, dialogue, images) and classified as unknown if clear identifiers were not marked. We recognize that race and ethnicity are distinct yet overlapping constructs and are categories used to define and classify. These terms have been used in previous content analyses of children’s literature (e.g., Bickmore et al., 2017; Hughes-Hassell & Cox, 2010; Kelley & Darragh, 2011). We acknowledge that gender is not a binary and used gender pronouns as identified in the text as the main signifier of gender identity for the characters (i.e., she/her/hers pronouns signal female, he/him/his signal male, and they/them/theirs signal nonbinary gender identity in the English language). This approach is commonly applied in content analyses of children’s literature (e.g., Berry & Wilkins, 2017; McCabe et al., 2011; Naidoo, 2012). Disability terms are also social constructs, and terms utilized were also used from other studies (Dyches et al., 2006; Kleekamp & Zapata, 2019; Koss, 2015). For example, characters who are deaf are included in the physical disability category, but we recognize that there is a Deaf culture that often stands alone.

Table 1

*A Priori Values and Descriptions: Coding Frame for Race/Ethnicity, Gender, and Disability*

Values	Description
<b>Race*/ethnicity</b>	
White*	People with origins from Europe or North Africa. Typically, the term White refers to those of European descent.
Black*	People with origins from Africa. Includes people identifying as African American. Black includes all peoples who identify as racially and ethnically Black.
Latinx	People of Hispanic or Latin origin. Latinx includes people from Latin America, North America, the Caribbean, and other countries who self-identify as having Latinx heritage.
American Indian*	First Nation and Indigenous peoples from the Americas—North, South, and Central.
Asian*	People inhabiting the continent of Asia inclusive of the Far East, Southeast Asia, and India, as well as U.S.-residing Asian Americans.
Island born*	Indigenous peoples from Hawaii, Guam, Samoa, or the Pacific Islands.
Middle Eastern	People of Southwest Asian, Middle Eastern, or North African countries, or those U.S.-residing peoples from these geographic regions who identify as belonging to this group.
Multiracial*	Any person identifying as having two or more races of origin.
Unknown	People with specific, yet undetermined, cultural or linguistic patterns.
<b>Gender</b>	
Female	People identified by she/her/hers pronouns, gender-specific language, and/or visible gender presented in images.
Male	People identified by he/him/his pronouns, gender-specific language, and/or visible gender presented in images.
Nonbinary	People identified by they/them/theirs pronouns, gender-neutral language, and/or nonspecified gender as presented in images.
<b>Ability</b>	
Physical	People with any physical impairment, including glasses and crutches. Temporary physical impairment was included.

Social-emotional	People with any social or emotional disorder, including anxiety, phobias, depressive disorders, or bipolar disorder.
Cognitive	People with any cognitive impairment, including learning disabilities, reading difficulties, expressive or receptive language, or traumatic brain injury.
Multiple disabilities	People who have more than one of the following: physical, social-emotional, and/or cognitive disabilities.

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\* Race is defined as a person’s self-identification with one or more social groups (asterisked above) whereas ethnicity determines whether an individual is of Hispanic/Latinx origin.”

While reading each title, we identified main characters and flagged instances in the text that provided evidence that supported coding decisions. Summaries of the flags were entered as comments in the database. Flags were retained in the hard copies of each title throughout the analysis to allow us to return to particular parts of the texts in context.

### Phase 3: Patterns and Trends Across Time

In the third analytic phase, post coding, we utilized line graphs to examine macro-level trends by each facet of diversity by decade of history: race/ethnicity, gender, and ability. The number of characters (i.e., the frequency with which each level of each variable was coded) was plotted against a timeline divided by decade as a function of the award year (1 year post-publication). Because the coding method allowed for coding up to four main characters, the total number in each decade varied from six (in the 1920s) to 19 main characters (in the 1990s and 2010s).

### Phase 4: Considering Context

Using decades to analyze data is a socially constructed practice utilized to map significant historical events against textual representations. Historical events were selected to correlate with our main areas of analysis—race/ethnicity, gender, and disability—and were used as catalysts for discussion in which we drew parallels to significant events in the children’s book world. Other studies of children’s literature, although smaller in scope, have leveraged decades as analytical components (e.g., Grauerholz & Pescosolido, 1989; Koss et al., 2018).

