

Ranking the Newbery Winners

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“No book is really worth reading at the age of ten which is not equally – and often far more – worth reading at the age of fifty and beyond.”

- C.S. Lewis, *On Stories*

Introduction

Every year since 1922, the American Library Association (ALA) names one book for, “The most distinguished contribution to American literature for children.” The award is named in honor of British bookseller John Newbery, “To encourage original creative work in the field of books for children. To emphasize to the public that contributions to the literature for children deserve similar recognition to poetry, plays, or novels.” Historically, the Newbery Award has been associated with the best in children’s literature.

Why Rank the Newberys?

Historically the Newbery books represent a high standard of writing skill and compelling literature for children. By virtue of passing scrutiny of a selection committee of librarians, books with the Newbery stamp have attained a level of distinguished literary merit. As readers we often find ourselves reading books recently published, accessible books featured prominently in the public library or featured on websites. One of the goals here is to highlight some of the outstanding winners seldom read today.

While the older books contain more family-friendly content, some of the recent winners are also outstanding, offering messages friendly to the Christian worldview. However, many in recent years also tend to fit a narrative in line with explicit promotion of social issues. Given the ALA’s dedicated desire to promote these causes, we will continue to see propagated an ideology in harmony with the latest movements. Predictably, the 2021 winner features the first homosexual character in the Newbery compilation. It is worth noting that the Newbery award has typically mirrored the cultural ethos, albeit with a strong multicultural focus.

Most parents lack the opportunity (and sometimes the motivation) to read through every book their children might read in order to select those of high literary value and themes in line with Christian virtue. Part of the impetus for this project is to inform parents not only about each previous winner, but to keep the pulse on future winners as a resource for parents and young readers.

Boy and Girl Readers

My experience is that young girls tend to read more widely than boys. Interestingly, many of the Newbery books feature strong female protagonists and coming-of-age themes than many boys will find uninteresting. Examples include *Dacey’s Song*, *Roller Skates*, *Jacob Have I Loved*, *A Gathering of Days: A New England Girl’s Journal*, and *Hitty, Her First Hundred Years*. Fewer books could be construed as “boy books,” and even these are likely to appeal also to girls. Examples include *Rifles for Watie*, *Shadow of a Bull*, *Maniac Magee*, *It’s Like This*, *Cat*, and more recently, *The Crossover*.

The inclusion of these notes in the reviews is not to discourage the reading of any of the books, but rather to help parents choose books most likely to appeal to their child. A strong and prolific reader – whether girl or boy – can enjoy any of the books on the list, but some of the books as noted may lead to boy boredom (always something to avoid whenever possible!).

Ranking Considerations

Several factors were considered in the rankings:

1. **Worldview** – While each book need not point directly to a Judeo-Christian worldview, the best books in the rankings contain a sense of moral cohesion and integrity. Does virtue win out? Do the characters wrestle with good and evil, with the good triumphing? Are the themes consonant with a worldview that points to the Author of Truth? In addition, overtly politicized books that have an obvious social goal tend to be lower ranked on the list.
2. **Interest and Engagement** – No one enjoys a boring book. Regardless of genre (novel, poetry, biography, etc.), the book should offer an appealing reading experience, with theme, plot, and story actively engaging the reader. The books at the top of the list tend to be those that provide an experience that holds a typical reader's attention.
3. **Content** – Books that contain objectionable content, themes, or language are ranked toward the bottom of the list. This is true for two reasons. First, books for children ought to not include subject matter incongruous with the frame of a child – assuming we desire to point children to the true, the good, and beautiful. Second, good books typically have unlikeable if not despicable characters, as well as tough themes. But the best authors (e.g. Dostoyevsky) avoid gratuitous language and inappropriate content while also portraying the true nature of evil.
4. **Readability and Re-readability** – The best books for children are so good that children desire to re-read them. Those at the top of the list are not only worthy of repeated reading, but they appeal to all ages; they are books that a curious book lover of all ages will enjoy.
5. **Award appropriateness** – Finally, consideration was given to the spirit of the award. I took liberties here to distinguish the book from the Caldecott Award, which is awarded, “to the artist of the most distinguished American picture book for children.” Thus, I placed higher value on chapter books since an award already exists for picture books. Short picture books for young children are ranked relatively low on this list.

Additional Notations

To help parents determine the best books for their children, note the following:

- **N.R.** *Not Recommended due to inappropriate language or subject matter*
- **R.R.** *Recommended for a Reluctant Reader who has not yet embraced the habitual joy of reading*
- **S.R.** *Due to length or subject matter, recommended for Strong Readers*

The Imperfections of Rankings

The following list is one person's perspective and by no means represents a complete or authoritative ranking. Every person has his or her own preferences and biases, which makes rankings open to interpretation and debate. Ranking considerations may also differ than those listed above. All this to say: disagreements and dialogue about the merits of each book are expected and encouraged. Parents and students may want to consider developing their own rankings while discussing the reasons and priorities for placement of books on their own lists.

Happy reading!

Ryan Evans, Headmaster
Providence Classical Christian School

1. Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry by Mildred D. Taylor (1977)

Taylor is a master, blending both likable and despicable characters, a gripping and fast-paced plot, vivid description, and compelling themes of friendship, race relations, family, suffering, and sacrifice. Worth reading and re-reading, if for nothing more than to be inspired by David Logan's fortitude, perseverance, and ability to overcome overt racism with determination and sound sensibility grounded in a biblical faith. Tough to find a flaw in this book. This is the first book written in the Logan family saga, all of which are highly recommended (except perhaps the last in the series, *All the Days Past, All the Days to Come*).

