

Dust Off the Gold Medal: Rediscovering Children's Literature at the Newbery Centennial.
Edited by Sara L. Schwebel and Jocelyn Van Tuyl. Routledge, 2022.

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Part of Routledge's Children's Literature and Culture series, *Dust Off the Gold Medal: Rediscovering Children's Literature at the Newbery Centennial*, edited by Sara L. Schwebel and Jocelyn Van Tuyl is a collection of fourteen essays that examine various Newbery winners throughout the first century of the prize. In the introduction to the collection, Schwebel and Van Tuyl present some history of the award and of the scholarship (and lack thereof) about the award winners, focusing in particular on the split between children's librarians and English professors: "While English professors turned their attention elsewhere, library and education professionals nurtured children's literature, which Literature departments would 'discover' only decades later" (5). Even after this "discovery" in the 1970s, however, Schwebel and Van Tuyl note that "The first generation of children's literature scholars largely ignored the work of education professors and librarians, focusing instead on books they considered important historical models and classics: fables and fairy tales, medieval literature, and Golden Age fiction—all categories that are considered 'Literature,' not just 'children's literature'" (5). This focus, according to Schwebel and Van Tuyl, led in part to the scholarly neglect of Newbery winners, something this volume hopes to start to rectify.

The introduction also explores the role that librarians continue to play in "marshalling their power as book award judges to bend the publishing industry toward their values. By selecting more Newbery and other book award titles that feature underrepresented communities, librarians are working to bring the We Need Diverse Books movement to bear on the industry, influencing both current sales and future book contracts" (8). The relationship between librarians and publishers continues to be critical; however, as the editors point out, the way children access books has also changed significantly since 1922: whereas until 1972, at least eighty percent of children's books were purchased by "institutions (libraries and schools)," by "the second decade of the twenty-first century, more than 65 percent of children's books sold were purchased by individuals" (3).

While acknowledging some of the problematic elements of the earlier Newbery winners in terms of representation of race, class, and gender, Schwebel and Van Tuyl emphasize the importance of these books in helping form the canon of American children's literature. As the editors note, winning the Newbery "generates a considerable profit, promoting individual authors' careers and sometimes securing the viability of small publishing houses" (2). Newbery winners rarely go out of print, regardless of when they won the award, even if they have not received much critical examination by children's literature scholars. The collection's fourteen essays examine Newbery Winners from each decade of the century during which it has been awarded "with particular attention to Newbery titles from the 1920s through 1940s, an area of significant critical neglect" (9). As a result of this "particular attention," Chapters 1 through 9 cover the first fifty years of the award. Chapter 10 straddles the two halves of the century, and the remaining four chapters cover the final decades of the centennial.

Chapter 1, “*The Dark Frigate* (1924) and the Use of Masculinity in Early Newbery Culture” by Paul Ringel, examines *The Dark Frigate* (the 1924 winner), looking particularly at its genres of adventure and nautical tale, and comparing it to the popular books published by the Stratemeyer Syndicate. Ringel offers significant historical background of the Newbery Award and *The Dark Frigate*’s win, and discusses possible reasons for its current lack of popularity, noting that “the book remains an important reminder that standards of quality in children’s literature, as in any field, are historicized” (30). Chapter 2, “Punching Up, Punching Down: Anticolonial Resistance and Brahmanical Ideologies in *Gay Neck: The Story of a Pigeon* (1928)” by Poushali Bhadury, offers an examination of the only Newbery winner by an Indian American, Dhan Gopal Mukerji. Bhadury notes the subversive anticolonialism presented in the novel as well as the bias toward the Brahmin caste. She emphasizes the need to critique as well as praise Own Voices books like *Gay Neck* and to contextualize them for readers. In Chapter 3, “Sounding the Broken Note: *The Trumpeter of Krakow* (1929) and Polish History” by Kenneth B. Kidd, Kidd points out the way that the novel frames “Polish history in the context of both American exceptionalism and Christianity” (51). He examines the role that the author, Eric Philbrook Kelly, plays in his adaptation of a Polish legend and how his book, though never translated into Polish, has influenced the legend in contemporary Poland. Kidd shows the problematic nature of Kelly’s historical fiction, calling the book “a case study in the ethics of writing historical fiction and especially historical fiction about other nations” (62).