We began selecting historical examples by first examining websites and historical timelines of significant national and global historical and sociopolitical events, people, and cultural movements (e.g., National Consortium on Leadership and Disability for Youth, 2007; Wallenfeldt, n.d.; A. Young & Harrington, 2020). We sought to get a picture of significant sociocultural happenings in specific decades to map alongside our diversity findings per decade. We focused on historical events that connected to race/ethnicity, gender, and disability and could be aligned to child and educational contexts (e.g., *Brown v. Board of Education*, the creation of the Special Olympics) as well as significant events in the children’s literature field (e.g., the establishment of children’s literature awards). A decade-specific list was created, culling pertinent events from the websites and other sources.

Once the list was created, we individually explored it and reflected on which events seemed subjectively interesting to us through a children’s literature lens. Each of

us wrote brief memos, capturing our reactions and connections between what was happening in the world and how those events pertained to the socially constructed categories of race/ethnicity, gender, and disability as represented in the Newbery corpus. The memos became data points that were coded inductively (Thomas, 2006). Instances in which both of our memos connected an event to the corpus were discussed, as were any other events we individually felt were significant and merited inclusion in phase 4 analysis. Based on discussions, up to five key events per decade per coding category (i.e., race/ethnicity, gender, diversity) were selected for inclusion in the findings.

## Findings

Findings are organized first at the macro level, providing a wide view of changing representations of race/ethnicity, gender, and disability across the corpus of the Newbery Medal. Then we offer a micro-level discussion of trends as they correlate to both historical events that shaped each decade and main characters identified from each decade.

### Macro-level Representations Across Time

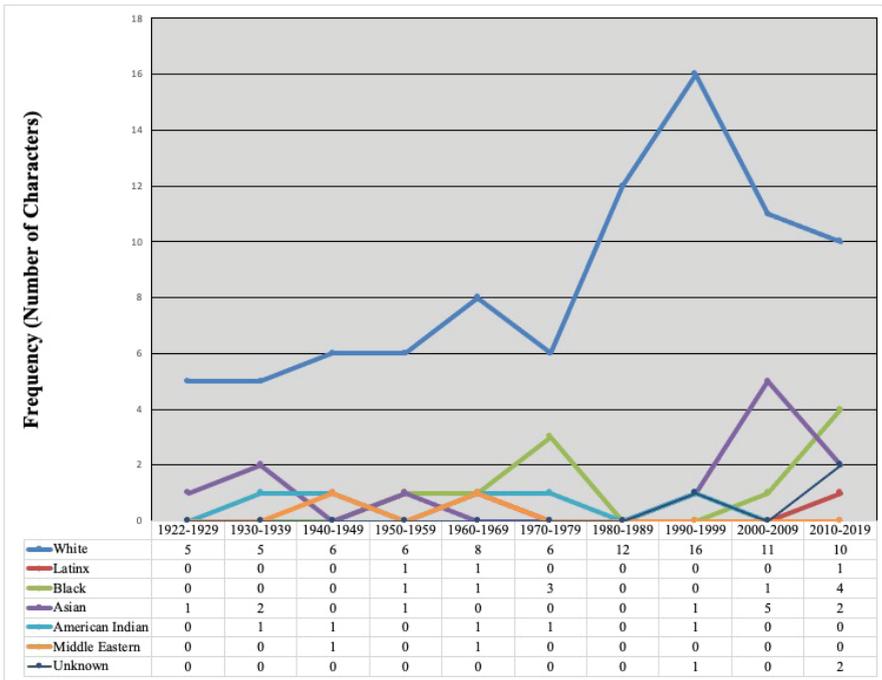
In this section we address the first two research questions: (1) What populations are represented in the main characters across categories of race/ethnicity, gender, and disability? (2) How have these representations changed across time?

#### ***Race/Ethnicity***

Main characters were predominantly White across the decades. Out of the 120 main characters, 35 (29%) were characters of color. Diversity in race/ethnicity was relatively flat in the first five decades of the Newbery Medal, with a dip in White characters in the 1970s, followed by a sharp increase through the 1990s. White main characters gradually began to decline as non-White main characters, specifically Asian, Black, and Latinx, began to increase in the 2000s. Figure 1 displays the number of main characters of each racial/ethnic group per decade.

Asian main characters were the second highest group represented (12), followed by Black (10), Latinx (3), American Indian (5), Middle Eastern (2), and unknown race/ethnicity (3). In the 1970s and 2010s, there were the highest number of Black main characters, whereas Asian main characters were highest in the 1920s, 1930s, 1950s, and 2000s.

