Tammi Dawn Simpson, 12.1 Final Paper

"What is commonly called *literary history* is actually a record of choices."
--Louise Bernikow

From the books we *choose* to include in our personal libraries, to the books we *choose* to fill the shelves of our classrooms, to the books we *choose* to include in school curriculums, to the books we *choose* as award winners, to the books we *choose* to embrace as classics, it is easy to conclude how "choice" is the driving force behind each of these; none of them happen according to chance and none of them just simply become. In this class, we have looked at several defining factors of choice and how those factors work to shape not only who we are, but also the literature we read and the literature we encourage others to read; these factors are not only based on our own personal histories and experiences, but they encompass differences in class, as well as gender, age, race and culture; they also include the time period in which we live, societal issues and changes as well as our surrounding geography. With all of these factors playing a role in the choices that we make, we can conclude that our literary history has also been shaped by these factors.

Although every member of our class may agree that a book such as Shel Silverstein's *Where the Sidewalk Ends*, is a "good" book (and even this may be debated by some), it was not embraced by every member to be the "best" book read in their childhood. Instead, the "best" books were chosen through the inspirations of something personal—our likes and dislikes coupled with all of the factors mentioned above—and they touched something within us that connected us emotionally to the characters, the plot, or the issues addressed in the book. Trying to conclude that one book was "best" out of our compiled list would have proven impossible because of how passionately we hold to that which is personal to us. Of course those with the most articulated speech or the most dominate voices may have been able to sway a final conclusion that we all agreed to accept over time, but within ourselves, we would hold to what we believe to be true and to the literature we believe to be "best". What I can see from this small example is that choices, although they begin as individual and subjective, can become influential and dominant (or they can be influenced and dominated) when we begin to make corporate decisions that affect the whole of societies—schools, communities, churches, organizations, etc. Although we cannot divorce ourselves from that which is personal to us, we must at times broaden our view to look at other critical aspects of literature; this was one of the most difficult tasks for me when I began to really reflect on children's literature awards and how and why they are chosen. As the criteria for choosing the awards remains very vague and indefinite in regards to the vocabulary and terminology used to define them, the choice of winners appears to be subjective. We do not all possess the expertise to spot literary greatness as it pertains to a book's merit, or quality, or distinguishing characteristics. Much of the controversy seems to arise because of the lack of understanding in this area and because as readers we hold an expectation that a book can only be good if we can connect to it somehow on a personal level. I learned when reading Marcia Brown's book, *Shadow*, that this is not always the case. This book was odd for me as a children's book; I did not enjoy it nor did I relate to it in any way, but I was challenged to find its value beyond my own insights and came to an understanding of its award winning qualities and its cultural worth.

Through first looking at the processes, criteria and factors of how each person in our class chose the "best" book from their childhood, I was able to gain a better perspective in how the awards committees choose the "best" books for the year in their specific category. Although on an individual basis these choices tend to be strictly personal, the awards committees are chosen for their expertise and abilities to look beyond how a book speaks to them personally and to see how books speak to races and communities and cultures. They also are subject to a process—one that is stricter, more focused and more guided. For example, with the Newbery Award the books are nominated, justified and then discussed by the committee members. Each nomination must be in accordance with the guidelines or the criteria set up for that particular award. I noticed that the criteria keeps them focused on a central purpose for what they desire in the winning book for that year, but the personal "factors" influencing each individual committee members choices add range of meaning to their understanding of the criteria which not only complicates choosing a winner, but it also complicates acceptance of the winner by critics and readers.

As I already indicated, it would not have been possible to have our entire class agree on one "best" book; likewise, it would be just as impossible to have a consensus regarding the "best" work of children's literature for the year. All literature is not written to reach all humanity all the time. I found that there are critics who appear to want this to be the case. However, the failure is not when one work of children's literature neglects to reach all audiences of children; the failure is when there are audiences—age groups, interest groups, classes, genders, intelligence levels, cultures, religions, etc.—that these winners consistently neglect to reach. As a result of the growing number of children's literature awards available in this present age, varieties of types are more easily promoted. The issue now is making these awards more widely known so that this variety can be appreciated. The Newbery Award is the primary focus of the children's literature world and it simply encompasses too large of a spectrum to allow for all types of literature to be represented throughout the years; this is one difficulty that seems to be a stumbling block for me and for many of the Newbery's critics. For many, the winners chosen by the awards committees are merely suggestive of quality literature, but for the world of children's literature, the choices act as a permanent mark of the times. They embrace the understanding of history during certain eras; they capture the beauty of the language and the vocabulary of that particular time; they reflect the tolerance (or intolerance) of societal issues during the time period written; they tell hidden stories of history. These winning books, and others by the same authors or illustrators, are the ones being held up in the public eye and are embraced by libraries and book stores, and are promoted by publishers and the media. The choices that are made regarding which books win these awards actually become crucial to the story that is preserved and passed on.