2. The Bronze Bow by Elizabeth George Speare (1962)

Set at the time of Christ, this is a stunning story of a young boy set aimed at avenging his parents' death. Full of bitterness and hatred, Daniel is committed to destroy the Romans. As the story progresses, he meets a variety of memorable characters, grappling with the miracles and message of grace and love of Jesus. (Jesus is actually a character in the book, and while portrayed carefully and biblically by Speare, some may object to this idea.) Probably the best conclusion of any book I've ever read. (S.R.)

3. The Twenty-One Balloons by William Pène du Bois (1948)

A zany retired schoolteacher decides to take a reclusive balloon trip, but it does not go according to plan. He lands on the island of Krakatoa, where he meets a group of families who live together in luxury because of their secret diamond mine. Incredibly imaginative, kids will find this book irresistible. (R.R.)

4. The Westing Game by Ellen Raskin (1979)

Sam Westing is dead – or so everyone thinks – and a series of clues is given to 16 people who are put in teams to solve the riddle and inherit his fortune. It can be a fairly complicated plot for a children's book and contains some politically incorrect parts (which adds to the humor if read in context). Raskin is a clever and funny writer, with colorful characters, humorous dialogue, and rich plot twists.

5. Holes by Louis Sachar (1999)

Stanley Yelnats is sent to Camp Greenlake, where he meets a cast of characters who dig holes every day. Their task is to discover a buried treasure for the warden (though they just think digging holes builds character). Part comedy, part adventure, the book keeps readers engaged with anticipation for the climactic conclusion. (R.R.)

6. The Witch of Blackbird Pond by Elizabeth George Speare (1959)

An outstanding book by one of the best authors in the history of children's literature. 16-year-old Katherine (Kit) moves in with an elderly woman who the townspeople in late-17th century New England believe to be a witch. She is then put on trial for her association in the hysteria; while the plot development can be a bit slow at times, the intense ending makes it well worth it.

7. Amos Fortune, Free Man by Elizabeth Yates (1951)

Hard to believe this book won the award given its very politically- incorrect themes – but it was written over seventy years ago. It paints slavery in an appropriately negative light and pays tribute to faithful Christians, one of which is the honorable and diligent Amos Fortune. It would not be surprising at some point to see the ALA recast certain books on the Newbery list and remove them in place of those more in line with their agenda; if so, this would be a place for them to start.

8. A Wrinkle in Time by Madeleine L'Engle (1963)

A rare science fiction story in the Newbery catalog. L'Engle integrates physics and mathematics into a storyline with endearing characters, including the precocious Charles Wallace. It reads like an adventure, with a strong theme of good versus evil on a cosmic level.

9. A Single Shard by Linda Sue Park (2002)

Set in Korea in the 1100s, a young orphan boy longs to learn the craft of pottery. He gets his wish, though not through ideal circumstances. The story moves quickly as the reader roots passionately for the boy's success, and the conclusion is incredibly satisfying. The only downside is the mystical, Buddhist beliefs assumed throughout, but such was the religion of that region.

10. Miracles on Maple Hill by Virginia Sorensen (1957)

Marly and her family temporarily move into a small family farmhouse in Pennsylvania where she and her brother Joe learn how to tap the maple trees and make syrup, meet a kind hermit who has an appreciation for goats, and befriend a clan of foxes. A story of family perseverance and friendship, and the joyful innocence of youth. Sorensen combines rich and memorable characters that may leave the reader longing for the bygone days when neighbors were neighborly, where trust in community was assumed, and when kids could be kids by creating adventure and fun because they had to.

11. The Trumpeter of Krakow by Eric P. Kelly (1929)

Kelly admirably weaves a healthy amount of medieval history in this story set in Krakow, Poland. He spends less time on characterization, but the plot development is strong and the pace brisk. Kelly also writes with a thorough, God-centered worldview with themes of loyalty, materialism, pride, and contentment. Scholar-priest Jan Kanty, who possesses wisdom, integrity, and courage to stand against evil, is one of the most noble and honorable characters in the Newbery corpus.

12. Caddie Woodlawn by Carol Ryrie Brink (1936)

Brink writes from the experiences of her grandmother in Wisconsin in the 1860s. A politically-incorrect tale of a young girl living in a world reminiscent of Laura Ingles Wilder. Caddie is a fierce, stubborn tomboy with a tender heart for others and always looking out for the underdog and underprivileged.

13. Moon over Manifest by Clare Vanderpool (2011)

Vanderpool is great with words – lots of puns and plays on meanings here. She clearly enjoys the literary craft and spins a tale that kids in 5th-7th grade will love, especially girls. A young girl, Abilene, is sent by her father Gideon to live with a friend (who is a pastor) in the town of Manifest. Abilene meets a few friends and starts to uncover some secrets of her family's past through the discovery of a box of keepsakes.

14. Shadow of a Bull by Maia Wojciechowska (1965)

Manola, a young Spanish boy, is led into bullfighting because of his father's legacy. The townspeople expect him to follow in his father's footsteps as he grows up, but he lacks the desire. The author cleverly weaves numerous subplots into a story of suspense with an unforgettable ending.

15. Number the Stars by Lois Lowry (1990)

A powerful and gripping story of a young girl who helps her Jewish friend escape the Third Reich. As Annemarie and her family take in Ellen, who poses as Annemarie's sister, the girls face harrowing challenges in pulling off their ruse. A well-researched and suspenseful read that both boys and girls will enjoy. (R.R.)

16. Sounder by William H. Armstrong (1970)

Armstrong tells a sobering story of a poor black family in the south, inclusive of the dark realities of poverty and prejudice. By naming only one character in the book – Sounder, the dog – the author emphasizes the brutality and stark oppression of racism. A powerful book, but because of the subject matter, best for older students.