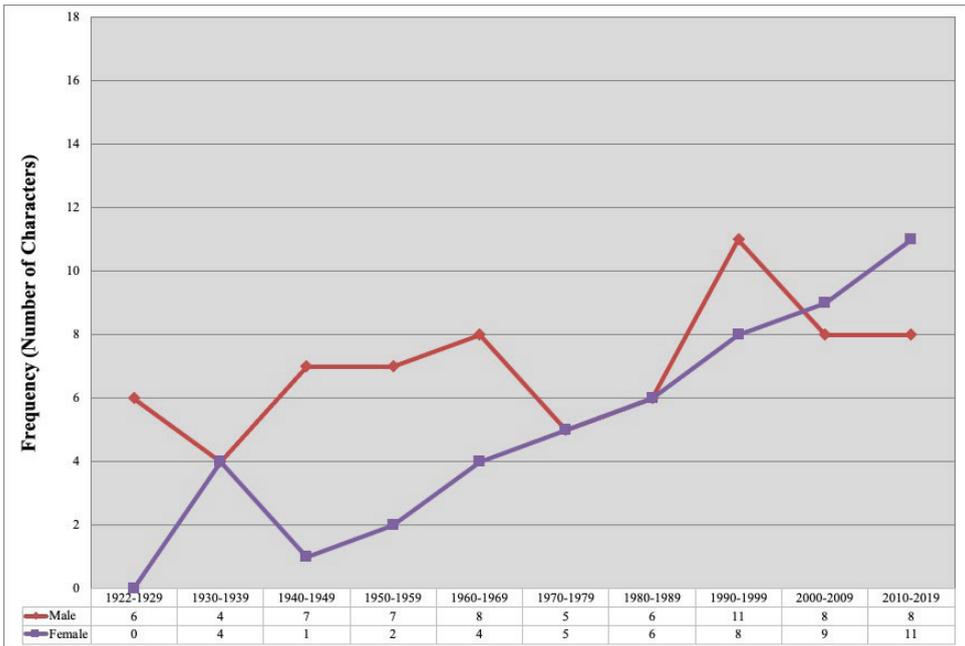
In Figure 1 it is evident that there was some early attention to Eastern cultures in this sample of American children's literature. The decades from the 1920s through the 1970s have twice the number of White main characters than Black and Latinx combined. In each of these arrays, we see more diversity since the turn of the 21st century.