Most importantly, the award winning books are there to point out quality literature, but if they are not being embraced by the children or if the children are not even reading them, then the influence of these books is limited; they remain permanent markings of the times, but they fail to inspire the times. The history of award winners gives an overview of which books of children's literature were chosen for them, but the most influential books of children's literature are the ones children choose for themselves. This thought shows how important adult (parents, educators, role models, leaders) influence is in guiding what our children read. When I say we must be part of guiding them, I in no way mean that we should control their

reading, but that through a more mature understanding of literature and through a desire to keep history alive and to keep the voices of cultures, ideas, morals, instruction and creativity from being neglected we should enable them to not only have access to a greater variety of books, but we should also encourage them to be enthusiastic about choosing these books for themselves. Many times this is stimulated by instruction and using supplemental material to draw connections. Dr. Laura Apol brought up a significant point in her journal for week six. She encouraged me to think critically about how "training and experience count for something"; this "training" and "experience" is needed in order to allow children to appreciate literature for something more than mere entertainment. Children's literature can be rich for so many other aspects; children as well as many adults need guidance in understanding its many faces. Awards help in this area; they pinpoint books of quality, books that teach culture and history, books that compel a child's imagination and inventiveness, books that capture the beauty of language or art, books that teach values and morals and books that inspire greatness and change. I battled back and forth whether the awards were beneficial or detrimental. The arguments ranged from John Beach's comment in Valerie Strauss's article "The Newbery May Dampen Kid's Reading" where he states "The Newbery has probably done far more to turn kids off to reading than any other book award in children's publishing," to Stewart's comments to our class emphasizing that it is primarily about the money that is made by the publishers, to how political the entire process is, to looking at the awards initial purpose of elevating the quality of children's literature and of raising the bar for excellence in literature by promoting "distinguished" books, to my final conclusions, inspired by Dr. Apol's comments, that although there are some glitches in the process (and although it is political), there are also exceeding benefits that if used properly can provide excellent literature for children to read and reflect on. These awards raise the bar for what books children are reading. Granted, there were some I could do without including them on my list of "must reads" for me or my children, but the more award books I began to read, the more impressed I become with the award's ability to promote a higher level of literature than many of the books children choose for themselves. I am all for pushing children to excel to reach their potential and beyond, and the children's awards we researched in our class appear to me to have a similar agenda.

Encouraging young readers to reach beyond their potential is not always easy, for as readers we tend to continually engross ourselves in what is familiar or comfortable. I would not have been drawn to *Magic Windows/ Ventanas magicas*, by Carmen Lomas Garza if it had not been for the purpose of the assignment which was to choose books from different awards and for the fact it was pointed out to me by the librarian, and even then I was skeptical because of its unattractive cover (which became quite captivating once I understood the meaning behind it). I thoroughly enjoyed Garza's book. My daughter was also fascinated with each page and the stories behind the pages. We both learned a great deal about Mexican history and culture and Garza did it in such a fun and interesting way that made the learning effortless and memorable. Through Garza's book, I was reminded that this tendency to stick to what we are familiar with hinders us at times from being included in the great conversation of choices that make up literary history. Literature has been made diverse through the diversity of personal choices and it is this diversity that teaches us so much about the world in which we live. Since taking this class, I am more passionate than ever that students should be informed of the many choices that others have made and that other's choices are valuable treasures in broadening their

thinking and understanding and in helping them make choices of their own. It is important that we not only teach students to look at literature through their own perspectives, but we must also teach them to look at it through the perspectives of others; reflecting not just on themselves, but on the lives of others; caring not just about what is important to them, but also about what is important to others.