17. Out of the Dust by Karen Hesse (1998)

Hesse paints a realistic but bleak picture of the Dust Bowl through poems of a young 14-year-old girl. Set in Oklahoma in 1934, Billie Joe tells of impossibly difficult family trials: dust storms that ravage the landscape, draught, locust invasions, and a terrible accident that adds even more sorrow to an already grim life. But starting this book without finishing it would be a mistake, as the conclusion ends in hope for not only Billie Joe, but her family as well. Though girls will be more naturally drawn to this book, boys too can appreciate the harsh realities of this period of history.

18. A Gathering of Days: A New England Girl's Journal, 1830-1832 by Joan W. Blos (1980)

Few books have such a powerful strength of voice. The reader is reminded of the difficulties of life during this era, where limited medicinal advancements lead to increased deaths, and the rigors of life led to unspeakable tragedies. A 13-year-old girl named Catherine writes of adventures such as providing assistance to a runaway slave and a despotic schoolteacher, sobering life trials from growing up without a mom for much of her life, and the sudden loss of a good friend. Age-old truths - "I wonder if it is common to feel that never is a place so loved as when once has to leave it?" - makes this a touching and memorable book.

19. The Giver by Lois Lowry (1994)

A bit of a pioneering book in the dystopian genre, Lowry forces the reader to consider how our own choices are impacted by societal assumptions and government dictates. There is no God and no Truth in the fictional world, the fight is against tyranny and totalitarianism in pursuit of freedom. Has hints of 1984, only for children.

20. The Voyages of Doctor Doolittle by Hugh Lofting (1923)

Tommy Stubbins, age 9, is enamored with John Dolittle, a famed naturistic doctor in his English town. He ends up serving as an apprentice for Dr. Dolittle, who possesses a special power: the ability to converse with animals. Because of this, Dr. Dolittle solves problems in miraculous ways: he ends bullfighting by

speaking with the bulls; finds land after a shipwreck by enlisting the help of porpoises; finds a lost friend by soliciting help from a beetle. This is one of the most engaging books on the Newbery list, an adventure story that maintains the reader's attention throughout. Caution: the early editions of this book contain racial insensitivities omitted in the modern version, so be sure to read a more recent edition of this book.

21. Rifles for Watie by Harold Keith (1958)

Jefferson Davis Bussy, age sixteen, is anxious to join the Union Army at the beginning of the Civil War. An idealist, he soon learns the reality of war is much different than he envisioned. Keith tracks Bussy's four years in the war, including a variety of interesting subplots, including his rivalry with a sinister Union leader, a chance meeting with a young girl he quickly falls in love with, and a dangerous mission to join the rebels as a spy. Despite its length, the book holds the reader's attention with a brisk pace, variety in description, and a protagonist impossible to not like. (S.R.)

22. Crispin: The Cross of Lead by Avi (2003)

With strong characterization, an adventurous plot, and first-person narrative, Avi keeps readers engaged throughout this novel set in 14th century England. Crispin is accused of crimes he did not commit, and the reader attempts to solve the mystery as Crispin searches for answers about his family lineage.

23. Roller Skates by Ruth Sawyer (1937)

A refreshing look at life in the 1890s in New York. Lucinda is a sprightly and curious young girl, an extrovert who enjoys and appreciates getting to know people of all backgrounds. Sawyer deals with the topic of death, though not to the same degree as other books have (e.g. *Bridge to Terabithia*). Not surprisingly, this one will be much more appealing to girls.

24. Call It Courage by Armstrong Sperry (1941)

A boy afraid of the sea is ridiculed by his peers, and must overcome his cowardice, inhibitions, and fears. After a storm he is left on his own, requiring courage to fight off foes such as an octopus, a boar, and a tiger shark. A short book, but full of adventure. (R.R.)

25. Up a Road Slowly by Irene Hunt (1967)

A book that will appeal primarily to girls, though mature boys may enjoy it. Very well written, with complicated characters and a well-developed plot that moves more quickly than most coming-of-age stories – and covers a long life of an admirable young lady.

26. The Matchlock Gun by Walter Edmonds (1942)

One of the shortest Newbery winners, this illustrated book can be read in one sitting. It is beautifully written – a true account of settlers in New York fighting off the Indians who, along with the French Canadians, were attempting to fight against the invasion of British colony settlers. A bit violent, but boys in particular will find this captivating.

27. A Year Down Yonder by Richard Peck (2001)

A refreshing book about a girl who moves to Chicago to live with her grandmother during the post-depression times. Her grandmother is a character: wizened and shrewd, stubborn yet generous. Grandma Dowdel's humorous and crafty ways impress upon Mary Alice the true ways of the world, and how to live and care for others while always covering your back.

28. Rabbit Hill by Robert Lawson (1945)

Told from the perspective of animals in a farming community waiting for new neighbors to arrive at their home which is for sale. Rabbits, mice, a fox, and other animals are waiting to see if the family will bring worthwhile garbage, plant a garden, and bring in nefarious pets. Lawson's pictures are a fabulous addition to this humorous story.

29. I, Juan de Pareja by Elizabeth Borton de Trevino (1966)

As a slave, Juan ends up working for and developing a friendship with a famous and gifted painter, Velasquez of Spain, who is a quiet yet merciful man. Not only is this a great story, but it exposes a radical difference between the Newbery books of the 1960's and those of today. The author captivates the reader and uncompromisingly integrates the faith of Juan de Pareja into the book.

30. Bridge to Terabithia by Katherine Paterson (1978)

A gifted writer and a Christian, Paterson weaves some redemptive elements in this somber book that deals with the death of a young person. Despite a moving and powerful ending, some children will find it difficult and emotionally challenging.

