

75 Years of Tradition

WHAT IT TAKES TO TAKE ON THE CALDECOTT AWARD

Ellen Fader

The Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC) and picture book lovers everywhere have spent the past year celebrating the Caldecott Medal's 75th anniversary. In 2013, the Caldecott Award is still going strong, and that, in large part, is due to the expertise and dedication of all those who have taken up the mantle of Caldecott Committee member. Have you ever wondered just how those fifteen individuals who make up the Caldecott Award Selection Committee reached that enviable position and received the coveted assignment of choosing the most distinguished American picture book of the year?

Every journey to a seat at the Caldecott discussion table begins with an ALSC membership. Committee members first and foremost are current members of the American Library Association (ALA) and ALSC. Not surprisingly, new ALSC members often ask how they can earn a spot on a future Caldecott Committee. As a common first step, new and veteran ALSC members alike take advantage of other volunteer opportunities within the association, where they share their talents and contribute to the work of the association. By doing this, they learn more about how the association works and afford other members and division leaders the opportunity to get to know them and their talents.

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While aspiring Caldecott Committee members get to know the nuts and bolts of the organization, they also begin exploring ways to boost their Caldecott-ready skills. There is no one route to Caldecott service and past committee members have taken advantage of any number of opportunities, inside and outside of ALSC, to cultivate book evaluation and discussion expertise. Here are a few examples of how individuals develop the necessary skills to participate in the Caldecott Committee experience.

Read All about It

The *Randolph Caldecott Medal Committee Manual* is the group's procedural bible; it is also available to the public online at the ALSC website, www.ala.org/alsc. This handbook includes a thoughtful selection of recommended reading, including a section on picture book art. It also provides suggestions of ways committee members can expand their involvement with picture books and art. Caldecott Committee hopefuls find these resources useful as well, for exploring the terrain and grooming themselves for prospective participation.

Textbooks on children's literature, like those included on the *Caldecott Manual's* reading list, detail criteria for evaluation of picture books and explain various aspects of artistic merit. Caldecott enthusiasts also use a variety of trade books to familiarize themselves with the creative process and bookmaking. There are numerous books on the market in which award-winning children's book illustrators speak candidly about their craft.

Also among the recommended reading for Caldecott Committee aspirants is the revised edition of *From Cover to Cover: Evaluating and Reviewing Children's Books* (HarperCollins, 2010), a practical guide that uses recently published children's books as touchstones for practicing book evaluation; it also poses helpful questions to consider when evaluating a picture book. The book's author, Kathleen T. Horning, is a well-known children's literature expert and director of the Cooperative Children's Book Center of the School of Education at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. She also has offered occasional online professional development opportunities through ALSC, including a six-week class about the Caldecott Award that explores the understanding of distinguished art in picture books—yet another opportunity for Caldecott-centric professional development.

Staying on top of trends in children's book publishing and developments in early literacy by reading a wide range of materials is also important, and a great way to learn new concepts. For example, visual thinking strategies (VTS) is a technique being explored and embraced by a growing number of library staff and educators; the method helps children learn to genuinely look at and talk about art. Reading up on VTS, as well as on other theories and trends, augments the Caldecott toolbox.

Observe the Experts

At both the ALA Annual Conference and the ALA Midwinter Meeting, the eleven members of the Notable Children's Books Committee discuss children's books, including picture books as well as poetry and creative nonfiction, which often rely heavily on graphic elements. During these open meetings, at which all of the books under discussion are available for inspection, visitors can study how these children's literature experts talk about the visual aspects of the books. ALSC publishes the final Notable Children's Books list shortly after the conclusion of every ALA Midwinter Meeting. Budding picture book evaluators who do not attend conferences can obtain these notable titles and examine them to develop evaluation skills; this is great practice for learning to analyze books using a set of criteria. The criteria that guide ALSC's Notable Children's Books Committee, which can be found on ALSC's website, define *notable* as "Worthy of note or notice, important, distinguished, outstanding. As applied to children's books, notable should be thought to include books of especially commendable quality, books that exhibit venturesome creativity, and books of fiction, information, poetry, and pictures for all age levels (birth through age 14) that reflect and encourage children's interests in exemplary ways." It is the committee member's task to identify the noteworthy elements of a book and formulate a convincing argument to win it support from other committee members.

