Challenges Then and Now

A Survey of Protagonists in Newbery Award Books, 1950s and 1990s

Jonathan Lathey

Sheila Egoff identified the 1950s as a Second Golden Age of children's literature, an optimistic time that might be symbolized by the image of a garden. Literature for children promoted safe survivors who were supported by caring but unobtrusive adults. In subsequent decades, advocates of New Realism challenged this middle-class view of childhood (and parenting) in favor of greater candor about the problems that faced young readers. The perfect-parent syndrome was broken.

I suggest that survival in this world of new realities demands a more extroverted approach to the world. To that end, I compare the personal attributes, stressors, and resources available to protagonists in Newbery Medal winners from the 1950s and the 1990s.

Protagonists in children's literature from the 1990s were under greater stress and less well resourced compared to protagonists from the 1950s. They showed remarkable resilience as they coped with an unreliable world, where themes of abandonment were common. Their survival depended upon flexibility, sociability, and expressiveness. However, traits that were adaptive in an earlier generation were pushed aside, along with a love of solitude. Compared to their counterparts of the 1950s, the young protagonists of the late twentieth century expected a world of activity, feeling, and self-expression—a world where a garden and its protective wall might feel too confining, quiet, and lonely.

In her 1978 Arbuthnot lecture, Egoff lamented the loss of a middle class, and a rather Victorian view of children, which had dominated children's literature in the early decades of the twentieth century.[1] For Egoff the literature of the 1950s reflected an optimistic view of childhood. Great writers in the traditional style of that time included E. B. White, Scott O'Dell, and Eleanor Estes. The garden and the garden wall represented a reliable and hopeful world, where families protected and nourished their children. In those good old days, books for children often displayed a warmth of feeling between children and those adults who respected their play—parents were in the background but "nonetheless were there and always ready to offer support."[2]

The psychologist Mary Pipher also recalled the 1950s as a time when children enjoyed "protected spaces."[3] By contrast, at the end of the twentieth century it was evident that young people were less protected. For example, adolescent girls experienced intensified pressures as they confronted issues ranging from eating disorders to sexually transmitted diseases. At the same time parents were often tired and overworked, and the family was "under siege."[4] In this article, I seek to understand the implications of our changed world as reflected in children's literature.

For the first half of the twentieth century, adjustment to social demands was the ideal, and a passion for personal achievement and status characterized the well-adjusted child.[5] This view of childhood, the downfall of which was anticipated in *A Separate Peace* by John Knowles, disappeared almost overnight.[6]

By the late 1960s, a more permissive and disputatious society began to welcome greater openness and candor in children's literature. The New Realism presented a more vivid imagery of gritty realities and uncertain outcomes that reflected a basic (countercultural) shift in our society.[7] This literature included characters from lower-class homes, and it no longer promoted models of middle-class behavior.[8] A new genre—the problem book—presented the grim details of life. For example, in *The Pigman* by Paul Zindel, tenth-grader John Conlan shares with the reader his opinion that the reading assigned in his school—*Johnny Tremain*, *Giants of the Earth*, and *Macbeth*—was garbage. He does not want to be like any of the adults he has ever known, including the school librarian, who he nicknames the Cricket.[9]

Jonathan Lathey *is a retired school psychologist. For several years, he worked for Cooperstown Central School in New York. Since 2000, he has been the adjunct reference librarian at the Standish Library at Siena College in Loudonville, New York.*

Egoff recalled a previous generation when protagonists were "safe survivors" who found happy endings in an exciting world.[10] In stories inspired by the New Realism, however, protagonists became "dangerous survivors" in a world where they must face disaster as if "walking a tightrope."[11] A recent letter to the editor in *The Horn Book Magazine* expressed a sense of "malaise" over the formula used for books published for children today.[12] Sandra Dutton described the formula as follows: "Put your main character in a pot of hot water. Turn up the heat. Turn it up some more. Put the lid on. Let her fight her way out."[13]

It appears that images of danger and stress have forever replaced the image of the garden as symbolic of children's literature. Has our view of childhood, in fact, changed in response to a more open and permissive society? What personal attributes appear to be adaptive in this environment? I examined twenty Newbery Medal winners of the 1950s with those from the 1990s in search of pertinent information. The comments of book reviewers that appeared in *Book Review Digest* were consulted for further insight into these works.