**Figure 1.** *Frequency of Race/Ethnicity in Characters by Decade*

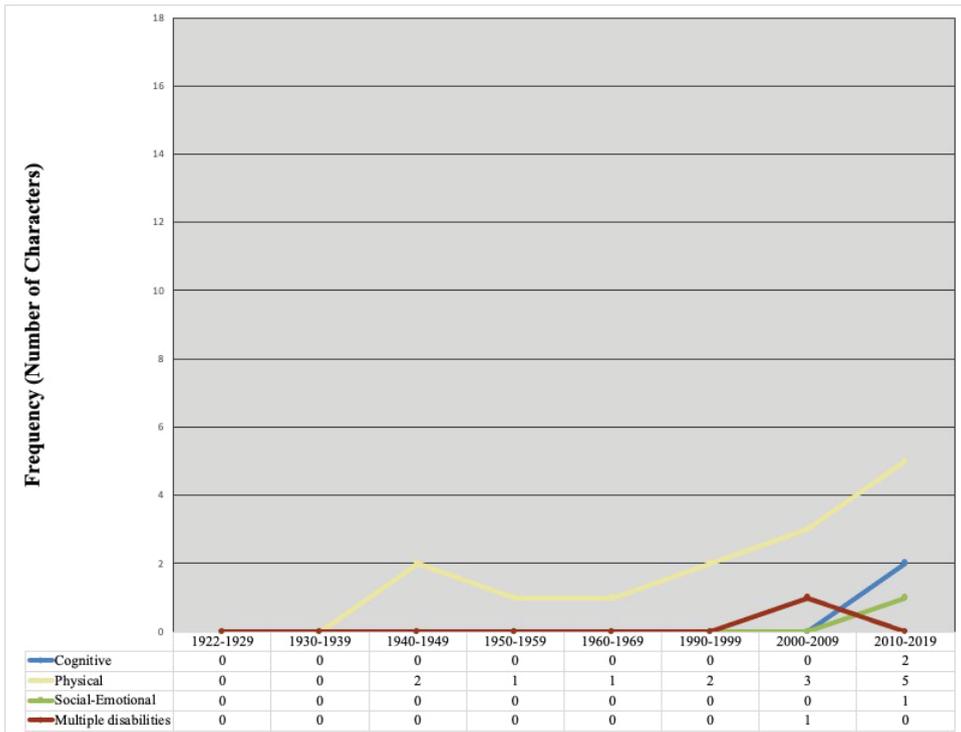
**Gender**

All main characters in the study were coded as either male or female. No main characters in the study were depicted outside of the gender binary. Male main characters were always represented in greater proportion than female main characters except for the last two decades, 2000–2019. Prior to the 1960s, there were only seven female main characters, in contrast to 24 male main characters. The number of female main characters began to rise consistently from the 1960s through today, equaling male main characters in the 1970s and 1980s and outnumbering male main characters in the 2000s and 2010s. Although female main characters showed a significant increase, male main characters had more shifts but were significantly higher in five decades (1920s, 1940s, 1950s, 1960s, and 1990s). Figure 2 displays the number of main characters of each gender group per decade.



**Figure 2.** *Frequency of Gender in Characters by Decade Disability*

Other than instances of physical disabilities, primarily the wearing of glasses or sustained injuries, there were few occurrences of main characters with any disabilities until the 1990s, when there was the start of an uptick in physical as well as cognitive and emotional disabilities. Eighteen main characters were portrayed as having a disability across the sample: three with cognitive disabilities (all from the last four decades), one with a social-emotional disability (from the most recent decade), and 14 with physical disabilities. Significantly, no main characters with any type of disability were portrayed in the 1970s and 1980s. This was followed by a marked increase in represented disabilities from the 1990s to 2010s. There were no instances of cognitive or social-emotional disabilities of main characters in the first four decades of the award. Figure 3 displays the number of main characters of each disability group per decade.



**Figure 3.** *Frequency of Disability in Characters by Decade*

**Micro-level Connections to Contexts**

In this section we address the third research question: How have sociocultural, historical, and political contexts shaped the way racial, ethnic, gendered, and/or able-bodied identities are privileged in the corpus? Looking across our data, we noted an increase in representation across the three categories of race/ethnicity, gender, and disability overall, with an apparent emphasis on increased representation of non-White and/or disabled main characters since the 2000s. Significant historical events likely impacted the presence/absence and portrayal of previously underrepresented identities, stemming from societal awareness of the importance of representation and ongoing activism from diverse communities.

The following sections are organized by race/ethnicity, gender, and disability, examining significant historical events with noted representations of main characters in Newbery-winning books.

**Race/Ethnicity**

The Newbery award emerged after World War I, a period of history in which U.S. society was focused on securing and protecting itself from subsequent threats of war. Described as isolationism (U.S. Department of State, n.d.) or nativism (J. G. Young, 2017), part of how the United States engaged in these assurances was by creating laws that prohibited immigration onto U.S. soil.

In the first five decades of the award, corresponding to the period preceding and immediately following World War II, there were only four main characters of color whose narratives took place within the United States: two American Indian characters (Nava-jo) in *Waterless Mountain* (Armer, 1931) and (Nicoleno) *Island of the Blue Dolphins* (O'Dell, 1960), one Black character in *Amos Fortune, Free Man* (Yates, 1950), and one Latinx character in *... and Now, Miguel* (Krumgold, 1953).

All of the other nine titles in the first five decades with a racially/ethnically non-White main character were set in other countries with no connection to the United States or U.S. sentiments. The settings all played significant roles in both the main characters' identities and the content of the narrative. Some titles appeared rooted in cultural traditions, although we note that as the Newbery Award is given to U.S. citizens, not all titles were written by cultural insiders and thus may lack cultural authenticity (Short & Fox, 2004). For example, *Call It Courage* (Sperry, 1940) portrays a Polynesian child surviving life alone on an island, and *The Secret of the Andes* (Clark, 1952) is about a young boy learning the ways of the Inca and the critical role llamas play in Incan culture.

