

*Reading
Research &
Instruction*



*Volume 38 No. 2
Winter 1999*

*The College
Reading Association*

Favorite Newbery books of sixth grade students, teachers, and library media specialists

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to identify the Newbery books most frequently chosen as favorites by sixth grade students, sixth grade teachers, and school library media specialists. There were 2,211 participants from forty-five schools in the United States. The study examined whether or not there were any differences of identified favorite Newbery books between boys and girls and whether or not there were any differences between students and adults. The top five favorite Newberys as selected by all the participants were: *The Giver*, *Shiloh*, *Number the Stars*, *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, and *Maniac Magee*. In this study, boys chose *Maniac Magee* as their favorite, while girls chose *Number the Stars*, and adults chose *The Giver*. Two recommendations for further study include: (1) to survey students, teachers, and library media specialists to determine their knowledge of Newbery books, and (2) to identify the favorite Newbery books ten years from now.

Whenever students walk into the school library media center looking for a Newbery book to satisfy a reading assignment, many ask the same question, "What's a good one?" The experienced library media specialist knows that this frequently means—"Make it short with lots of action."

Although these award-winning books provide a rich variety of choices for a wide variety of readers, to the disappointment of some students, there is not a definitive list of action-packed, easy-to-read Newbery books. But I was curious. Are there particular titles preferred by contemporary readers?

During the spring of 1996, I surveyed 2,211 sixth grade students, sixth grade teachers, and library media specialists from forty-five schools in the United States, asking them to identify their favorite Newbery. While several respondents commented how difficult it was to name just one favorite book, readers did have definite choices. In this study, boys chose *Maniac Magee* as their favorite Newbery book, while girls chose *Number the Stars*, and adults chose *The Giver*. For all the participants combined, the number one favorite Newbery book is *The Giver*.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to identify the Newbery books most frequently chosen as favorites by sixth grade students, sixth grade teachers, and sixth grade school library media specialists. The study examined whether or not there were any differences of identified favorite Newberys between boys and girls. The study also examined whether or not there were any differences of identified favorite Newberys between adults and students.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In 1996, when the American Library Association celebrated the seventy-fifth birthday of the Newbery Award, I examined all the research on Newberys from the past thirty years. A database search of ERIC, UNCOVER, *Dissertation Abstracts International*, and the *Comprehensive Dissertation Index* revealed no studies in which students were asked to identify their favorite Newberys, yet these books are written for them.

Since the 1960s, nearly forty studies on Newberys have been conducted. The studies in this literature review may be classified into the subject areas: (1) studies concerning moral values, (2) studies dealing with writing style, (3) studies investigating readability, and (4) studies investigating reading interests and knowledge of Newbery books.

Moral values

Stephens (1989) analyzed thirty Newbery books and fourteen classics published between 1928 and 1987 to determine whether or not characters displayed traits such as: resiliency, seeking and finding adult help, developing talent, persistence, independence, cheerfulness, and working for social as well as individual goals. The two tables included in the report summarize the content analysis. By looking at the tables, it can be concluded that characters in early Newbery books seek a social, or group goal, while the characters in later Newbery books seek individual goals.

Ryder (1978) investigated two questions: (1) do students and librarians share similar values, and (2) do students and librarians recognize such values in books? Seventh graders from Jefferson County School District in Colorado and public librarians from Denver, Colorado were asked to rank the importance of a list of thirty-six values, to read the five Newbery books published from 1971 to 1975, and to complete a survey identifying the books' values.

The study showed that the two groups do not recognize similar values in the Newbery books. Also, seventeen, or 47%, of the thirty-six values were recognized differently by students and adults. Students ranked values higher—being obedient and having an exciting life were more important to students than to adults. The author concluded that there might have been a maturity gap between the two groups. Ryder went so far as to recommend that publishers should only

publish books that reflect the values held by the majority of society, a concept that many publishers and librarians would find unreasonable.

Writing style

Darkatsh (1975) replicated the 1944 research of Rankin by comparing the characteristics of Newbery fiction books to popular fiction books checked out by young readers. Darkatsh looked at variables such as: general themes, number of illustrations, types of fiction, time and place settings, number and types of main characters, readability, story openings, and story endings.

