

The John Newbery Medal

The First Decade

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June 22, 1921, stands as a monumental date in the history of children's literature: it marks the establishment of the John Newbery Medal for distinguished writing in a book for children. The occasion was the American Library Association's conference in Swampscott, Massachusetts, where more than three hundred children's librarians (a record number) gathered in that seaside community. This unexpectedly large attendance necessitated that the Children's Librarians' Section (as it was then called) crowd into an unused garage behind the New Ocean House hotel. Their two-day opening session featured a panel of librarians detailing the third successful year of Children's Book Week. The next morning, excitement about the growing interest in children's librarianship still permeated the air, but nothing suggested anything revolutionary was about to be put in place.

The agenda for the second session on June 22, presided over by chair Alice Hazeltine of the St. Louis Public Library, was routine: various papers on manufacturing costs of books and other pertinent topics were followed by the annual installation of new officers. Then, at the meeting's close, Frederick Melcher, editor of *Publisher's Weekly*, stepped forward and presented a groundbreaking idea.

Melcher was not a librarian, but as a longtime bookseller and recent publisher he felt a kinship with the library world—especially the world of children's books. He had been the instigator of the recently launched Children's Book Week and had spoken eloquently about the project on the previous day, emphasizing the “power [librarians] could have in encouraging the joy of reading among children” (Smith 1957). He seemed to understand innately all aspects of the children's book world and sensed the rising vitality in the growing field of children's literature. In this he was certainly right.

In 1916, Bertha Mahony had opened her highly successful Bookshop for Boys and Girls in Boston; 1918 found Anne Carroll Moore, superintendent of work with children at the New York Public Library, offering critical reviews of children's books in *The Bookman*; 1919, the first year of Children's Book Week, also saw Macmillan appointing the first-ever children's book editor—Louise Seaman. Three years later, Scribner and Doubleday, Page followed suit, choosing Alice Dalgliesh and May Masee, respectively, to head their children's book departments. These three women were the pioneers of what has developed into a distinct—and flourishing—arena of book publishing.

Interest in elevating children's literature was growing in other venues as well. Special rooms for young readers were

being established within public libraries across the country; colleges and universities had begun offering courses to train librarians in the art of bringing children and books together; and the media was starting to find children's books worthy of notice.

On June 22, 1921, however, Melcher reached for an even greater role for librarians. He felt strongly that they should not just be caretakers of children's literary heritage but should be encouraging the creative aspects of bookmaking. He feared the conference-generated enthusiasm would melt away when the participants returned to their own communities.

From the bevy of ideas that had been racing through Melcher's mind, one caught hold and crystallized: a medal, to be given annually, for an outstanding children's book. The Pulitzer Prize might ignore the genre, but a competition of literature for the young, he thought, could light a needed fire. It was his hope that such a prize would entice already proven writers and artists to the children's book field.

Caught up in the ebullient mood, the librarians welcomed the idea and voted to put Melcher's idea into effect the very next year. And so it was that the John Newbery Medal “for the most distinguished contribution to American literature for children” came into being.

Looking back, it seems a daring undertaking: the Children's Librarians' Section had only twenty-seven members and \$1.95 in its treasury. Today we can only applaud their willingness and energy to take on an undoubtedly daunting task, which, over the years, has turned into an event with far-reaching prestigious and financial implications.

Although in the twenty-first century some find it puzzling that such a coveted American prize would be named after an Englishman, it seemed a natural choice to Melcher and the librarians involved with creating the award. Coincidentally, Melcher had been reading Charles Knight's *Shadows of Old Booksellers* and had been impressed with the lively description of the eighteenth-century bookseller and printer John Newbery. What better way, the publisher thought, to honor the first person to see possibilities in producing books particularly for children. Melcher was later to say that the idea for the award and its name rushed to his mind simultaneously.

A committee of three was immediately organized to head up this new endeavor: Clara W. Hunt, Brooklyn Public Library (named chair); E. Gertrude Avey, Cincinnati Public Library; and Leonore St. John Power, New York Public Library. In the months that followed, the trio wrestled with considerations such as who was entitled to vote, how the

final decision would be made, and how to involve librarians nationwide. Concerned that the vote might be close, they decided that a jury, made up of the Children's Librarians' Section officers and four member librarians, would make the final decision.

To publicize both the voting and the presentation of the award, letters asking for nominations for the most distinguished children's book published in 1921 went out to nearly five hundred practicing children's librarians, and notices were published in *Library Journal* and other professional magazines. Nominations were due on March 1, 1922, and all librarians, not just those serving children, were invited to take part. The widespread notice served two other intertwining strategies: to entice librarians to join the slow-growing Children's Librarians' Section and to draw them to the ALA conference for the granting of the first John Newbery Medal.