Immerse in Art

Visiting museums and examining art made in different periods with assorted media helps to expand artistic vocabulary and educate the eye. Savvy observers have learned to think about why an artist chose a particular medium or color palette for his work. Museum docent tours provide an enhanced opportunity for learning specifics about art, media, and the artist. For individuals with some art or teaching background, volunteering as a docent is a dynamic way to sharpen artistic sensibilities.

As a viable alternative to the art museum experience, libraries and bookstores have many art books available to those who want to immerse themselves in art and art knowledge. Local teacher education and library graduate programs offer courses to expand understanding of art, how children respond to art in picture books, and how books are created. Online classes, webinars, and seminars also provide convenient opportunities for advancing Caldecott-related skills.

Practice, Practice, Practice

Caldecott Committee hopefuls put into practice what they learn by writing columns about children's books for local newspapers or schools; providing workshops for

educators; and hosting, or assisting with, mock Caldecott discussions and elections. Mock elections are widely popular programs, and are held in person or even online. Mock election participants can raise their awareness of children's literature, sharpen analytical skills, and improve listening, discussion, and communication skills. In the fall each year, ALSC's electronic discussion list buzzes with the results of mock elections held in libraries and schools around the country.

ALSC's own *Newbery and Caldecott Mock Elections Tool Kit* (ALSC, 2011) is another resource offering practical wisdom on how to view, discuss, and evaluate picture books. The kit also shares art from past-winning Caldecott books that demonstrates various artistic media, styles, and elements. Tracking the fall election results, viewing the assorted winners in light of the Caldecott criteria, and formulating one's own personal opinions on those selected books is also valuable practice. Social media outlets provide opportunities for individuals to share with others their interactions with picture books, especially during the mock election season.

Other ways to cement learning and demonstrate expertise include participating during online book discussions, reviewing books for a print journal or online reviewing source that features signed reviews, and writing a personal blog about children's books.

Successful Caldecott Committee members also have emerged by way of ALSC's biennial Morris Seminar. The seminar brings new ALSC members and members with limited evaluation experience together with those who have served on ALSC's media evaluation committees for a day of mentoring and training on the group process and children's media evaluation techniques. The seminar is by invitation and is free to the members selected by ALSC to attend. Past attendees cherish this invaluable, practical learning experience.

So, Do I Have What It Takes?

While there are many diverse ways ALSC members prime themselves for a spot on the Caldecott Committee roster, one thing is certain. The commitment necessary to study, practice, and prepare for this sought-after professional position is equally matched by the deep dedication and responsibility assumed during the term of committee service.

Once members are comfortable with ALSC committee service and secure in their ability to discuss picture books for children, they may decide that they are ready to serve on an award committee. Many of ALSC's award selection committees, including the Caldecott, have a mix of appointed and elected members. By the fall of each year, the ALSC president appoints seven individuals, including the chair, to the Caldecott Committee, leaving eight members to be elected by the ALSC membership after being placed on the annual spring ballot by a nominating committee. This is why it is advantageous for members to build their skills and develop name

recognition by successfully serving on other committees before setting sights on an award committee; reputation and recognition may improve one's chances of being appointed or elected.

Those who believe they are ready to commit to service on the Caldecott Committee must realistically ask themselves serious questions and consider all the obligations, committee-related and otherwise.