31. Strawberry Girl by Lois Lenski (1946)

Birdie Boyer, a young girl, and her family move to central Florida and quickly develop a feud with another local family, the Slaters. The book has a Little House on the Prairie feel, with an equally admirable mother and feistier father. The regional feel is enhanced by not only the dialect but also Lenski's diction. The characters are rich, the story brisk and with enough action for boys (the cover makes it unattractive for boys to pick up). The best thing about the book are the themes rooted in the gospel, the main one being love your neighbor as yourself. The power of the Holy Spirit, the preaching of the word, and the kindness of neighbors can truly change lives.

32. The View from Saturday by E.L. Konigsburg (1997)

Konigsburg creates a clever plot with a humorous and intelligent look at life in the 6th grade (one of the reasons I like it, having taught 6th grade for seven years). The theme is an "academic bowl" competition, and at Epiphany Middle School Mrs. Olinski gathers four sharp and peculiar kids to form her quirky team. The book tracks the team as they get to know each other and develop their team's identity as "The Souls."

33. The Crossover by Kwame Alexander (2015)

Alexander constructs a series of poems, some set to rhyme, some more of a narrative format. He writes with a poetic flair, with the strength being a sense of author voice and the theme of strong family. It reads as very believable and credible, with the main character immersed in the basketball culture and his self-absorbed young life. The only caution is a boyfriend-girlfriend relationship (tactfully handled) and references to rap artists that have little redeeming value. (R.R.)

34. Bud, Not Buddy by Christopher Paul Curtis (2000)

An orphan, Bud is living a difficult life during the Depression when he decides to leave his latest foster family and look for his father. His experiences in a racially tumultuous time with a cast of characters creates a fun reading experience, with Bud serving as an endearing and likable protagonist.

35. From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler by E.L. Konigsburg (1968)

Two siblings decide to run away from home and end up stumbling into a mystery at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The point of view may throw off the reader at first, but it all makes sense in the end. The creative plot and humorous characters make this one appealing to boys and girls.

36. The Eyes and the Impossible by Dave Eggers (2024)

Eggers weaves a wonderful story of a group of talking animals on an island led by three wise bison. The group desires to get the trio off the island with a scheme led by a dog who later learns he is half coyote. Perhaps the best part of the book are the pictures – all authentic classic paintings where an illustrator has painted the protagonist dog into the scene. Stunning. A redemptive story with a fun ending, with the only downsides the use of the Lord’s name in vain and references to the sun as their god.

37. The Whipping Boy by Sid Fleischman (1987)

Fleischman spins a short, humorous, and adventurous tale of a young prince and his whipping boy. They end up trading places (a la Prince and the Pauper) and through their escapades develop an appreciation for each other and become friends.

38. Island of the Blue Dolphins by Scott O'Dell (1961)

Incredibly, this story of Karana, a young girl stranded on an island off the California coast, is based on real events. The reader can't help but root for Karana as she battles the elements to survive. O'Dell's research and commitment to detail makes this a fascinating read.

39. The Slave Dancer by Paula Fox (1974)

A young boy is kidnapped by sailors of a slave ship and tasked with playing his fife for the slaves. Slave dancers move in their shackles, evidently to entertain the captain and to raise their spirits while keeping them in peak physical shape. It's a despicable and inhumane way to treat our fellow man. The story is told from the boy's viewpoint as the reader experiences the cruelty of the captain and those on the ship.

40. King of the Wind by Marguerite Henry (1949)

The main plot follows Agba, a young slave boy from Morocco who falls in love with Sham, a young colt born with competing destinies: the wheat ear on the horse's chest which portends problems, and a

white patch near his hoof, which promises prosperity. This is more complex than an “animal story,” and is surprisingly exciting and fast-paced.

41. Hitty, Her First Hundred Years by Rachel Field (1930)

Field tracks the life of Hitty - a doll - through a hundred years of adventures and various owners. Told from Hitty's first-person narrative, Hitty shares her exciting historical adventures: joining a whaling vessel where a fire requires them to abandon ship; becoming the idol of a native island tribe; being cast into the Mississippi River as a sign by penance of a girl who stole her. While a surprisingly engaging story, few boys will find this readable but girls will love it.

42. Hello, Universe by Erin Entrada Kelly (2018)

Kelly cleverly weaves a story of several different children, the plot converging when the characters meet up at the end. The book is fun in spite of a fatalistic worldview with somewhat silly reference to horoscopes and a young girl who is a self-proclaimed psychic (though she doesn't take herself too seriously). The story's main character gains victory over his fears in a whimsical and satisfying conclusion.

43. Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH by Robert C. O'Brien (1972)

Mrs. Frisby seeks out help for her young son Timothy, who is ill. In the process she meets up with a group of rats that live nearby, learning that they are a special breed indeed. They lived through a series of experiments after being captured by some scientists; in fact, they learned so much that they were able to free themselves and develop an advanced colony of their own. They are uniquely equipped to help Mrs. Frisby move her family home to a new location where she will be safer. The characters are likeable (especially for rats!) and the story is surprisingly engaging. (R.R.)

44. The Door in the Wall by Marguerite de Angeli (1950)

Set in medieval times, this is a well-told story of a boy who overcomes a tremendous personal challenge. It isn't an easy book to follow because of the archaic language and setting, but the themes of perseverance and faith are inspiring throughout.

45. *Thimble Summer* by Elizabeth Enright (1939)

Enright is a master of detail, figurative language, and concrete description. A young girl on a farm in the summer may seem mundane, but Enright's skill creates an adventure out of a story lacking in suspense. May be a bit slow for boys, but great for girls. Even better are Enright's *Gone Away Lake*, and *Return to Gone Away*.