While Melcher was adamant from the beginning that the Newbery Award belonged in the hands of the American Library Association, he did provide continued guidance and support. He volunteered to find (and pay) someone to create the medal, choosing Rene Paul Chambellan, a young designer who had distinguished himself with a number of large sculptures in New York City. Melcher gave the artist a free hand, his only suggestion being that the medal should reflect "genius giving its best to the child" (Smith 1957).

By March 8, 1922, 212 votes had been received and tabulated. The verdict was unmistakable: Hendrik Willem van Loon, with 163 votes for *The Story of Mankind* (Boni & Liveright, 1921), was named the first Newbery Medal winner. The five other authors who received votes were named "Runners-Up," a designation that was later changed, retroactively, to "Honor Book." They were Charles Boardman Hawes for *The Great Quest* (Little, Brown, 1921) with 22 votes, Bernard Gay Marshall for *Cedric the Forester* (Appleton, 1921) with 7 votes, William Bowen for *The Old Tobacco Shop: A True Account of What Befell a Little Boy in Search of Adventure* (Macmillan, 1921) with 5 votes, Padraic Colum for *The Golden Fleece and the Heroes Who Lived before Achilles* (Macmillan, 1921) with 4 votes, and Cornelia Meigs for *The Windy Hill* (Macmillan, 1921) with 2 votes.

Of these five, Hawes and Meigs would win future Newbery Medals and Meigs would receive three more Honor Book designations in her career. Colum would garner two other Honor Book designations, but Marshall and Bowen left no further mark on the field. While *The Story of Mankind* has stayed in print, none of van Loon's other titles made its way onto a Newbery list. Interestingly, of the four medal-winning publishers (Liveright; Macmillan; Little, Brown; and Appleton) only one—Little, Brown—is still publishing children's books today.

While voting is heavily veiled in today's Newbery Award selection process, such secrecy was obviously not an issue in 1922: the statistics appear in Irene Smith's *A History of the Newbery and Caldecott Medals*. Neither, evidently, was conflict of interest: Leonore St. John Power, a member of

the organizing committee, provided a reading list that was included in the first edition of *The Story of Mankind*.

Van Loon was an interesting choice for the first award. Born in Holland in 1892, he immigrated to America in 1902, where he became a well-known journalist, lecturer, college professor, writer, illustrator, and correspondent for NBC. In 1919, he applied for and received American citizenship, just three years before winning the Newbery. He was known to be a womanizer and was married four times, twice to the same woman. His first wife was Eliza Bowditch, great-granddaughter of Nathaniel Bowditch (in 1956 Jean Latham would win a Newbery Medal for a biography of the famous navigator). Widely recognized as an engaging writer, lively public lecturer, and enthusiastic radio commentator, van Loon was often in the news—sometimes shown in a negative light. The *New York Times* once stated, "When Hendrik Willem van Loon writes history, you can be certain of getting both plenty of history and plenty of van Loon" (Unitarian Universalist Historical Society website). While some accused van Loon of sloppy scholarship and of manufacturing details to support his narrative, others championed his flamboyant style.

The Story of Mankind received lavish praise upon its release. Anne Carroll Moore, a powerful influence in the children's book field, heralded the book as "the most invigorating and, I venture to predict, the most influential children's book for many years to come" (Miller and Field 1955). But van Loon's book was not without its detractors. For example, his extended treatment of evolution without mention of the Biblical account of creation deterred a number of libraries from acquiring the book. Nevertheless, *The Story of Mankind* was lauded for "its originality, its boldness of conception, its vigor of phrase and metaphor, and [for] its animated illustrations" (Miller and Field 1955), and this, along with the high proportion of votes it garnered, brought assurance to the Children's Librarians' Section that the first Newbery Medal winner had been chosen well.

Measured by today's standards, van Loon's style seems overblown and somewhat sentimental, but in the 1920s his lively storytelling broke barriers in making history come alive on the page. In 1951, his son Gerard van Loon supplemented his father's work, continuing the story through the First and Second World Wars and into the postwar years; the book was revised again in 1973. The 2005 edition ends with a section called "The Last Fifty Years, Including Several Explanations and an Apology," undoubtedly to appease those concerned with the now-unacceptable cultural and racial slurs in the original edition. It is significant that an informational book won the first Newbery Medal. While nonfiction books have captured Newbery Honors, other than biographies and poetry none has ever won a medal.

ALA held its 1922 conference in Detroit. The meeting of the Children's Librarians' Section, on Tuesday, June 27, devoted time to several papers on the general subject of the book, but the highlight of the afternoon, without a doubt, was the Newbery presentation ceremony.

Eager to build anticipation about the award, Melcher had cautioned the committee to keep the winner's name a secret until the award was presented. Melcher, who had accompanied van Loon to Detroit by train, found bands and waving flags on the platform and feared his ruse had not worked. However, the duo quickly (and ruefully) discovered that the commotion was to welcome cartoonist George McManus—not a children's book author!