Can I afford to travel to various cities to attend required meetings? Many employers cannot afford to pay all or even some travel expenses. A term of service spans four conferences: An initial, optional meeting held during the ALA Midwinter Meeting, usually in January, is highly recommended. Here the committee members and chair meet together for the first time to discuss timelines and procedural matters, and to explore what it really means to serve on the committee, especially focusing on understanding the Caldecott criteria. At ALA Annual Conference (usually held in late June or early July), committee members practice their growing book discussion skills as a group. At the following Midwinter Meeting, committee members discuss, vote, and announce their final selections. Attendance at the Annual Conference after selections is optional, but no committee member wants to miss the final, climactic event, the Newbery-Caldecott Banquet, where the awards are physically presented to the winners and honor recipients.

Can my school, university, or library afford to give me this much time off? Can my family or my pets spare me? Will my work and assignments suffer?

What are my other commitments? Do I have enough time in my days during the award year to unpack publishers' submissions and locate in libraries or bookstores the hundreds upon hundreds of American picture books published each year? Do I have enough time to read, examine, form a cogent opinion based on Caldecott criteria and concentrate on a written evaluation of each title? Can I put other life activities on hold for a year to meet the anticipated committee timeline, which includes monthly suggestions of titles and an obligation to nominate a total of seven titles at specific times that meet the criteria for a distinguished picture book?

Can I commandeer enough space? Those who think that they will find enough room at their school or library to accommodate the many books under consideration are often sorely mistaken. As a member of the 2012 Caldecott Committee, I know that our committee considered about 1,000 titles. For some committee members, that means giving away or selling some of one's own books to make room at home—on the floor or in bookcases (or in just-purchased bookcases!)—for the many new books that will arrive on the front doorstep via USPS, FedEx, and UPS. Can I bake these delivery drivers enough cookies and say thank you multiple times over, especially if I live on the third floor of a building without elevators? Can I put a "reserved" sign on the most comfortable reading chair in my

home? And move the best light next to it? Can I repeatedly wake up refreshed to get ready for work the morning after falling asleep in my chair, surrounded by picture books and notes?

The Experience of a Lifetime

Those who answer yes to these questions, and ultimately to the call to Caldecott duty, have one final, momentous question they ask themselves: am I ready to have the most exciting book-related year of my life—full of highs (“I think I’ve found the winner!”) and lows (“I’ll never be able to measure up to the way Mr. Book Expert discusses books! How did he see all those things in that one illustration?”).

Caldecott Committee members experience the most amazing book discussions of their career and learn to appreciate the multiple points of view fueled by the diverse backgrounds of fellow committee members. Discussion participants may feel themselves growing even at the very same time that they doubt the conclusions that they reach. Like countless ones who went before them, Caldecott Committee members agonize over each book’s merits. When filling out the final Caldecott ballot, a committee member may have to painfully leave some favorites along the wayside when she realizes these titles don’t have enough support to win; the committee member may have to move on to weigh the high points of books that others discussed with conviction.

The Caldecott Committee uses a system of voting that assigns a specified number of points to each member’s first (four points), second (three points), and third (two points) place choices, so immediately following the voting, committee members cannot begin to predict what might win. They wait patiently on a few members who work diligently on calculators in a corner of the room to see if the ballot resulted in a clear winner. The triumphant shout of “We have a winner!” may come after one ballot, or it may take many votes; out of respect for the winners, the number of ballots taken is never revealed outside of the committee.

When the fifteen colleagues reseal themselves around the discussion table to learn the ballot results, the suspense is palpable. This is the culmination of an entire year of living and breathing picture books, and two *full* days, Friday and Saturday of Midwinter, sequestered as a group discussing books. Members experience a range of emotions as they learn the results of twelve-months’ worth of reading, critical thinking, and friendly debate. Many feel relief, some recognize a sense of loss, and most temper exhaustion with excitement.

Even after the big decision is made, there is still more work to be done. The committee must prepare quotable annotations for the Caldecott Medal winner and Honor books, including biographical facts about the illustrators. One member, usually the chair, delivers the assembled information, along with a draft press release, to ALA’s press office at the Midwinter Meeting site on Sunday morning. These submit-

ted materials are critical for announcing to the wider world the results of all of ALA's youth media award committees. Sworn to secrecy, ALA and ALSC staff members prepare the components—press release, script, PowerPoint slides—of Monday morning's high-profile Youth Media Awards (YMA) press conference.