46. *New Kid* written and illustrated by Jerry Craft (2020)

A story of a 7th grade boy as he seeks to adjust to a pretty big culture shock. Craft effectively dispels racial stereotypes and the unfairness of judging people based on superficial identities. Not without its politically-correct sensibilities as heavily prioritized by the ALA. This is the first graphic novel of the Newbery genre, highlighting Craft's impressive skills. (R.R.)

47. *The High King* by Lloyd Alexander (1969)

Similar to *The Lord of the Rings* in theme, setting, and characters, *The High King* is the fifth and final book in the *Chronicles of Prydain* series. Not having read the former books puts the reader at a bit of a disadvantage, but the second half of the book is much easier to follow than the first half. It's a classic medieval story with a clear battle of good against evil, magic characters (including a prophetic pig – that was a bit weird), and a strong sense of place. The pronunciation guide at the back of the book is helpful, though would be even better were it placed at the beginning of the book.

48. *The First State of Being* by Erin Estrada Kelly (2025)

The setting is 1999, and 12-year-old protagonist Michael Rosario and his babysitter meet a boy from the future, a time traveler who returns to experience the quintessential symbol of 90s living: the shopping mall. The science fiction setting, pop culture references and the dialogue maintains the reader's interest, though the book is tarnished by euphemistic language and some unhelpful crass references.

49. *The One and Only Ivan* by Katherine Applegate (2013)

The story of a gorilla who is trapped in a cage in a mall, where he befriends a new elephant that is brought to the mall to attract more people and tourists. The dialogue between the two elephants (the older one dies), the gorilla, and the dog is a creative exchange. Lots of positive messages here, but replete with a worldview of evolutionary assumptions.

50. **Shiloh** by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor (1992)

Marty, an 11-year-old boy, has a special connection with a small beagle owned by a spiteful and cruel neighbor. Marty's work ethic, determination, and graciousness help him achieve the somewhat predictable outcome. Point of view is a strength, eliciting the reader's emotion as the plot develops, and the reader is compelled to be in Marty's camp.

51. **The Grey King** by Susan Cooper (1976)

Cooper writes in a similar style as Tolkien. Set in Wales, the story includes lots of Welsh dialect (which actually makes it a bit hard to follow) and establishes the setting as a key element throughout the story. It's a tough read as a stand-alone, and the reader would benefit from reading the previous books in the series.

52. **Young Fu of the Upper Yangtze** by Elizabeth Lewis (1933)

Young Fu and his mother seek a better life. After securing a position as an apprentice for a coppersmith, Young Fu has many lessons to learn as he experiences some thrills: he is hunted by creditors after making an unwise purchase; bandits raid a ship where Young Fu helps deceive the thieves; and he is forced to protect the shop while the master is away and an ex-employee has ill intentions. But his diligence and persistence in spite of some growing pains pays off for him with a satisfying conclusion. (S.R.)

53. **Jacob Have I Loved** by Katherine Paterson (1981)

The title, taken from the book of Genesis, reveals the theme of the book: a rivalry of sorts between Caroline and Louise, the latter of whom seems to constantly live in her twin sister's shadow. Paterson weaves Scripture throughout the book, but also does not shy away from tougher subject matter, which requires a mature reader. Would be a tough go for boys. (S.R.)

54. **Maniac Magee** by Jerry Spinelli (1991)

Jeffrey (Maniac) Magee is an orphan forced to fend for himself as a nomad, using his supernatural athletic gifts to overcome challenges. Spinelli has a gift of describing the mundane with a creative twist to keep the attention of his reader, though at times with questionable language and themes. (R.R.)

55. Carry On, Mr. Bowditch by Jean Lee Latham (1956)

A biographical novel of Nathaniel Bowditch, a young man with a prodigious gift of numbers and sharp intellect. He serves as a ship's navigator and educator of persons, embodying virtues of determination, fortitude, and honor. Good book for boys, though the archaic language can get tricky. (S.R.)

56. When You Reach Me by Rebecca Stead (2010)

A 6th grade girl who struggles with typical problems with friendships, boys, and home issues. She receives some mysterious notes that appear unbelievably prophetic. She has no idea who is writing them; in fact, they seem written from someone in the future. The book's conclusion makes this worth reading.

57. The Girl Who Drank the Moon by Kelly Barnhill (2017)

Barnhill weaves a fantasy story that blends elements of Harry Potter with Lois Lowry's *The Giver*. The book is somewhat confusing, though those with a strong appetite for fantasy may find it less so. Barnhill employs effective word economy and excellent diction in this world of magic.

58. Lincoln: A Photobiography by Russell Freedman (1988)

A truly rare Newbery winner: a non-fictional work, and with numerous photos and drawings. The text covers Abraham Lincoln's personal and public life, illuminating for readers the influence and importance of our sixteenth president.

59. Merci Suárez Changes Gears by Meg Medina (2019)

The latest Newbery books have common elements, and this is no exception: a strong protagonist going through some type of life change; a specific push against a patriarchal theme that pushes girls down; a multi-cultural motif. Notable positive themes include the importance of family, excellence in education, and repentance.

60. Dead End in Norvelt by Jack Gantos (2012)

Gantos has a good sense of humor, though a bit irreverent at times. His worldview comes out in the book too: Naturalistic, tolerant (all religions are equal and God doesn't control anything, according to Jack's mom). He highlights the triumph of Americanism though, and the book provides a nostalgic look back at life in 1962.

61. All the Blues in the Sky by Renee Watson (2026)

A lot to like about this book: the touching and real struggle the protagonist (Sage) walks through after her best friend dies in a car crash on the way to her birthday party. She feels guilty for a variety of reasons, and her grief group helps her heal, introducing her to new friends even though she resists it.

The downside: an agenda (mentions of police brutality, racial profiling, etc.) and an afterward with a biased, imbalanced view of events.