Table 1. Major childhood stressors faced by protagonists in select Newbery Medal Winners

Year	Title/Author	Stressor
2001	*A Year Down Yonder* by Richard Peck	Change in residence
2000	*Bud, Not Buddy* by Christopher Paul Curtis	Death; abandonment
1999	*Holes* by Louis Sachar	Incarceration
1998	*Out of the Dust* by Karen Hesse	Death of a parent
1997	*The View from Saturday* by E. L. Konigsburg	No major stressor noted
1996	*The Midwife's Apprentice* by Karen Cushman	Abandonment
1995	*Walk Two Moons* by Sharon Creech	Abandonment
1994	*The Giver* by Lois Lowry	Death
1992	*Shiloh* by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor	Abuse (favorite pet)
1990	*Number the Stars* by Lois Lowry	War
1961	*Island of the Blue Dolphins* by Scott O'Dell	Death of parents, sibling
1960	*Onion John* by Joseph Krumgold	No major stressor noted
1959	*The Witch of Blackbird Pond* by Elizabeth Speare	Change in residence
1958	*Rifles for Watie* by Harold Keith	War
1956	*Carry On, Mr. Bowditch* by Jean Lee Latham	Death of a parent, sibling
1955	*The Wheel on the School* by Meindert DeJong	No major stressor noted
1954	*And Now Miguel* by Joseph Krumgold	No major stressor noted
1952	*Ginger Pye* by Eleanor Estes	No major stressor noted
1951	*Amos Fortune, Free Man* by Elizabeth Yates	Incarceration (slavery)
1950	*The Door in the Wall* by Marguerite de Angeli	Serious illness (self)

Table 2. Resources available to protagonists in Newbery Medal Winners from the 1990s

Year	Protagonist/Age	Individual Resources	Family Resources	Social Environment
2001	Mary Alice, 15	Sense of humor	Caring adult	Supportive
2000	Bud, 10	Flexibility	Belief in child	Supportive
1999	Stanley	Fortitude	Parental warmth	Supportive peers
1998	Billie Jo, 13	Language skills	Talent	Academic success
1997	Julian Singh	Conviction	Warmth	Material resources
1996	Alyce, 12	Tenacity	Talent	Teacher influence
1995	Salamanca, 13	Responsiveness	Caring Adult	Supportive peers
1994	Jonas, 11	Hopefulness	Cohesion	Teacher influence
1992	Marty, 11	Enduring values	Assistance	Supportive
1990	Annemarie, 10	Attachment to others	Cohesion	Material resources

I also used a list of major childhood stressors to help identify sources of stress in the lives of the main protagonists in these twenty stories (see table 1).[14] Major stressors include death; serious illness; such parental issues as divorce, remarriage, and alcohol abuse; and other extraordinary trauma such as war.

Additionally, I used a comprehensive list of factors associated with adolescent resilience to help identify resources available to the main protagonist in each of the books (see tables 2 and 3).[15] The list includes resources at the individual level, family level, and social environment level. Olsson and his colleagues assumed that when young people are well resourced at these levels, they are more resilient, and therefore better able to cope with adversity.[16] I selected one salient personal attribute (tables 2 and 3) to describe each protagonist. Newbery protagonists are, of course, not flimsy characters, and several personal attributes could be selected to more fully describe a given protagonist.

Table 1 presents the major childhood stressors that confronted the protagonists. Major stressors were evident in 60 percent of the stories from the 1950s, compared to 90 percent in stories from the 1990s. Death, change in residence, and war were common to both eras. However, the 1990s included stories with a theme of parental abandonment. This theme, which emerged in children's literature in 1980s, may reflect the increasing rate at which parents abandon traditional roles as protectors, so as to explore their own needs and interests outside the family.[17] Marilyn Fain Apseloff suggested that abandonment is particularly "unnerving" because it implies that "the missing parent did not care enough about the child to stay."[18] Thus, the "perfect-parent syndrome" has been broken.[19]

Protagonists in the 1950s era appear well-resourced at the family and social environment levels (see table 3). Each family portrayed in these stories includes a father with an occupation or title. This may reflect the relative peace and prosperity of the 1950s, when the middle class was growing and the nuclear family was the norm. Susan Faludi observed that this was a good time to be a young (white) boy, because fathers were busy building Little League baseball fields all across America.[20] Whereas supportive families and happy outcomes were almost assumed in the 1950s, the Newbery Medal winners of the 1990s reflect changes in the family, most notably with respect to the resources available to children.

Themes of abandonment play a prominent role in thirty percent of these stories. For example, Salamanca in Sharon Creech's *Walk Two Moons* is depressed after her mother leaves their home in

Ohio one April morning. Her father seems to lack strength and is at times merely "playing the role of father."[21] One reviewer described her story as an "emotional journey" through the grieving process.[22]

On the other hand, three other stories from the 1990s presented protagonists who were dependent upon family-based resources for direction. Annemarie in Lois Lowry's *Number the Stars* is a member of a Danish family that helped resist Nazi occupation in 1943. There is little Annemarie can do but contemplate the possibility of human decency in a world that is "too cold, too big, and too cruel."[23] Mary Alice is dependent upon her grandmother in *A Year Down Yonder* for entertainment, and Marty in *Shiloh* needs the assistance of his parents in achieving moral clarity.