High-profile events of the 1950s, such as *Brown v. Board of Education* and sending federal troops to Little Rock, Arkansas, to enforce racial integration of schools, foregrounded the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Advocacy for representations of racial and ethnic diversity in children's literature during this time period was supported by seminal studies identifying the "all-white world of children's books" (Larrick, 1965), leading to an uptick in racial and ethnic diversity in the children's literature of the 1970s. The Coretta Scott King Book Award was established in 1970, honoring outstanding African American authors and illustrators of books that "demonstrate an appreciation of African American culture and universal human values" (Ethnic and Multicultural Information Exchange Round Table, n.d.). This attention to racial and ethnic diversity began to be reflected in the Newbery winners. In the 1970s, three of four non-White main characters were Black, and their stories conveyed the realities and struggles of Black citizens historically in the United States. These titles, *Sunder* (Armstrong, 1969), *M. C. Higgins, the Great* (Hamilton, 1974), and *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (Taylor, 1976), recognize the hardships of slavery, sharecropping, and systems of oppression in place.

Also taking place in the 1960s was the Chicano movement, championing Mexican American identity. In 1962, Cesar Chavez formed the National Farmworkers Association, but this achievement for Latinx peoples was not reflected in the Newbery corpus as there are only two titles in which Latinx main characters are represented after the 1960s: Hector in *Criss Cross* (Perkins, 2005) and Merci in *Merci Suárez Changes Gears* (Medina, 2018).

During the late 1970s through 1990s, global and local events such as the War in Vietnam, the end of the Cold War, and the rise of hip-hop impacted U.S. sentiments. Yet these were not reflected in, nor do they appear to have influenced, the racial or ethnic diversity represented in Newbery-winning books during those decades. Significantly, there were no non-White main characters during the 1980s, followed by a steep increase of White main characters in the 1990s. The books of the 1990s with non-White main characters did not have the same focus on cultural setting or attempt at reflecting cultural authenticity as titles in the early decades of the Newbery Award. One title from the 1990s, *The Giver* (Lowry, 1993), had a racially/ethnically unknown and undescribed main character, and *The View From Saturday* (Konigsburg, 1995) focused on relationships between the main characters and how their interconnecting histories allowed them success

in a quiz bowl championship. The main character in *Walk Two Moons* (Creech, 1994), Salamanca, was proud of her Seneca Indian heritage, but the focus of the novel was on her relationship with her grandparents through storytelling in a road trip across the United States and not the Seneca culture.

Another event in the children's literature world was the establishment of the Pura Belpré award in 1996. This award "celebrates the Latino cultural experience in an outstanding work of literature for children and youth" (ALSC, n.d.-b). Although this award highlights Latinx authors, illustrators, and characters, the findings of this study indicate that although increased attention has been given to this population, it has not yet made its way into the Newbery corpus. In 2006, two new book awards were established: the Asian/Pacific American Award for Literature and the American Indian Youth Literature Award, bringing heightened attention to these populations.

Although the 2000s presented a spike in racially/ethnically diverse main characters, they all emanated from historical fiction titles and thus do not capture the experiences of today's children and do not reflect the breadth of the growing inclusivity of the Youth Media Awards. *Bud, Not Buddy* (Curtis, 1999), *A Single Shard* (Park, 2001), *Kira-Kira* (Kadohata, 2004), and *Criss Cross* (Perkins, 2005) reveal racially/ethnically diverse main characters whose lived realities are impossible to replicate as the events of their narratives were tied to history. The psychological result of this for the reader is that they are more removed from the narrative. The main characters and narratives of the 2010s move closer to children's contemporary experiences, presenting readers with more opportunities for psychological realism (Sen, 2019) as they present contemporary realistic fiction and racial/ethnic diversity in more frequency than observed in the 2000s.

Some argue this results from the significant attention to the diversity, or lack thereof, in the corpus of U.S. children's literature in the most recent decade (Cooperative Children's Book Center, 2020). The We Need Diverse Books nonprofit organization was founded in 2014, followed by two editorials published in the *New York Times* by African American father/son author duo Walter Dean Myers and Christopher Myers. In 2015, Lee & Low Books released its first Diversity Baseline Survey examining the diversity of employees of the publishing industry. The We Need Diverse Books organization now emphasizes the need for cultural insiders being given space to write their own stories.

This emphasis on the need for racial/ethnic diversity in U.S. children's literature, and the resultant increased publication of books with diverse main characters, presents a pocket of hope for increased diversification of the Newbery Award. Almost half (47%) of the main characters in the 2010s had racially/ethnically diverse main characters. Although one book, *The Girl Who Drank the Moon* (Barnhill, 2016), contained two main characters whose racial/ethnic identity is unknown, the remaining four titles were realistic fiction written primarily by cultural insiders: *Merci Suárez Changes Gears* (Medina, 2018), *The Crossover* (Alexander, 2014), *Hello, Universe* (Kelly, 2017), and *Last Stop on Market Street* (de la Peña, 2015). These four texts represent insider views of contemporary settings, reflecting racially/ethnically diverse cultures in the United States. Three of these depict multiple cultures and nonhomogeneous cultural groups, more reflective of today's population. Of note, however, is that the Newbery Award criteria do not include specific attention to diversity, so the uptick in racial/ethnic diversity in recent years is corollary and cannot be directly tied to the award itself.