62. Sarah, Plain and Tall by Patricia MacLachlan (1986)

Set in the Midwest in the late 1800s, a widower is looking for a wife and mother for his two children. It's a stark contrast to our current tech-saturated, media-dominated culture. Sensitively written, this is best for 4th grade and under.

63. Freewater by Amina Luqman-Dawson (2023)

I suppose it's not surprising that a book featuring a strong racial theme won the award in 2022. But this one isn't an agenda piece that paints all good black people virtuous and all white people corrupt. Community and sacrificial love are central themes here, as families seek to stay together and ink out their lives in the Florida swamps to remain free. Some great themes are woven throughout the book as slaves seek freedom from the shackles of an evil institution, though it lacks as the solution the one thing that frees us all: the saving grace and mercy of Jesus Christ.

64. Julie of the Wolves by Jean Craighead George (1973)

A 13-year-old Eskimo girl runs away from an arranged marriage. Desperate for food, she befriends a pack of wolves and depends on them for sustenance and friendship. Hard to imagine boys enjoying this book, though they would find the descriptions of the wolves interesting. Some mature subject matter, so best for older kids. (S.R.)

65. The Wheel on the School by Meindert DeJong (1955)

There are some redeeming qualities in this book and the plot twists are creative, but it's a strange book. Set in a small Dutch town of Shora, the town's youngsters long for storks to return and nest on the rooftops of the homes and building. Yes, that's basically the plot of this book. One has to wonder why storks are so interesting and important to the lifeblood of the town, but so be it.

66. The Higher Power of Lucky by Susan Patron (2007)

A bit of a typical storyline: An underprivileged orphan girl in a (very) small town overcomes self-doubts, and with a redemptive ending. Some unfortunate word choice is both a distraction and deterrent to the story, though the protagonist is hard not to like.

67. Johnny Tremain by Esther Forbes (1944)

An historical novel based on the Boston Revolt. Johnny is a strong-willed orphan working as a blacksmith until an accident forces him to choose an alternate vocation. History fans in particular will enjoy this one, even though it's a bit of a slog. (S.R.)

68. Good Masters! Sweet Ladies! Voices from a Medieval Village by Laura Amy Schlitz (2008)

Schlitz writes a compelling account of life in medieval times through biographical first-person accounts. The stories fit together well in presenting a realistic feel of communal life. She doesn't shrink back from some of the interesting if not stark realities of that time, including the birth of sheep, the Crusades, and falconry.

69. Ginger Pye by Eleanor Estes (1952)

Set in the early 1900s in Connecticut, *Ginger Pye* is a simple story of a family and their pet. Jerry desperately wants a dog, and he providentially gets an offer from an older boy to dust the church pews for a dollar. He gladly accepts, and promptly buys the dog of his dreams, but Ginger quickly disappears and the bulk of the book is occupied as they search for her. The highlight is the good-natured family story, likeable characters, and themes of community, faith, and an America where church served as an assumed and integral part of American life.

70. It's Like This, Cat by Emily Neville (1964)

This story is told from the first-person narrative of a teenager in New York who experiences the normal coming of age struggles: gaining independence, friendship challenges, and family dynamics. Not a particularly interesting plot, and better for older children. (S.R.)

71. The Tale of Despereaux: Being the Story of a Mouse, a Princess, Some Soup, and a Spool of Thread by Kate DiCamillo (2004)

DiCamillo weaves the lives of several characters – the most endearing being a small mouse named Despereaux – into a story that in the end proves that light does defeat darkness. Children will sympathize with Despereaux and find much of the book humorous. (R.R.)

72. Adam of the Road by Elizabeth Janet Gray (1943)

Adam is a minstrel's son in the Middle Ages. When separated from his father and his dog, he sets out to be reunited and must decide whether he desires to go to school or follow in his father's footsteps. Some strong Christian themes, but not a particularly enticing book for children to pick up. (S.R.)

73. The Hero and the Crown by Robin McKinley (1985)

McKinley tells a pretty good story, though integrates some odd things in a book designed for kids. The main character is a girl in a fictional land who desires to fight dragons (perhaps a bit of a feminist bent here). Aerin is a red-haired daughter of king and witch, so she isn't looked favorably upon by the townspeople. In the end good triumphs over evil in what appears to be an amoral universe. The reader isn't convinced that this is true and good. Better than the evil, certainly, but the lines are blurry.

74. Walk Two Moons by Sharon Creech (1995)

Salamanca (Sal) travels with her eccentric grandparents to Idaho in search of her mother. On the trip they visit historical sites as Sal tells stories to her grandparents about her life and reflects on her friendships. Creech includes some funny episodes, and though the story is not despairing, it does leave the reader feeling melancholy given the conclusion.

75. Secret of the Andes by Ann Nolan Clark (1953)

Cusi, an Incan boy in Peru is figuring out who he really is. He lives an isolated life in the foothills with an elderly man, and together they herd llamas. They live a simple life, making a trip to gather salt, shear the llamas, and eat roasted guinea pig. But there is something calling Cusi, and the "mystery" unfolds at the end of the book when he finds his calling and the true "secret" of the Andes. Beautifully written but slow and lacking in excitement.

76. Dear Mr. Henshaw by Beverly Cleary (1984)

Creatively written in a series of letters by a young boy to his favorite author, Mr. Henshaw. The boy is struggling with various challenges, including transition to a new school and his parents' divorce. This one is written for younger ages, ideally for about 4th grade.

77. Flora & Ulysses: The Illuminated Adventures by Kate DiCamillo (2014)

DiCamillo writes well, but the humor can't overcome the unbelievable characters and the hyper-fantastic plot. Young children will find it fun and funny, but the confluence of a seemingly-realistic story containing a flying squirrel who can type poetry just doesn't resonate.