Without the garden wall to protect them, it appears that children are vulnerable to the extremes—too much exposure (parental abandonment) on the one hand, and too much protection (anxious over-involvement) on the other. Apropos, consider Lowry's 1994 Newbery acceptance speech for *The Giver*, which reveals a loss of security in the world.[24] Lowry recalled how as an eleven-year-old girl in 1948, she rode her bicycle alone and without her parents' knowledge "countless times" into a Tokyo neighborhood. Her curiosity about the Japanese culture after World War II motivated this adventure, and she was unafraid to venture out from the American enclave, where she lived with her family.

Contrast this with her depiction of eleven-year-old Jonas in the opening chapter of *The Giver*, a boy who is alone and feels frightened and anxious, his stomach churning. That evening at the so-called "telling of feelings," he shared with his parents his feelings of fear and apprehension. On almost every page there is another synonym for anxiety. The closing chapter shows Jonas escaping from this regulated society, hoping to recover the colors, and the other rich sights and sounds (the garden) Lowry enjoyed as a child.

What happened to the well-behaved and well-adjusted child and the safe and reliable world of the 1950s? Knowles explored the conflict between the well-behaved and studious Gene Forrester and his friend, the more expressive and politically outspoken Phineas.[25] Literary critic Robert M. Nelson suggested that Gene's struggle was between the "cautious Protestant" side of his adolescent personality and the more impulsive "germ of wildness" side.[26] *A Separate Peace* was published in 1959. The following year, Richard M. Nixon, a cautious Protestant (a Quaker), was defeated in the presidential election by the more outgoing and vigorous Catholic John F. Kennedy. The choice was between caution and vigor. Individuals rejected the cautious Protestant, who dominated the 1950s, in favor of the expressive extravert: someone who preferred responsiveness and altruism; someone who had a need to join and a capacity "to enjoy bustle and noise of every kind."[27]

The culture of the late 1960s welcomed a more expressive child. In *Tinker v. Des Moines* in 1969, the United States Supreme Court upheld the freedom of expression of adolescents. The majority on the court supported the young plaintiffs who wore black armbands to school to protest the war in Vietnam and agreed that vigorous and open debate of ideas in the classroom would best prepare young people to live in our "relatively permissive, often disputatious, society."[28] This decision is consistent with children's librarians who subscribe to a "non-protectionist" view of the child; their professional canon endorses a belief in young readers as strong and resilient decision-makers.[29] The Tinker decision gave aid and comfort to advocates of the New Realism, which was coming into vogue at the time. We encouraged our young citizens to think for themselves, to explore the world, and to express openly their feelings and opinions. Needless to say, this new freedom of expression, endorsed by the Supreme Court, alerted young people to the possibility of great opportunities.

Sociability, flexibility, and expressiveness have emerged in response to these new opportunities. Along the way, these personal attributes may have pushed aside traits valued in earlier generations: introspection, goal orientation, and modesty. With each of these attributes are associated opportunities and risk.

It is not surprising that the young protagonist of the 1990s appears more sociable, outgoing, and comfortable working in a group. In the early 1970s, educational reformers began promoting the benefits of cooperative learning in the classroom, an approach that fit with a noncompetitive and egalitarian approach to education. As the authority of the classroom teacher declined in the 1960s, children began to look to each other for direction and support.[30] Flexibility is also essential for survival in a world that is unsafe and unreliable. The sociologist James Coleman recalled a time (before the 1960s) when "functional communities," communities where norms, sanctions, and rewards were widely shared by

Table 3. Resources available to protagonists in Newbery Medal Winners from the 1950s

Year	Protagonist/Age	Individual Resources	Family Resources	Social Environment
1961	Karana, 12	Tenacity	Tenacity	Provisions to assist
1960	Andy, 12	Responsiveness	Encouragement	Supportive
1959	Kit, 16	Balanced perspective	Caring Adult	Supportive peers
1958	Jeff, 16	Fortitude	Encouragement	Material resources
1956	Nat	Conviction	Marital support	Supportive
1955	Lina	Resolve	Assistance	Teacher influence
1954	Miguel, 12	Attachment to others	Cohesion	Supportive
1952	Rachel, 9	Sense of humor	Warmth	Supportive
1951	Amos	Enduring values	Talent valued	Teacher influence
1950	Robin, 10	Responsiveness	Assistance	Material resources

parents and educators, provided a sense of order in the world.[31] By the end of the twentieth century, rapid social and technological change demanded that children (and adults) adopt a more flexible approach to life.