At the ceremony that afternoon, Melcher spoke first, presenting the medal to Clara Hunt, the section chair, who in turn bestowed it on van Loon. The only record of his acceptance speech states: "Dr. van Loon responded in merry vein" (Miller and Field 1955). On leaving the stage, the three were surrounded by a flurry of reporters and photographers. Van Loon's popularity with adult readers and his name recognition provided a conspicuous debut for the new award.

Before the conference ended the Children's Librarians' Section drew up a resolution expressing gratitude to Melcher for "his generosity which prompted the gift and saw it executed in so beautiful and worthy a fashion" (Smith 1957). The following November, Melcher drafted a full statement of the medal's origins and intent, outlining all aspects of the award, including details about the recipient, the method, the purpose, and the name. It was presented to the ALA Executive Board, which voted to accept Melcher's document on December 27, 1922—making the John Newbery Award official.

As always with a fledgling award, rules and regulations were changed, delineated, and refined in the ensuing years. In 1924, the section concluded that a special award committee, instead of a popular vote, should decide the winner. It would consist of the section's executive committee, the book evaluation committee, and three members at large. That made Charles Finger (*Tales from Silver Lands*, Doubleday, 1924) the first person to be chosen by a committee designed for the purpose of choosing a Newbery Medal winner.

In 1929, the Newbery Committee was enlarged to fifteen: four current officers, the ex-chair, and the chairs of the standing committees. Although nominations were still encouraged, it had become obvious when only 150 suggestions were received the year before that the process worked best as a committee endeavor.

Back in June of 1921 when Melcher first presented his award idea, the librarians' enthusiasm reverberated across the hotel's veranda. According to Clara Hunt, if the award had been decided at that moment, Hugh Lofting's *The Story of Doctor Dolittle* (Frederick A. Stokes, 1920), published that year, would have been named the winner (Smith 1957). In 1923, Lofting *did* win a Newbery—the second medal to be given—for *The Voyages of Doctor Dolittle* (Frederick A. Stokes, 1922).

The Dolittle tales feature an eccentric country doctor with a bent for natural history and a unique ability to talk to animals. In *Voyages*, Doctor Dolittle sails to Spider Monkey Island, where he unites two tribes, becomes king, and sails home inside a 70,000-year-old glass sea snail. Readers praised

Lofting's storytelling talent as well as his natural ability to speak—through Dr. Dolittle—to readers young and old.

Born in England, Lofting had immigrated to the United States, but at the outbreak of World War I, he left his family with relatives in England and joined the Irish Guards. While serving at the front, he became disheartened over the sorry treatment of the horses and mules under fire. In illustrated letters to his children, Lofting invented a doctor who would do for the animals what was not and could not be done in real life. His son became so entranced with the stories that he began calling himself Dr. Dolittle. Injured and sent home, Lofting met author Cecil Roberts (whose novels about New England are still held in high regard) on a transatlantic trip back to America. Upon hearing the stories (and meeting "Dr. Dolittle"), Roberts recommended Lofting to his publisher, Frederick A. Stokes, who published Lofting's books to great acclaim. The extremely popular series grew to fourteen titles, but today children are more familiar with the Dr. Dolittle of the 1967 film (often shown on television) starring Rex Harrison and the 1998 and 2001 films featuring Eddie Murphy.

The third Newbery winner (1924) was Charles Boardman Hawes. *The Dark Frigate* (Little, Brown, 1923), a tale of rugged life on the high seas in which young Philip is forced into joining a pirate crew, was Hawes's third book. Born in New York in 1889, Hawes was the first American-born Newbery winner. He worked as a writer, educator, and editor and had drawn attention as a promising young author: his first writing effort, *The Mutineers* (Little, Brown, 1920), received good reviews, and his second book, *The Great Quest*, was a 1922 Honor Book. Hawes's career, unfortunately, was cut short when he died suddenly at age 34, never knowing *The Dark Frigate* had claimed a Newbery Medal. At the ALA conference in Saratoga Springs, the third John Newbery Award ceremony was a bittersweet affair. Hawes's wife gave a short appreciative speech, then accepted her husband's award to a standing ovation.

Illustrations for Hawes's *The Dark Frigate* have an interesting background. Published with a frontispiece and eight black-and-white illustrations, the book contains only the word "Illustrated" on the title page. Anton Otto Fischer has been credited with the work in many major sources. Close examination of a first edition, however, reveals the name A. L. Ripley on the frontispiece and the initials A.L.R. on all eight line drawings. Ripley did, in fact, illustrate children's books, including Arthur Walden's *Leading a Dog's Life* (Houghton, 1931) and Horacio Quiroga's *South American Jungle Tales* (Dodd, Mead, 1943), leading one to assume that, in a work-for-hire situation, he did the artwork but was not credited.