Findings indicated that Newbery books were still more didactic than popular books. Newbery books ranged in reading levels from the fourth to the eighth grade, and popular books ranged in reading levels from the second to seventh grade. Popular books had more illustrations. Newbery books had made the most drastic changes by becoming more similar to popular books in setting, opening and closing passages, length, and main characters.

With the premise that children do not always enjoy books that are recommended by adult critics, Lehman (1986) examined seventeen books that were published from the years 1975–1985. Eight of the books had received awards by adult critics and also were selected as favorites by young readers in IRA/CBC Children's Choices. Nine books were recognized by adults but not preferred by children. All seventeen titles were content analyzed for themes, style, and structure. The researcher supported this analysis by interviewing an adult reader, a young reader, and by examining the reviews of all the titles.

The analysis showed that while both children and adults enjoy similar themes, children are more likely to choose books that enhance predictability—chapter titles, foreshadowing, suspense, familiar story structures, and characters. Also, children are more likely to enjoy books with an optimistic tone, a lively pace, and complete resolution.

Readability

Schafer (1986) examined the readability of thirteen Newbery books published between 1974–1986. Results indicated that the average grade level for ten of the Newbery books ranged between sixth and ninth grade. Only three books fell below the sixth grade reading level—*M.C. Higgins the Great*, *Bridge to Terabithia*, and *Sarah, Plain and Tall*.

Chatham (1967) examined twenty-one Newbery Award books published from 1945–1965 and determined the minimum reading grade level for each of them. He tested the comprehension of fifth and sixth grade students in Meridian, Mississippi by having them read selected passages and answer written questions on each Newbery and then comparing their scores to their scores on the California Reading Test. Minimum reading grade level was determined when 50% of the students at a grade level correctly answered 75% of the questions.

Of the twenty-one books examined, nineteen of them were judged appropriate for students in the fifth and sixth grades. *Rabbit Hill* and *Rifles for Watie* were better suited for students at the seventh grade reading level.

Reading interests and knowledge of Newbery books

Foster (1982) investigated the relationship of gender, grade level, and demographic characteristics on the individual reading interests of third and fifth grade students in rural, urban, and metropolitan areas of Oklahoma. The findings showed that gender, followed by grade level, were the most influential factors in determining reading interests. The investigation revealed that the third and fifth graders in this study were not reading Newbery books.

One of the most exciting Newbery studies is the one by Gunter (1994). She designed a practicum to enhance Hispanic fourth and fifth grade students' knowledge of Newbery and Newbery honor books. Pre- and post-surveys were developed and implemented. Teachers read Newbery books; the library media specialist sponsored a book club and reading contests. Data analysis indicated that the students' knowledge and familiarity of Newbery titles increased 365%.

In 1994, Ouzts presented a paper at the National Reading Conference in San Diego, describing a questionnaire that had been administered to seventy-two teachers concerning knowledge of Newbery books. Subjects were asked to identify the title based on a brief descriptive phrase. The results showed that 70.8% of the teachers correctly identified *Sarah, Plain and Tall*. None of the teachers correctly identified *The Hero and the Crown*.

QUESTIONNAIRE

I designed the questionnaire so that it could be completed in less than five minutes in order that it might not disrupt the regular class period. I asked participants to respond to four items: (1) I am a sixth grade student, a sixth grade teacher, or a school library media specialist; (2) I am male or female; (3) I do not have a favorite Newbery book, where the participant marked yes or no; and (4) My favorite Newbery book is, with a space for the participant to write in a Newbery title. (A copy of a Newbery bibliography accompanied the questionnaire. See the appendix for the bibliography.)

After validation by two professors who teach educational research and graduate students in a children's literature course, the survey was revised according to their recommendations, but even so, item 3 was confusing and should have been rewritten. However, it did not seem to affect the purpose of the study.

The questionnaire was mailed to sixty-seven school library media specialists who responded to a request for participants posted on the LM_NET listserv, a listserv housed at Syracuse University that reaches more than 6,000 school library media specialists (presently 10,000 people subscribe to it). The sixty-seven media specialists represented the following states: Arkansas, California, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kansas, Kentucky, Hawaii, Illinois, Indiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nevada, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Rhode Island, Tennessee, Texas, Washington, and Wisconsin. Forty-five, or 67%, of the media specialists returned the surveys. The respondents remained anonymous.