## Gender

Looking across the corpus, there is a clear shift from women being portrayed as individuals who reside and/or work in the home and follow strict societal expectations to those asserting more control over their lives. The term *girl power* has long been in existence, first noted in print in 1913 (Oxford English Dictionary [OED], 2020). The first definition described the contributions of females to the workforce, predating the women's suffrage movement that resulted in the ratification of the 19th Amendment (1920) and the roaring 20s, concurrent to the first awarded Newbery Medal in 1922. Its definition as a term for strong, independent women did not come into popular use until the 1990s, highlighted by the Spice Girls among others. In 2001, the OED updated its entry, defining it as "a self-reliant attitude among girls and young women manifested in ambition, assertiveness, and individualism."

Books that did not have strong female main characters were more prevalent before the 1960s, with males characters outnumbering females four to one. Examples of books without any female main characters abound from the early decades of the award, including ... *and Now, Miguel* (Krumgold, 1953) and *Onion John* (Krumgold, 1959). True to Gomez-Najarro's (2019) findings in her analysis of children's literature used as exemplar texts for the Common Core, early female characters predominately assumed supporting roles.

The first four decades of the award presented seven out of 31 female main characters, including those from *Caddie Woodlawn* (Brink, 1935), *Strawberry Girl* (Lenski, 1945), and *Miracles on Maple Hill* (Sorensen, 1956). Several of the female main characters from this time period were expected to help out in the home and curb their adventurous sides. Yet these characters all pushed against stereotypical expectations of girl power by wanting to help with typically male chores and tasks or play in ways unbecoming to a lady and so aligned with the image of the spunky women of the roaring 20s. One exemplary instance appeared when Garnet in *Thimble Summer* (Enright, 1938) went out to help with the end-of-summer work. She "felt extremely important" (p. 73) until she botched the job and her brother scolded her: "You certainly made a mess of it... Why don't you stay home and help mother? Threshing isn't anything for girls to be monkeying with anyway; home with a dish towel, that's where you belong!" (p. 74). The young female protagonists of the 1930s and 1940s stand out instead of blending in, defying parental and societal expectations.

Transitioning from the early decades, most female main characters of the 1960s and 1970s fended for themselves and/or observed females engaged in work outside of the home. Survival became a theme in several of these titles, in which the female main character must save their own lives or the lives of those they love. Karana in *Island of the Blue Dolphins* (O'Dell, 1960) and Julie in *Julie of the Wolves* (George, 1972) are girls stranded alone in the wilderness. Meg in *A Wrinkle in Time* (L'Engle, 1962) goes on a quest to save her father and observes her mother, a scientist, spending time in a laboratory, providing a new cultural model (Gee, 2000). Similar models appear in *Bridge to Terabithia* (Paterson, 1977), where "both of the Burkes were writers" (p. 45), and in *The Westing Game* (Raskin, 1978), where Turtle observes three strong working women: a lawyer, a store owner, and a secretary.

The OED documents an instance of girl power from 1967, stating "the typical student power activist at the university is a girl." In many ways, this entry documents the start of the women's liberation movement that lobbied for key changes in rules governing

the rights of women, evidenced by the ratification of Title IX, which created more abundant and streamlined opportunities for women to pursue professional aspirations: Billie Jean King won the 1973 Battle of the Sexes, Sandra Day O'Connor was sworn in as the first U.S. Supreme Court justice in 1981, and Sally Ride became the first woman in space in 1983. The Newbery corpus of this time period reflects strength in women through female protagonists who took charge of their families and their own lives. In *A Gathering of Days: A New England Girl's Journal, 1830-1832* (Blos, 1979), Catherine takes care of her father and brother after the death of her mother. Aerin, in *The Hero and the Crown* (McKinley, 1984), saves a kingdom. Annemarie bravely stands up for her Jewish friend Ellen to help save Ellen's family from the Nazis in *Number the Stars* (Lowry, 1989). Although the female main characters depicted in the 1990s were strong, they were outnumbered by male main characters, counterbalancing strength in character versus strength in number.