The 1930s are represented in the collection by Anne K. Phillips and Gregory Eiselein’s essay “Invincible Nina: Louisa May Alcott and the Depression-Era Feminism of *Invincible Louisa* (1934).” Much of the essay is spent showing the parallels between Cornelia Meigs’s biography of Louisa May Alcott and the Great Depression, as well as how Meigs’s portrayal of Louisa May Alcott and her mother are positive and proactive. Phillips and Eiselein also note the influence Meigs’s biography has had on other Alcott biographies, even though it is often uncited, and they speculate that “This omission may be related to its fame as a children’s book rather than as an adult work of scholarship” (79-80). Beverly Lyon Clark presents the first of three essays dealing with 1940s winners in Chapter 5, “The Most Scorned of the Newbery Medalists?: *Daniel Boone* (1940).” Clark notes that *Daniel Boone* is one of the few Newbery medalists that is currently out of print, and that it has been since 1982, despite its popularity from its publication through the 1960s. Clark indicates that the style of writing has not held up, and that the author, James Daugherty, brings in the legend of Boone more than the historical facts, and she offers a close reading of the racism issues in the book. Chapter 6, “In the Tradition of Cannibal Talk: *Call It Courage* (1941)” by Mary K. Bercauw Edwards, examines Armstrong Sperry’s novel as part of a tradition of “cannibal literature,” comparing it to works by Herman Melville, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Jack London. Edwards also lays *Call It Courage* alongside other cannibal literature for children—Maurice Sendak’s *Where the Wild Things Are*, Astrid Lindgren’s *Pippi in the South Seas*—then compares the portrayals of the god Maui to Disney’s *Moana* and discusses how sensibilities have changed since the publication of *Call It Courage*. Megan L. Musgrave’s Chapter 7, “Of Sultans, Studs, and Stable Boys: Equine and Literary Lineage in *King of the Wind* (1949)” notes the popularity of Marguerite Henry’s horse stories to this day, though there is a lack of scholarship about *King of the Wind*. Musgrave compares the novel to *The Godolphin Arabian* by Eugène Sue, which she calls the “source text” for *King of the Wind*

(117), and delves into some of the history of the actual horse, one of the originators of the Thoroughbred line. Musgrave notes how racism and xenophobia are presented, often negatively, in the novel, through both the character Agba (the horse's handler) and through the horses themselves. She ends the essay examining the prizing of the novel, as it is both a type of "genre fiction" and not an "original work," though she parallels the novel's source to "traditional" stories, such as folktales, which makes its win acceptable (128).

In Chapter 8, "Double Dutch Nostalgia: *The Wheel on the School* (1955)," Anna Lockhart examines Meindert DeJong's novel, focusing on how "it is steeped in two strains of nostalgia": DeJong's nostalgia for his childhood home in Holland, and the Newbery committee's nostalgia for "a simpler, less fearful time" than the current Cold War (134). Lockhart also looks at how the novel illustrates effective education through a Progressive approach and how it idealizes the one-room schoolhouse. Despite some of the novel's conservatism, Lockhart notes, the novel is forward thinking in terms of environmentalism and social issues such as disabilities, ageism, and socioeconomic status. Chapter 9, "Lost Cat: *It's Like This, Cat* (1964) and the Invention of Young Adult Literature" by Kathleen T. Horning and Jocelyn Van Tuyl rounds out the first half century of Newbery winners covered in the collection. Horning and Van Tuyl argue that Emily Neville's novel is "the first true example of YA fiction" and speculate about why it "has failed to garner critical attention for its contributions to the emerging YA genre" (149). The authors examine the novel's use of vernacular and the first-person present-tense narrative, as well as the genre of contemporary realism as keys to its being a YA novel. Then they discuss the book's lack of popularity with teens when initially published, attributing the dislike in part to the manner in which the author was presented in the marketing of the book.