78. A Visit to William Blake's Inn: Poems for Innocent and Experienced Travelers by Nancy Willard (1982)

As a tribute to the English poet and artist William Blake, these fantastic and magical poems who reside at William Blake's inn include dragons who bake, angels who make the beds, mischievous cats, a gentle old bear, and a sullen rat. More of a picture book – and a Caldecott Honor Book - the poems are aimed at older elementary-aged students.

79. The Midwife's Apprentice by Karen Cushman (1996)

A young girl with no name and no family desires to serve as an apprentice midwife in medieval England. She overcomes myriad challenges with grit and determination. It's a short book, with the focus on vocation of midwifery and many of the superstitions common in the middle ages. While she includes some humor, Cushman also adds some raw and frank images. Cushman makes it informative for the adult, but hard to imagine many children would find this interesting. (N.R.)

80. Daniel Boone by James Daugherty (1940)

This biography of Boone reads more like a hagiography, but the history and action serve as a quick read and interesting study in literary criticism. It's also the most unique book on the Newbery list for several reasons. First, the book is nearly impossible to find and likely the only Newbery book out of print. Second, it's the most politically incorrect book on the list, romanticizing Boone, vilifying the Indians, and in effect condoning slavery by not calling out the inherent evils of the trade - perhaps a product of the times, and perhaps too easy to point out this flaw. Third, the pictures tell a story unfavorable to our black brothers and to the Indians. The pictures even portray the American women as pugnacious yet beautiful, brandishing weapons as they fight off savages. Fourth, the author promotes a solid view of the

Bible as the driving force for the Americans, the source of truth and conduct. Overly idealistic, though representative of the time and easy to critique eighty years later.

81. Invincible Louisa: The Story of the Author of Little Women by Cornelia Meigs (1934)

A biography of Louisa May Alcott, with lots of anecdotes from her youth and key details from her life. The highlight is a refreshing, God-centered household in which she was raised. Not an easy book to read (very little dialogue), and a book few boys would find interesting.

82. M. C. Higgins, the Great by Virginia Hamilton (1975)

One of the strangest books on the Newbery list. An extremely hard book to follow with references that I can't imagine children would find comprehensible. While M.C. Higgins is an interesting kid (his hobby is to climb a pole in the yard) and the reader can enjoy some of the family unity and uniqueness of the main character's plight, it is nevertheless an odd story. Hamilton's books, *The House of Dies Drear*, and *The Mystery of Drear House*, are much better and highly recommended.

83. The Dark Frigate by Charles Hawes (1924)

Hawes spins a good story, not shying away from the goriness and wretchedness of the pirate life. While some characters are likable and the plot sequences exciting, they are wedged between long parts of slow narrative, confusing language, and archaic words and dialect that is hard to follow. For engaging books with pirate themes, *Treasure Island* (Stephenson) and *Moonfleet* (J. Meade Faulkner) are much better. (S.R.)

84. The Story of Mankind by Hendrik Willem van Loon (1922)

This mammoth book was chosen as the first Newbery winner in 1922 and it's a bit hard to see why. It's a dense and detailed book that chronicles thousands of years of history. Van Loon certainly took on an auspicious project, sprinkling his drawings about every 3-5 pages. He's a true Darwinian, treating the Bible as myth and prominently featuring the descent of man from the primordial soup. At a whopping 490 pages, it's a slog that only children who are die-hard history fans could dream of completing. (S.R.)

85. Dicey's Song by Cynthia Voigt (1983)

This is a typical coming of age story, with a highly capable girl in a tough family situation. Dicey is the oldest of four children, living with their grandmother after their mom evidently had a nervous

breakdown. Grandmother is loving in her own way, but too stern and matter-of-fact, and takes Dicey to visit their mother (her daughter) in the hospital after learning she is dying. Requiring a boy to read this is likely to ruin the gift of reading for him, but mature girls could stomach the sadness and the seriousness of the book. (S.R.)

86. *Onion John* by Joseph Krumgold (1960)

A 12-year-old boy befriends a man in the town who everyone likes but few really know. He's from a foreign country, and eccentric but kind. A typical coming-of-age story as Andy grapples with important life choices and how best to help John navigate key decisions as society is advancing faster than John would prefer. Not a lot of action in this book, so best for high-volume readers. (S.R.)

87. *Joyful Noise: Poems for Two Voices* by Paul Fleischman (1989)

Fleischman crafts some great poems, drawing on the novelty of the "two voices" – two oral readers at times simultaneously reading the poem. All the poems revolve around insects, and the author blends strong word choice with word economy and the wonder of each species to draw out the joyful noises. Unlikely to appeal to kids, other than those who embrace poetry.

88. *Waterless Mountain* by Laura Adams Armer (1932)

The book lacks a coherent plot and is more episodic in tracking the growth of a young Navajo boy. The writer is well-informed of the history and cultural artifacts and practices of the Navajo people; Armer also describes things well, albeit often poetic to the point of making things abstruse.

89. *Summer of the Swans* by Betsy Byars (1971)

Another coming-of-age story about a 14-year-old girl with swiftly changing emotions with a variety of obstacles to overcome: her love for her younger, mildly retarded brother; her relationship with her attractive older sister; her battle with a boy whom she hates with a passion.

90. *...And Now Miguel* by Joseph Krumgold (1954)

Miguel is the middle child in a family that raises sheep in New Mexico. As he seeks to find a way to meaningfully contribute to his family, he also dreams of visiting the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. He finally gets his opportunity when his brother is called into military service. Much of the book is a bland and somewhat mundane dialogue that most children will likely find tedious.