Similar to how looking at an individual's literary choices teaches us something about the individual and how looking at the literature chosen by certain school curriculums teaches us something about the school and its surrounding area, so the literature we embrace and see embraced as classics teaches us something about the world in which we live. Literature, in this sense, is a very powerful force; it not only shapes us, but it also defines us. *Little Women* is a prime example of this force; it defines the time period in which it was written in regards to certain societal and moral issues and it continues to be the source of some friction between the roles of women in 1868 and 1869 when it was first published and how the views of those roles have changed through the feminist movement in the twentieth century to the present time. For this reason, classics seem to be at a disadvantage. They remain unchanged in a rapidly changing world. However, there remains something profound about them that keeps attracting readers. *Little Women* is attractive for its moral goodness, its authenticity and realness, and its development of characters in a way that draws a connection. *Peter Pan* is attractive for its beauty of language, its appeal to the reader's imagination, and its wittiness and depth. However, these are merely my own reasons of attraction to these classics. Others may only find them significant for their historical value or because they raise controversies that have been stimulated by changing views and ideals. Whatever the attraction may be, these books have made their way into the common language of societies, races, genders, etc. and they remain there because of people's choices.

Through all the conversations we had as a class and in our groups, through seeing what my classmates chose as "best" books and what they chose as "classics" and through reading the different scholarships of classics, it is apparent that choices vary from person to person as well as from generation to generation. It also became apparent that choices of literature vary among cultures and religions and social classes. Since choices vary so greatly and change so rapidly, it seems safe to say that the literature we embrace as classics today may differ greatly from those fifty years ago and from those fifty years from now, but it may also differ greatly from those living in the United States and those living in Taiwan or from those living in the next town who enjoy significant social advantages or from the family next door who chooses literature based on their religious beliefs. Choosing classics is, as Dr. Apol stated in the unit 8 journal, "**systemic** and **social** and **contextual**." Trying to come up with a universal set of criteria is virtually impossible, but they are classics because they have significance beyond merely being included in a personal list of "best" books.

Finally, by participating in the Literary Discussion Group at the conclusion of our class, we took a serious look at specific literature that was chosen for its award winning qualities (Natalie Babbitt's *Tuck Everlasting*) and for its ability to captivate readers from generation to generation (J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*). The discussion group required that we make choices about the chosen literature, dissecting each aspect of the book to access its worth textually and pedagogically and reflecting on the books ability to connect us emotionally to the themes and issues addressed in the text as well as connect us emotionally to each other in our groups. By

participating in this type of discussion, I felt as though I was literally making a personal decision, based on the choices already made by others, to include Babbitt's book as well as Barrie's book in my personal library of literature. I discovered that although I enjoyed *Tuck Everlasting* when reading it first, it was quickly overshadowed by *Peter Pan*. This gave me quite a clue to one of the most important criterion of a classic; they simply outshine other books that we read. Of course, there are various aspects that make them outshine other books, but the fact remains that they possess something great within themselves (something implanted by the genius of the author or illustrator) that cause them to stand taller than the rest. Watching myself make these choices throughout the whole of this class gave me greater understanding to how these choices are made across time and cultures and it brings clarity to the idea that the whole of *literary history* can only be described as "a record of choices"; there remains too much diversity for it to be anything more concrete than this.

Bernikow's quote seems to sum up much of what I believe we were meant to discover by taking this class. We first began by looking at how we made our own choices concerning "good" literature; these choices were personal (chosen by us and for us) and nobody could refute the choices we made or deny us the privilege of choosing what we did. We then moved on to awards which focused our attention on how choices concerning "quality" literature are made by others (we hope by experienced committee members) and the public effect of those choices on the world of children's literature. Choices made for us by others will never be without conflict or disagreement or friction at times; they will not be unanimously accepted or wholeheartedly embraced by all people at all times. However, I have learned that if we embrace their choices not as ones that we must agree with, but rather as ones that enlarge and enlighten our own opportunity for making a more informed personal choice and for providing the same opportunity for young readers, then we can see the selected winners as embellishments to our own choices of literature rather than hindrances or limitations of our choices. Finally, we ended with the classics—books that grew out of personal choices to such an overwhelming degree that they became public choices and the public choice has remained so strong that they are continually thrust upon us in order that we make a personal choice about them. As society changes so does our insight and understanding of these classics and therefore so does our choices regarding their personal value. However, because of their historical values to the world of literature, they are not quickly or easily dismissed. Books such as Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* can forever teach young girls something about themselves—who they are and who they want to become—whether they agree with Alcott's conclusions for Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy or not.

Although we cannot debate the facts of our literary history—where it began, how it began, the different styles—there remains an obvious debate that will persist as changes persist concerning what literature is regarded as "best". As the world continues to change, so too will the people change and as the people continue to change, so too will the literature change that we choose as impacting and influential, but that which is already a component of *literary history* will always remain as an important piece marking where we have been and what we have become.