



# Give Us a Voice, We'll Give You Newbery!

## TEENS BECOME NEWBERY REVIEWERS

Almost everyone has heard of the Newbery Awards, but few people know that the prestigious committee that names them has dozens of devoted young imitators. As Library Resource Center Director of Kennedy Junior High School, Paulette Goodman was perusing the catalogs of the American Library Association when her interest was piqued by an ad for *The Newbery & Caldecott Mock Election Kit* (Staerkel, Hackett, and Callaghan 1994). It was 1993, and Kennedy Junior High School was filled with eager young adult readers who spent endless hours scavenging the library shelves for new books. Investing in the kit initiated a chain of events that took place over the next twelve years, surprising even Paulette and catching the attention of NPR (National Public Radio) in January 2005. The Mock Newbery Election became a reading adventure that grew from a single junior high school to a citywide event and then a statewide event, eventually expanding to occur in numerous schools across the country.

### Once Upon a Time

Knowing that selecting even Mock Newbery books could prove to be a burdensome process, teachers enlisted the assistance of the



By Paulette Goodman,

Jill Brooks,



and Jane Hester



staff of Anderson's Bookshop in Naperville. Jill Brooks, children's book consultant at Anderson's, provided us with a list of titles that the Anderson's staff had already read and recommended as excellent selections. Thirty-five students traveled to Anderson's to view and choose 25 books from a selection of approximately 50 deemed potential Newbery winners. This group of books, modified by input from Jane

students would read not hundreds of books but a small, quality selection of Newbery contenders. And rather than evaluate books according to personal appeal, students would need to critique them by assessing excellence in writing style and potential reception by students in grades 3-8. Our goal was to accomplish this task prior to the actual Newbery Awards announcements in midwinter.

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Hester and Paulette Goodman, made up the first Mock Newbery contenders list.

A targeted young adult audience of 35 students taught by Jane Hester, a gifted instructor at Kennedy Junior High School, was chosen with careful attention to their reading abilities and willingness to participate in the arduous task of reading critically 25 books. We determined that a four-month period would be necessary for the students to read and critique all the books and narrow their selections down to a top five. Our initial group of young adults gathered for the first time at a meeting in the fall of 1993, where they listened and took copious notes about the history and process of electing a Newbery book. Students took immediate interest in the 25 books that were presented to them, but none of us at that point had any idea of the time, effort, and passionate debate that would attend each book discussion. In endeavoring to mimic the actual Newbery Committee, an outstanding group of reviewers for the American Library Association,

### Choices, Choices, Choices

Currently, Jill Brooks and Anderson's Bookshop staff review books for a balance of genres and gender focus, decide on the book candidates, and present a list of 25 titles in early September to our reviewers. Final selections are weighed in consideration for Newbery interest and have been narrowed to include no more than 25 titles so that students who wish to read all of them can do so while still completing their homework.

### To Read or Not to Read

A formal Mock Newbery book talk session from an Anderson's Bookshop consultant in early September now launches our four-month election season. Students meet in a comfortable setting in the Library Resource Center, where they are given annotated copies of the Mock Newbery list and encouraged to read as many titles as possible without expecting to complete all 25 (although many read 15 or more). Information about the critiquing process and the elements that define each genre is also provided. These elements—

such as original plot development, appropriate style, and distinctive voice—may be found in part throughout each book, but it will be the top five titles that capture the true Newbery essence as judged through the students' analyses. Our students critique each title using a questionnaire patterned after the American Library Association's Newbery form, which describes relevant criteria and allows them to record and analyze the selection. Filling out the questionnaires is probably the most time-consuming aspect of the Mock Newbery that students encounter.

### Putting It All Together

Each year our students face the daunting task of narrowing 25 Newbery candidates down to five. Student-led discussions about whether to eliminate or retain specific books generate lively exchanges that can last for hours if adults do not intervene! Teachers sit back and watch as students voice their well-documented opinions and strive for consensus. A good portion of the task of elimination is completed in November and December. By winter break, students are accentuating the positive aspects of the remaining titles to ensure that we have the best ten books remaining in the running. Their assignment during winter break is to narrow their choices down to the top five.