Chapter 10's essay, "Vision, Visibility, and Disability: Re-Seeing *The Summer of the Swans* (1971) and *The Westing Game* (1979)" by Sara K. Day and Paige Gray, links the two halves of the Newbery's first century with its examination of two winners from the 1970s. Day and Gray focus on the growing movement surrounding disability rights and explore how *The Summer of the Swans* and *The Westing Game* are progressive but ableist. The authors examine the role of visions and visibility in the novels, and discuss the contemporary Own Voices movement, which emphasizes "Nothing about us without us" (181) and helps in the re-evaluation of books featuring disabled characters. In Chapter 11, "The Women's Poetry Movement and the Affordance of the Lyric: *A Visit to William Blake's Inn* (1982)," Donelle Ruwe analyzes Nancy Willard's collection of poems, the first to win both the Newbery and Caldecott Medals, and the first collection of poetry to win the Newbery. Ruwe focuses on how Willard adapts the lyric poem in the collection, feminizing it, and spends much of the essay discussing how Willard came to create the collection and how it was illustrated. Adrienne Kertzer wraps up the twentieth century with Chapter 12, "'One Jew, One Half-Jew, a WASP, and an Indian': Diversity in *The View from Saturday* (1997)." The essay focuses on Jewish characters for two reasons, according to Kertzer: multiculturalism privileges certain kinds of diversity and there are few Jewish Newbery Medal books. She overviews the history of race and ethnicity in relationship to Jewish Americans to query what constitutes diversity, then examines the characters in the novel in terms of ethnicity, noting the lack of religion in the novel despite the description of two characters as Jewish. She ends with a discussion of how Konigsburg brings the Holocaust into other novels, but leaves it out of this one.

The final two chapters of the collection look at winners from the first two decades of the twenty-first century. In Chapter 13, “Ghosts of Japanese/American History in *Kira-Kira* (2005),” Giselle Liza Anatol analyzes Cynthia Kadohata’s historical novel and notes that despite the setting of the 1950s and 1960s and the lack of overt reference to internment and nuclear bombs from World War II, these events “possess the text of *Kira-Kira* as a powerful spectral presence” (219). Anatol discusses how Kadohata presents racism in an “unobtrusive manner,” which may lead to the problematic reading of the novel as universal or apolitical, and then details specific cultural elements that show how Japanese/American culture is presented. Anatol also offers a close reading of the text to show where overt examples of racism in the novel appear. Finally, in Chapter 14, “Playing to Win the Newbery: Black Boyhood in *The Crossover* (2015),” Rachel L. Rickard Rebellino and Rebekah May Degener discuss how Kwame Alexander’s verse novel departs from the few Newbery Winners that feature Black characters by setting his novel in a contemporary urban setting rather than a historical setting or rural area. They argue that “Alexander’s book makes an argument rooted in the politics of literacy: Black boys—their stories, music, and interests—matter” (236), and they examine the novel as a hip-hop and sports text, both of which are often seen negatively. Rebellino and Degener end their essay comparing *The Crossover* to past winners, noting differences and parallels, and reference the increasing diversity of Newbery winners and honors in 2015 and since, with a hope that the diverse pool is truly expanding.

While the majority of these essays are strong individually, and most are, as Schwebel and Van Tuyl say in their introduction, “historically grounded, linking to the historical context of their publication and prizing and addressing, where relevant, the way members of the Newbery Award Selection Committee were influenced by contemporaneous social, political, and literary trends” (9), the collection itself feels unbalanced by the amount of attention paid to the winners from the 1920s and 1940s—six of the fourteen essays. If the winners between 1920 and 1950 do suffer from “significant critical neglect,” then perhaps a volume about just those decades would help to rectify this neglect, at least in part. Similarly, ten of the fourteen essays are about books from the first half of the centennial, and five about books from the second half of the centennial (one book overlaps the two halves), which adds to the unbalanced feel of the collection. If the goal of the collection is to “dust off the gold medal,” then perhaps the collection should have focused solely on those works that have a “dusty” medal, not the more current winners. Further, the historical grounding and discussion of Newbery prizing is strongest in the essays about the earlier winners, which makes the later ones, some of which barely mention the Newbery Award, seem lacking. Despite this lack of balance, however, the collection offers some strong essays about various Newbery winners and makes a valuable addition to scholarly criticism about the award.