These items were included in the mailing: a letter explaining the purpose and instructions, a copy of the questionnaire, and a Newbery bibliography. The media specialists duplicated the forms for the participants. Also included was a return envelope, addressed and metered with postage.

At the building level, the data was collected in a variety of ways. Some media specialists conducted the survey when the sixth grade students came to the media center. In some schools, the media specialists asked the sixth grade teachers to complete the survey in their classrooms. In most schools, all of the sixth graders participated.

SAMPLE POPULATION

The sample population consisted of participants from forty-five schools in the United States. The total number of participants was 2,211, which included thirty-seven media specialists, sixty-two sixth grade teachers, and 2,112 sixth grade students. In this survey, 96% of the respondents were students, with slightly more boys than girls. Since the number of adult respondents was much smaller, the information in the tables does not include a breakdown by gender and job description for the adults. (Table 1)

It should be noted that this 1996 survey does not represent the opinions of all sixth grade students, teachers, and school library media specialists in the United States.

FINDINGS

No favorite Newbery

Out of this sample, 564 participants (26%) did not identify a favorite Newbery. More boys than girls reported that they did not have a favorite Newbery.

Table 1

Survey Participants

Participants	Total
Sixth Grade Boys	1094
Sixth Grade Girls	1018
Female Teachers	47
Male Teachers	15
Female Library Media Specialists	36
Male Library Media Specialists	1
Total	2211

Table 2*

Top forty favorite Newbery books

Year	Title	Boys	Girls	Adults	Total
1994	The Giver	78	60	18	156
1992	Shiloh	84	60	1	145
1990	Number the Stars	35	102	6	143
1961	Island of Blue Dolphins	47	82	2	131
1991	Maniac Magee	85	34	4	123
1978	Bridge to Terabithia	22	58	6	86
1963	Wrinkle in Time	50	27	3	80
1972	Mrs. Frisby . . .	46	32	1	79
1986	Sarah, Plain and Tall	8	49	3	60
1987	The Whipping Boy	32	17	0	49
1968	Mixed-up Files . . .	23	25	0	48
1970	Souder	28	19	1	48
1977	Roll of Thunder	8	31	6	45
1979	Westing Game	15	24	1	40
1995	Walk Two Moons	6	19	6	31
1959	Witch of Blackbird	7	14	4	25
1984	Dear Mr. Henshaw	7	18	0	25
1941	Call it Courage	19	3	2	24
1923	Dr. Dolittle	11	9	1	21
1973	Julie of the Wolves	8	13	0	21

Some 34% of the boys reported no favorite as compared to 18% of the girls. Similarly, more adult males than adult females reported that they didn't have a favorite Newbery.

For several respondents, this answer implied that they do not like to read Newbery books. One girl wrote, "Newbery books are boring." Other respondents, however, wrote that they had so many favorite Newbery books that it was impossible to choose just one. In fact, forty-nine respondents—students and adults—named several favorite titles. (The additional choices are not indicated in any tables.) Even though honor books were not included, several boys at one school listed *Hatchet* (an honor book) as their favorite Newbery.

Number one favorite Newbery

So what is the number one favorite Newbery book? For all the participants combined, the number one favorite Newbery book is *The Giver*. For boys who participated in this survey, the favorite Newbery is *Maniac Magee*. For girls, the

Table 3

Boys' top ten favorite Newbery books

Year	Title	Total
1991	Maniac Magee	85
1992	Shiloh	84
1994	The Giver	78
1963	Wrinkle in Time	50
1961	Island of Blue Dolphins	47
1972	Mrs. Frisby . . .	46
1990	Number the Stars	35
1987	Whipping Boy	32
1970	Souder	28
1968	Mixed-Up Files . . .	23

King of the Wind (1949), *Caddie Woodlawn* (1936), *Johnny Tremain* (1944), and *The Twenty-one Balloons* (1948). Also, two newer titles—*Walk Two Moons* (1995) and *The Midwife's Apprentice* (1996)—were chosen by many participants in this survey.