Immediately prior to the press conference, Caldecott Committee members gather to notify the winners. In the cramped, makeshift press office in the convention center, the committee huddles together as the chairperson, armed with various phone numbers, calls the Medal winner and each Honor book recipient to share the news of the committee's decisions. Many youth literature lovers hunger to hear how the winners and honorees learned about their awards and how they reacted. There are some legendary stories! One winner took his children to school but forgot his cell phone when he went to work in his studio. Luckily, he had a second cell phone, so after he had charged that phone, the great news of his win finally made its way to him. Another winner, before the availability of widespread cell phone service, was unreachable on a cruise ship. Newer authors and illustrators, who don't know when and how ALA makes the award announcements, are especially shocked by their instant fame. Some illustrators may know the name of the Caldecott Committee chair, and when they hear her name on the phone, become so overwhelmed that they cannot even hear what the chair is saying. Others are sure that there's a mistake: "I couldn't have won the gold!" Committees treasure these personal stories about "their" winners.

The YMA announcements are a thrilling and significant event for Caldecott Committee members—and for picture book lovers everywhere. For the 2013 YMA press conference, ALA provided for approximately 12,500 webcast viewers to join the more than 1,300 onsite audience members. ALA makes virtual seats available on a first-come, first-served basis. Those who are not able to join the webcast can still follow results in real time by logging on to the ALA Youth Media Awards Facebook page, or via Twitter by following hashtag #ALAYma. After the press conference, ALA's social media channels provide the opportunity to continue the press conference excitement. Some award winners and honorees even appear in short YouTube videos reacting to their new award-winner status.

No Caldecott Award year is complete without the coda: about 1,200 children's literature fans attend the Newbery-Caldecott Banquet each year at the ALA Annual Conference to see the authors and illustrators accept their medals and honor citations. A banquet benefit that comes along with being on the Caldecott Committee is an invitation to a pre-event reception that affords committee members a chance to speak with all the authors and illustrators being honored that evening. By that time in the conference, committee members have usually enjoyed the company of these children's literature stars at a variety of publisher-sponsored events. Additionally, publishers are often very generous in inviting committee members to be their banquet guests. In the acceptance remarks delivered that evening, the Caldecott-winning illustrator and Newbery-winning author provide insight into their creative process, and how

life has changed for them since the momentous award announcement six months earlier.

The banquet marks the official conclusion of an eventful, all-consuming award year. Yet it is not really the end. A year of committee service is a single segment of the greater Caldecott legacy being carried forward by each successive committee; as one rewarding and hectic award year ends, the next is already hitting its stride. As for each committee, the relationships its members develop during their year together live on for years to come. They get together for meals at subsequent conferences. They become conference roommates. They sit together at future Midwinter YMA press conferences and mark the anniversary of their committee service. Each committee shares a special experience; only those fifteen individuals will ever know or understand the distinct discussions, dynamics, and camaraderie shared by the group. Like the diverse paths taken by ALSC members on their road to the Caldecott Committee, each committee is unique with its own personality and place in time.

For more than seven decades, children and adults have known the Randolph Caldecott Award seal as a mark of quality. Affixed to a book's front cover, the sticker reminds us to examine carefully the art within. That iconic symbol proclaims that this is a book to purchase for a beloved child or for the library's shelves. Caldecott books remain in print a long time unlike their counterparts, which may fade quickly from our memories. As a member of the 2012 Caldecott Medal Committee, I know that the choices we made, as part of the 75 years of Caldecott Award history, live on by bringing children and books together, by inspiring other illustrators, present and future, to bring their artistic talent to the world of children's literature, and by encouraging the adults in children's lives to share with them the best picture books available. Congratulations to all Association for Library Service to Children members for supporting this critical award. Happy anniversary, Randolph Caldecott Medal!