The Newbery Medal winners of the 1990s presented stories of endurance and emotional survival, where flexibility, sociability, and expressiveness are adaptive. For example, Bud of *Bud, Not Buddy* and Stanley of *Holes* are both sociable and flexible in their approach to the world. They size up their social environment, and they think on their feet. Bud is particularly expressive in his formulation of rules for survival on the hard road home to his (or Stanley's) family.

In his 2002 Arbuthnot lecture, Philip Pullman suggested that the children's author has a responsibility to write an emotionally honest work, whose aim—in the words of Dr. Samuel Johnson—is "to enable the reader to enjoy life, or better to endure it."[32]

Salamanca of *Walk Two Moons* and Billie Jo of *Out of the Dust*, both 13, ponder the loss of their mothers. At the outset of her story, Salamanca doubts she will survive her emotional journey. At the end of Billie Jo's story, she expresses her bitterness in her poetry. Francesca Lia Block once observed that in a world without adult direction the young person, like her character Weetzie Bat, can rely on art and love. Billie Jo is thus sustained by her artistic writing and her love for fellow musician Mad Dog Craddock. Storytelling allows both Salamanca and Billie Jo to cope with their grief.

Of course, some realities are almost too difficult to endure. The reader winces at the image of the discipline wand in *The Giver*, which is applied both to the very young and the very old for misbehavior.

Thus, stories of endurance, survival, and escape dominated the Newbery winners of the 1990s era. By contrast, sixth-graders portrayed in *A View from Saturday* are well-traveled (well-resourced) and enjoy themselves as they celebrate learning and knowledge. Their tea parties outside of school provide the time and space needed to refine ideas and coordinate answers in preparation for a state academic championship. They are comfortable around adults, and it comes as no surprise that young Julian Singh might confront the New York State Commissioner of Education as to the correctness of his answer in that state championship. For these fortunate young people their version of a Victorian tea party provides the benefits of an inclusive and multicultural garden—one suited to contemporary realities.

Expression of feeling is evident in the young protagonists of the late twentieth century. Pullman suggested that we live in "an age that values feeling very highly."[33] Protagonists experienced and found ways to cope with the stress and the pressures associated with what Pipher called our "dangerous culture."[34] Themes of abandonment replaced earlier themes of tolerance and self-restraint more common in the books of the 1950s. Consider the 1951 Newbery winner, *Amos Fortune: Free Man*, a biography that told the story of Amos Fortune, a tanner and a former slave, who once quietly accepted the indignity when a customer threw coins on the floor of a tavern in payment for his tanning. He later donates funds to his New Hampshire village to provide money for local education in the hope that education (and religion) could make people more decent.

To conclude, by the end of the twentieth century Newbery Medal winners portrayed young protagonists "bypassing adults completely" as they strive to achieve independence and self-reliance.[35] Where have the resources gone—adults and otherwise? Water, for example, used to be a plentiful natural resource, and Kit of *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* and Karana of *Island of the Blue Dolphins* are strong swimmers. Now imagery from the Texas desert (*Holes*) and the dust bowl of the 1930s (*Out of the Dust*) evoke feelings of deprivation and uncertainty. It is no wonder that young protagonists in the contemporary environment might look to each other for support. Protagonists of the 1990s appear resilient, as they cope with adversity, even when resources from the family are scarce. It is less clear that they are self-reliant, which according to Ralph Waldo Emerson is rooted in reflection and the inner life.[36] Perhaps solitude is the casualty of our contemporary world. Billie Jo of 1998's *Out of the Dust* acknowledges that she is "terrified of being alone."[37] In an earlier generation, Kit contemplates how much she enjoys the meadows near her home: "If only I could be here alone."[38] Miguel of 1954's *And Now Miguel* also is comfortable with solitude: "The best part of it was going off by myself to bring home the sheep."[39] Compared to their counterparts of the 1950s, the young protagonists of the late twentieth century operate in a world of action, feeling, and expression. In this exciting world of new realities, a garden and its protective wall might feel too confining, quiet, and lonely for comfort.