The decades from 2000 to 2019 are the first in which there are more female than male main characters and girl power was at the forefront. Contextually, women also held an increased number of roles in entertainment, government, and science during these years. Women such as Katie Couric, the first female sole anchor of a major news syndicate; Sonia Sotomayor, the third woman and first Hispanic person to serve as a justice on the U.S. Supreme Court; and U.S. presidential candidate Hillary Clinton were prominently profiled. Younger female leaders such as Greta Thunberg (environmentalist) and Emma Gonzalez (antigun activist following the Parkland school shootings) showcased how young women can stand up and effect change. These influences appeared in strong female characters in Newbery-winning books in the last two decades, particularly those in realistic fiction titles. Merci in *Merci Suárez Changes Gears* (Medina, 2018) and Kaori and Valencia in *Hello, Universe* (Kelly, 2017) learn to stand up for themselves, be proud of who they are culturally and physically, and become confident through making new friends. In these examples, realistic fiction is presented as a mirror of readers' world in which characters are given opportunity and space to be autonomous in their own lives like the strong, proud women representative of these more recent decades.

Another component of history related to gender in children's literature was the establishment of the Stonewall Book Award (Rainbow Round Table, n.d.), first awarded in 2010 to recognize books of "exceptional merit relating to the gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgendered experience." Although no books in the Newbery Medal-winning corpus represented any LGBTQ+ main characters, events in history related to the gay rights movement have taken place, such as passage of the Matthew Shepard Act (2009), legalization of same-sex marriage (2015), and removal of the ban on transgender people serving in the U.S. military (2016). These events have not yet affected any main character in a Newbery-winning title.

### **Disability**

This study confirms and validates extant studies (e.g., Dyches et al., 2006; Kleekamp & Zapata, 2019) that documented underrepresentation of disability in children's literature. As instances of disability are infrequent, portrayals that do exist become especially salient. Their disability depiction was a part of their cultural authenticity and played a role in ownership of their storylines. The problem arises in that individuals with disabilities are largely absent from the sample.

In the first seven decades of the Newbery Award, all instances of main characters being portrayed as having a disability were physical, and many, such as Robin in *The*

*Door in the Wall* (de Angeli, 1949) and Billie Jo in *Out of the Dust* (Hesse, 1997), had to do with mobility or fine motor skills. Visual impairment was solely marked by characters wearing glasses, including Meg in *A Wrinkle in Time* (L'Engle, 1962). This aligns with historical developments focused on mobility and access for people with physical disabilities, such as the barrier-free movement of the 1950s and the first accessibility standards published in 1961, Accessible and Usable Buildings and Facilities.

Although there were several historical developments regarding disabilities between the 1960s and 2000s, these were not reflected in the Newbery corpus. Of historical significance were three events: federal support for training teachers of children with “mental retardation,” becoming law in the United States in 1958; the appearance of Linda Bove in 1976 as the first Deaf actress on *Sesame Street*; and the Education for all Handicapped Children Act, passed in 1975, renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990. IDEA was reauthorized and amended in 1997 and 2004, which led to increased advocacy for diversity and equity issues considered in the education and awareness of all individuals with disabilities.

These developments began to be reflected in the most recent two decades of the Newbery Award. In *The Tale of Despereaux* (DiCamillo, 2003) we see the first instance of a character with a cognitive disability, Miggery Sow. It is unclear if her being “a bit slow-witted” (p. 152) was the result of a traumatic brain injury resulting in deafness or a happenstance of birth. The first novel to include a character depicted as deaf from birth or with a learning disability was *Hello, Universe* (Kelly, 2017) with the characters of Valencia and Virgil.

Two children’s book awards aimed at honoring the authentic portrayal of people with disabilities were established in the 2000s: the Dolly Gray Children’s Literature Award in 2000 and the Schneider Family Book Award in 2004. No books that have won a Newbery Award have also won the Dolly Gray or Schneider Award.

### Limitations

This study was not without limitations. First, the graphs in the figures do not account for the fact that the number of characters per book increased over time. For example, Asian characters in Figure 1 increased in the 2000–2009 decade. In that timespan, 17 characters of all races/ethnicities were identified, while only six were identified for 1922–1929. No more than 10 main characters were present in a decade prior to 1960. The effect this has is that Figure 1 does not represent relative percentages of character representations, but rather a raw count of the characters overall, which varied across each decade.