There were, however, some surprises on the list. For example, *The Voyages of Dr. Dolittle* (1923) made the top twenty list, and *Smokey, the Cow Horse* made the top forty, but most experienced library media specialists know that these books are rarely checked out.

Gay-Neck: The Story of a Pigeon does not appear on the top forty favorite list, but this was not from any lack of enthusiasm. (On the Newbery bibliography, I did not give the subtitle.) Several adults wrote that after some of their students chose *Gay-Neck* and then got the giggles, the students were instructed to change their answers.

Seven Newbery books did not receive any votes from the participants in this survey. These books include: *The Dark Frigate* (1924), *Tales from Silver Lands* (1925), *Waterless Mountain* (1932), *Young Fu of the Upper Yangtze* (1933), *Dobry* (1935), *Ginger Pye* (1952), and *M.C. Higgins the Great* (1975).

Student choices

For the most part, sixth grade boys and girls in this study like the same Newbery books. An examination reveals that seven of the top ten favorite Newberys on both lists are the same books. (Tables 3 and 4) These are: *Maniac Magee*, *Shiloh*, *The Giver*, *A Wrinkle in Time*, *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*, and *Number the Stars*.

Table 4

Girls' top ten favorite Newbery books

Year	Title	Total
1990	Number the Stars	102
1961	Island of Blue Dolphins	82
1992	Shiloh	60
1994	The Giver	60
1978	Bridge to Terabithia	58
1986	Sarah, Plain and Tall	49
1991	Maniac Magee	34
1972	Mrs. Frisby	32
1977	Roll of Thunder	31
1963	Wrinkle in Time	27

However, the boys and girls did not rank the books in the same order. For example, the boys' top choice, *Maniac Magee*, ranked seventh on the girls' list. Similarly, the girls' top choice, *Number the Stars*, ranked seventh on the boys' list.

The boys picked three books that do not appear on the girls' top ten list—*The Whipping Boy*, *Sounder*, and *From the Mixed-up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler*. The girls picked three books that do not appear on the boys' top ten list—*Bridge to Terabithia*, *Sarah, Plain and Tall*, and *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*.

Adult choices

As stated earlier, because the number of adult respondents was small, the information in the tables does not include a breakdown by gender and job description for the adults. (Table 5) Still, the results are interesting. Both female teachers and female media specialists ranked *The Giver* as their number one choice. For their second and third choices, female teachers chose *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* and *Bridge to Terabithia* while female media specialists chose *Walk Two Moons* and *Dacey's Song*. Each of the sixteen adult males voted for a different title.

Even though the adults' choices are similar to the sixth grade students' choices, there are some slight differences. Adults in this survey overwhelmingly chose *The Giver*, followed by *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* and *Bridge to Terabithia*. The students liked these books but not to the degree that the adults did. Adults enjoyed *Dacey's Song* and *Walk Two Moons*. Adult females influenced

Table 5*

Adults' favorite Newbery books

Year	Title	Total
1994	<i>The Giver</i>	18
1977	<i>Roll of Thunder</i>	6
1978	<i>Bridge to Terabithia</i>	6
1990	<i>Number the Stars</i>	6
1983	<i>Dacey's Song</i>	5
1991	<i>Maniac Magee</i>	4
1995	<i>Walk Two Moons</i>	6
1963	<i>Wrinkle in Time</i>	3

*Because of the small number of adults responding, this list does not include the ten favorites.

these choices since none of the adult males voted for the same book. In this study at least, gender does seem to influence what books students and adults like.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

In 1996, some 2,211 participants—sixth grade students, sixth grade teachers, and library media specialists—identified their favorite Newbery books. The number one favorite book of all the participants was *The Giver*. Boys chose *Maniac Magee*; girls chose *Number the Stars*, and adults chose *The Giver*. The study showed that gender and age influence choices.

Beginning teachers and school library media specialists who have not read all the Newbery books may want to begin reading and recommending the seven books favored by both boys and girls in this study: *Maniac Magee*, *Shiloh*, *The Giver*, *A Wrinkle in Time*, *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*, and *Number the Stars*.

Two recommendations for future study include: (1) Are students, teachers, and library media specialists able to identify Newbery books after reading a short description of each title, and (2) What will be the favorite Newbery books ten years from now?

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