What are the implications for librarians who work with children? At the turn of the century, Michael Gorman looked to old realities for direction, as he pondered our increasingly complex society. He identified seven enduring values in librarianship, which included the library as place.[40] The library is a place that embodies learning and culture—a safe space "free from the distractions of everyday life," where readers can find assistance with their studies.[41] Gorman suggested that children's libraries should be "bright, welcoming, comfortable human spaces."[42]

Ophelia and her friends might find here the kind of "protected space" that Pipher feels our culture is missing.[43] Service as a value also endures. Gorman would admire the devotion to service (and resourcefulness) of the librarian portrayed in *Bud, Not Buddy*. Miss Hill, a librarian who had worked at the public library in Flint, Michigan, during the Great Depression, establishes a trusting relationship with the protagonist, a young boy otherwise eager to express his skepticism about adults and the institutions of society. &

References

1. Sheila A. Egoff, "Beyond the Garden Wall: Some Observations on Current Trends in Children's Literature," *Top of the News* 35 (June 1979): 258–71.
2. Ibid., 260.

3. Mary Pipher, *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (New York: Ballantine, 1994), 236.
4. Ibid., 80.
5. Jerome Kagan, *The Nature of the Child* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).
6. John Knowles, *A Separate Peace* (New York: Macmillan, 1959).
7. Robert Burch, "The New Realism," *The Horn Book Magazine* 47 (1971): 257–64.
8. Alleen Pace Nilsen and Ken Donelson, "The New Realism Comes of Age," *Journal of Youth Services in Libraries* 1 (1988): 275–82.
9. Paul Zindel, *The Pigman* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968).
10. Egoff, "Beyond the Garden Wall," 266.
11. Ibid., 267.
12. Sandra Dutton, "Letters to the Editor," *The Horn Book Magazine* 80 (Sept./Oct. 2004): 499.
13. Ibid.
14. L. Eugene Arnold, *Childhood Stress* (New York: Wiley, 1991).
15. Craig Olsson et al., "Adolescent Resilience: A Concept Analysis," *Journal of Adolescence* 26 (2003): 1–11.
16. Ibid.
17. Marilyn Fain Apseloff, "Abandonment: The New Realism of the Eighties," in *Only Connect: Readings on Children's Literature,* ed. Sheila A. Egoff et al. (Toronto: Oxford Univ. Pr., 1996), 359–64.
18. Ibid., 61.
19. Rebecca J. Lukens, *A Critical Handbook of Children's Literature,* 7th ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2003), 141.
20. Susan Faludi, *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man* (New York: Morrow, 1999).
21. Sharon Creech, *Walk Two Moons* (New York: Scholastic, 1994), 31.
22. Connie Tyrel Burns, "Review," *School Library Journal* 40 (Oct. 1994): 142.
23. Lois Lowry, *Number the Stars* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989), 87.
24. Lois Lowry, "1994 Newbery Acceptance Speech," in *The Newbery & Caldecott Medal Books 1986–2000: A Comprehensive Guide to the Winners* (Chicago: ALA, 2001), 209–16.
25. Knowles, *A Separate Peace*.
26. Robert M. Nelson, "John Knowles," in *American Novelists Since World War II: Second Series,* ed. J. E. Kibler, Jr. (Detroit: Gale, 1980), 169.
27. Carl G. Jung, *Psychological Types* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Pr., 1971), 549.
28. Frank R. Kemerer and Kenneth L. Deutsch, *Constitutional Rights and Student Life: Value Conflict in Law and Education* (St. Paul: West Publishing, 1979), 115.
29. Betsy Hearne and Christine Jenkins, "Sacred Texts: What Our Foremothers Left Us in the Way of Psalms, Proverbs, Precepts, and Practices." *The Horn Book Magazine* 75 (Sept./Oct. 1999): 533.
30. Diane Ravitch, *The Troubled Crusade: American Education, 1945–1980* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).
31. James S. Coleman and Thomas Hoffer, *Public and Private High Schools* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), 6.
32. Philip Pullman, "The 2002 May Hill Arbuthnot Honor Lecture," *Journal of Youth Services in Libraries* 15 (Summer 2002): 38.
33. Ibid., 39.
34. Pipher, *Reviving Ophelia*, 12.
35. Kathleen T. Horning, "Newbery Medal Books 1986–2000," in *The Newbery & Caldecott Medal Books 1986–2000* (Chicago: ALA, 2001), 24.
36. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Pr., 1979).
37. Karen Hesse, *Out of the Dust* (New York: Scholastic, 1997), 76.
38. Elizabeth George Speare, *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958), 63.
39. Joseph Krumgold, *And Now Miguel* (New York: Harper, 1953), 87.
40. Michael Gorman, *Our Enduring Values: Librarianship in the 21st Century* (Chicago: ALA, 2000).
41. Ibid., 46.
42. Ibid., 55.
43. Pipher, *Reviving Ophelia*, 266.

Copyright of Children & Libraries: The Journal of the Association for Library Service to Children is the property of American Library Association and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.