When Little, Brown reissued *The Dark Frigate* in 1934, they substituted a full-color illustration by Anton Otto Fischer on the frontispiece, dropped the black-and-white line drawings, and gave Fischer credit on the title page. In 1996, the book was again released, this time without a frontispiece but with decorations by Warren Chappell topping each chapter.

The 1925 winner—Charles J. Finger for *Tales from Silver Lands*—is filled with stories of exotic adventures from

the author's own life. In his autobiography, *Seven Horizons* (Doubleday, 1930), Finger recounts the ten amazing years he spent in Tierra del Fuego and Patagonia. Back home in Arkansas, he retold the stories he had heard around the South American campfires to his wife and five children. Later, at his typewriter, those tales of jungle animals, sea creatures, fairy sprites, and earth people that seemed to flow directly from the mouths of the native storytellers became *Tales from Silver Lands*. His wife described him as a "weaver of fairy tales" in a tribute following his death.

A book similar in nature, *Shen of the Sea: A Book for Children* (Dutton, 1925), by Arthur Bowie Chrisman, captured the Newbery the following year. Folk and wonder tales are again at the heart of the book, but here they take on a Chinese flavor. Although he never traveled to China, Chrisman spent many years in California, exploring the state on foot. During his travels he befriended a Chinese shopkeeper who could, Chrisman said, sometimes be persuaded to "put on his talking cap." Through their long conversations, Chrisman became intrigued by Chinese history and literature, and strains of this interest crept into his books and stories.

In *Newbery Medal Books 1922–1955*, Chrisman, a prolific writer, authored the highly laudatory "Book Note" about Will James's *Smoky, the Cowhorse* (Scribner, 1926), the 1927 Newbery Medal winner. Chrisman describes James's surprising relationship with his editor—the renowned Maxwell Perkins, who nursed such luminaries as Thomas Wolfe, Ernest Hemingway, and Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings into print. The elitist Perkins, it seems, treasured the ten-gallon hat given to him by James and found the authentic American vernacular of James's writing highly likable.

Orphaned at age four, James was taken in by a Canadian trapper who "taught him to read and write a little." A cowboy with a quick wit, James was amazed to find *Smoky* winning the Newbery, saying it had been published as a book for adults. "I don't know about that Medal, but it's fine with me." Some librarians criticized the book as too full of "cowboy lingo," saying that boys and girls would never read it. Others (among them undoubtedly the Newbery committee) found it "a bit of poetry in disguise," full of humor, color, and excitement. The story did in fact prove highly popular and continual reprints necessitated new plates in 1955.

Dhan Gopal Mukerji's *Gay-Neck, the Story of a Pigeon* (Dutton, 1927), the 1928 Newbery Medal winner, tells of the training and care of a carrier pigeon. Writing out of his own experiences, Mukerji tells how Gay-Neck's master sent his prized bird to serve in France during World War I to carry messages of courage and hope, eventually welcoming him

home as a hero. Incidents from Mukerji's own boyhood are woven into a theme that proclaims man and winged animals as brothers. Mukerji, the son of Brahmin parents, immigrated to America at age 19, attended Stanford University, married an American, and spent the rest of his life in the United States writing for both adults and children, until his death by suicide in 1936.

The final 1920s Newbery winner was Eric Philbrook Kelly's *The Trumpeter of Krakow: A Tale of the Fifteenth Century* (Macmillan, 1928). While in Europe following World War I, Kelly visited Poland and developed a strong rapport with the Polish people. He returned later to teach and study at the University of Krakow and became motivated to write a story about the city. Its absolute charm and history, he said, led him to set the novel in medieval times. The writing of the book, Kelly said, "launched me into the destiny of a new nation" (Miller and Field 1955). After World War II, asked by the U.S. Department of State to help resettle Polish refugees in Mexico, he founded a refuge for homeless Poles, half of them children, in an abandoned hacienda in León, Mexico. He eventually returned to Dartmouth, where he went on to write other books—but, he said, his intoxication with Krakow never left him.

While the 1920s Newbery Medals were completely male dominated, nine women did capture Honor Book designations during those first years. Most of those titles are little known and long out of print, with the notable exception of Wanda Gág's *Millions of Cats* (Coward, 1928), which received a Newbery Honor in 1929 and has been continuously in print since its publication.

Studying these early Newbery Medal and Honor Book authors—who they were, what they wrote, what influenced their writing—is absorbing and revealing. These twenty-one men and women set the stage for the decades to follow, where winners selected from ever-growing choices of books stand proudly, having been proclaimed "distinguished" for their literary merit.

SOURCES

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