Second, we looked only at winning titles, which is one title per year. Widening the sample to include honor books could and probably would yield different results.

Additionally, we are two White, able-bodied women. We recognize our positions in the world and the transactions that occur between reader and text as a function of our own positions and cultural understandings and biases.

### Implications

In this study we situated the corpus of Newbery-winning titles against the time periods in which they were written. We have identified trends and patterns in who is present and who is absent and connected these findings to significant historical events. Our findings map the increases and decreases in diverse representations across the decades and demonstrated an increase in diverse representation across layers of race/ethnicity, gender,

and disability, but there is always the possibility for more. The historical component of our research posited that fluctuations in diversity in the corpus were connected to historically, politically, and socioculturally significant people and events. The growing presence of non-White, non-able-bodied main characters gives us hope that Newbery Award winners have the potential to reflect the growing diversity of today's school population.

This study was the first step in allowing us to interrogate these books against the contexts in which they were created and taken up. Connecting texts, particularly realistic and historical fiction, affords a picture of a time period that allows for critical examination, questioning, and critique. The next step is for teachers to use this knowledge to impact the structure of the discussions they have around these books. How can educators take known representations of a variety of populations in texts and use this knowledge to advocate for characters in ways that mirror our current climate and need for inclusivity and equitability? When teachers present representations of who is in books as parallel to privilege and as set within history, students are set up to enter into a critical space.

Freire (1970) defined critical literacy as the reading of books through a questioning stance, critically examining the social, political, and economic conditions of the society in which the texts were written and asking what exists and who benefits from it. He later argued that reading with a critical lens requires not only critique and questioning, but also hope and the belief in the possibilities of social justice through democratic dialogue (Freire, 1994). The reading of books, then, involves examining texts for representations and stereotypes, specifically in how social issues position particular groups of people. It also necessitates taking this questioning one step further and looking for textual counternarratives—narratives of hope—in which characters push back against societal constraints and offer new possibilities for a more equitable world.

Considering history and the time period in which a book is written adds a layer to the reading experience. It is an avenue for critically interacting with and making meaning from text. Situating Newbery-winning titles within their historical contexts allowed us to connect trends in the corpus to pivotal moments in U.S. history. Examining parallels provided insight into the larger publishing field and has the potential to encourage teachers and publishers to make a commitment to the creation and dissemination of books representing today's diverse student body.

Teaching students to read deeply and critically gives them the ability to uncover themes of social justice and injustice in the texts they read and make parallels to these same injustices in their lives and society (e.g., Gonzalez, 2016; *Teaching Tolerance/Learning for Justice*, 2018). Teachers frequently encounter curriculum that includes teaching award-winning titles, including Newbery winners, either because they have always taught that title in a particular grade level or because they have 30 copies of that title. We wish to encourage teachers to explore new ways to use these titles, going beyond what has been traditionally taught and adding a critical layer of historically situated character representation and diversity.

The presence and absence of diversity in the corpus of Newbery-winning titles gives teachers opportunities to challenge students to read both efferently, within a historical framework, and aesthetically (Rosenblatt, 1978). It allows them to push students to challenge the time periods within which a book was written. Whether reading contemporary realistic or historical fiction titles, teachers can ask students to critique which characters are in positions of power and have open pathways of possibility and which characters are presented with roadblocks. Using a critical stance, teachers can create opportunities

for “grand conversations” (Eeds & Wells, 1989). Questions such as these can be posed:

- How do the characters or plot lines reflect societal values and morals of the time period in which they were created?
- Which characters are privileged and how? In what ways can we interrogate the historically privileged representations to connect to a more just present?
- What representations are missing from the story, and how might inclusion of diverse perspectives have altered the character’s story?

This study has demonstrated that the main characters in the corpus of the Newbery Award–winning titles offer pockets of hope in terms of where we’re going in the future; as society appears to be becoming more equitable and inclusive, so too, we hope, are the books we share with students and young people.

With the establishment of We Need Diverse Books, a recent social movement emphasizing the importance of including diverse populations in children’s books, an awareness of diversity continues to be at the forefront of the educational and publishing worlds. This provides promise that current events and inclusion and equity movements gaining momentum and garnering attention today have the potential to be reflected in the books of tomorrow. As bell hooks (2003) wrote, hope “empowers us to continue our work for justice even as the forces of injustice may gain greater power for a time. As teachers, we enter the classroom with hope” (p. xiv). As researchers, we enter our research with hope. Together we can instill hope in our students.

### **About the Authors**

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