### The Newbery Campaign

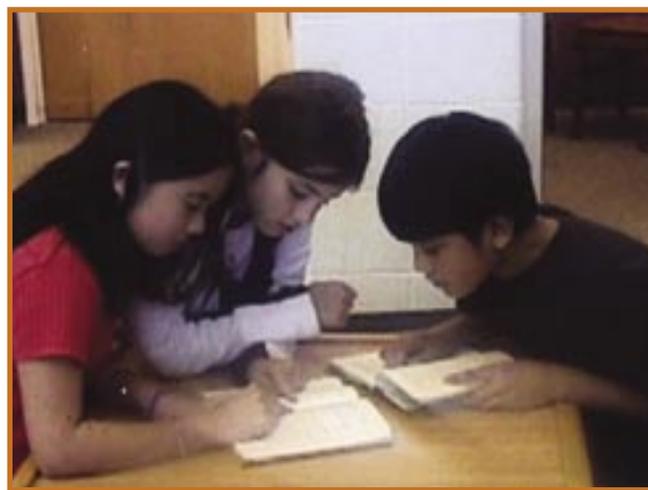
Take a bit of theatre; mix it well with costumes; sprinkle in cameras, slides, verbal interpretations, lights, and action; and presto, you have five groups of student presenters making the case for their selected book to become the Mock Newbery winner. Each presenter collects student critiques as defenses in the campaign to promote a chosen book and crafts unique shows that attempt to persuade an audience of about 100 students and visiting parents. The Mock Election takes more than one-and-a-half hours to complete and includes voting tallies. Each audience member is required to score specific points

for each book candidate on the ballot. The votes are then tallied, and the results are promptly announced throughout the building so that those who won can rightly claim the title of Mock Newbery Winner. Excitement permeates the school as students spread the buzz about which book won the top award.

### And the Winner Is...

Anderson's Bookstore coordinates the voting results from all the participating schools in the area. Currently, 22 elementary and junior high schools are participating in the Mock Newbery Awards program, with over 800 students in Illinois and Ohio submitting votes in 2005. Each of the participating schools adapts the program to suit its individual needs. Winning book presenters have been known to snail-mail, fax, and e-mail persuasive letters on their book's behalf to the American Library Association in the hope that they will influence the adult committee's final decision. Some schools continue their work with the books even after the awards are announced. One of the favorite projects, begun by Hill Middle School in Naperville with educator Rita Kraman, is a Mock Newbery Academy Awards program, where students nominate and elect books in categories such as Best Female Character, Best Plot Twist, Best Villain, and so forth.

The far-reaching benefits of this program are manifold. We've succeeded in promoting the love of reading to student audiences who in turn come to appreciate the Newbery Award's quest for excellence in literature. Jane Hester has observed students who, given the opportunity to analyze the craft of several authors, can emulate



various styles, thereby improving their own writing as they gain more confidence. Participating schools have the benefit of obtaining the books that represent some of the year's best literature, with the added boon of an introductory book talk for students and staff that will benefit circulation beyond the Mock Newbery program. The schools and community derive a heightened appreciation of the Newbery Awards and the depth and range in today's children's literature. The students' love for literature has created a platform that requires their use of the Bloom's Taxonomy higher-level thinking skills of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation to persuade an audience to vote their way in the Mock Newbery Election. As educators and book promoters, we have been thrilled and gratified to see student readers enthusiastically undertake this process for the past eleven years.

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

Staerkel, Kathleen, Nancy Hackett, and Linda Ward Callaghan. *The Newbery & Caldecott Mock Election Kit: Choosing Champions in Children's Books*. Chicago: Association for Library Service to Children/American Library Association, 1994. ■

**Paulette Goodman** is the library resource center director at Kennedy Junior High School in Lisle, Illinois. **Jane Hester** is a teacher at Kennedy Junior High School, and **Jill Brooks** is a consultant for Anderson's Bookshops in Naperville and Downers Grove, Illinois.

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