91. **The Last Cuentista** by Donna Barba Higuera (2022)

This book checks all the favorite boxes of the progressive committee: a female protagonist, a dystopian and futuristic setting, a non-white, non-native speaker, and a healthy blend of agnosticism (a prayer is offered to a female god). The plot is creative but hard to follow, and the futuristic premise hard to believe. The theme of stories, memory, and storytelling is good, as is the value of preserving the distinction of humanness, but likely only appealing a small group of children. (SR)

92. **Miss Hickory** by Carolyn Sherwin Bailey (1947)

With vivid descriptions, whimsical animal characters, and an orchard setting, Bailey takes the reader back to a bygone era. Miss Hickory is a doll who takes on a real personality in the book; while she is charming and has the foibles of a real person, her interaction with the creatures such as Frog, Groundhog, Squirrel, and Crow comes across as strange and disturbing. (N.R.)

93. **The White Stag** by Kate Seredy (1938)

A story about the migration of the Huns and Magyars from Asia to Europe, and primarily about the overwhelming precocity of Attila the Hun as a young man. A blend of apparent fiction with fact, it reads more like a Greek epic. Though a short book with great pictures, it can be hard to follow and unlikely to engross most young readers.

94. **Smoky, the Cowhorse** by Will James (1927)

Ideal for those who delight in horses, dream of the rodeo, and long for adventures in the corral. This is all about horses and cowboys with such detail at times that all but the most devout horse lover will be overwhelmed. Even for lovers of a good nature story, young readers will find the length - over 300 pages - difficult to wade through and the pacing slow outside of a few interesting subplots. (S.R.).

95. **Dobry** by Monica Shannon (1935)

Dobry is a young man living with his family in Bulgaria who is raised to be a farmer but has artistic gifts and years to pursue his favorite craft: sculpting. Throughout the book the reader experiences the traditions (human ice melting competition, ice-hole diving), stories (the Christmas Bird), and myths handed down from the family. Positives are a Christian worldview, but this is a slow read few children will find interesting enough to finish.

96. The Graveyard Book by Neil Gaiman (2009)

A boy's family is murdered, but he manages to escape to a local graveyard, where he is raised by ghosts. Gaiman is a creative and gifted writer, but this is a dark and macabre book, with themes devoid of truth, beauty, and goodness. (N.R.)

97. Shen of the Sea by Arthur Bowie Chrisman (1926)

As a child Chrisman was attracted to the poems and stories of Edgar Allan Poe; if only the adventure and mystery in Poe showed up these folktales. While some have serendipitous conclusions, many end so abruptly as to leave the reader wondering if pages are missing. Others are bizarre and disturbing. Each story has a distinct theme: how tea was invented to banish sleep; why Chinese use wooden chopsticks; the surprise invention of gunpowder. But really this is a tough book to complete, and only the most intrepid young readers will have the stamina and interest level to finish it.

98. The Cat Who Went to Heaven by Elizabeth Coatsworth (1931)

An artist is asked to construct a painting of the Buddha, so he does so with many animals that have shown character and sacrifice. All but the cat, that is. With the Buddhist theme, reincarnation of the animals present with Buddha in his last days, and the mystical and confusing worldview therein, it's hard to recommend this one. (N.R.)

99. Last Stop on Market Street by Matt de la Peña (2016)

A children's book with great illustrations. It's an unfortunate and inappropriate choice for an award based on "the best contribution to children's literature" and an offense to writers in the genre of chapter books.

100. When you Trap a Tiger, written by Tae Keller (2021)

It was bound to happen and finally did: The ALA found their book to promote a same-sex relationship with young people. While not the focus of the book, it nevertheless come across as intentional and likely garnered special consideration from the selection committee. Lily, her sister Sam, and their mother move to Seattle to live with their beloved and eccentric grandmother; much of the book chronicles the emotional challenges of the move to a new place, as well as grappling with the sad diagnosis of their grandmother's brain cancer. The book contains some touching parts, some deft writing, as well as a mix of Eastern spiritual mysticism throughout. (N.R.)

101. **Gay Neck, the Story of a Pigeon** by Dhan Gopal Mukerji (1928)

The name of the book says it all: the story of a pigeon. Doesn't sound too interesting, does it? It's not. The first half of the book is like watching Planet Earth with only sound and no video. Pigeons are interesting creatures, actually, but the story elevates the pigeon to almost human status, in part because of the Buddhist worldview embedded in this story.

102. **Tales from Silver Lands** by Charles Finger (1925)

Have you ever listened to a person speak for a few minutes, only to realize you cannot remember one thing the person said? That is how I felt about these stories. While fairy tales are often odd to modern sensibilities, these stories ramble and read like first drafts in desperate need of editing. With few exceptions, the stories are unsatisfying, confusing, and sorely lacking in word economy.

103. **Kira-Kira** by Cynthia Kadohata (2005)

Parts of the story are endearing - the close relationship of Katie, the narrator, and her older sister Lynn; their real struggles growing up as Japanese-Americans in 1950's Midwest; their move from an apartment in Iowa to a small house in Georgia. Other parts are difficult - discrimination they and their parents faced in the community and at work; Lynn's declining health and death from anemia and lymphoma. The book is marred by some objectional content, including vulgarities rarely found in Newbery winners, and a choppy writing style with minimalistic, laborious sentence length that distracts from the flow of the book. (N.R.)

104. **Missing May** by Cynthia Rylant (1993)

A young girl is taken in by elderly relatives to live with them in their trailer. They lovingly welcome her, but the woman dies and the man is unsure if he is able to care for the girl. With the help of a precocious, odd neighbor boy, they journey to visit a Spiritualist who they think has the ability to connect with the dead, only to find that she has died. The book ends when they see an owl, a reminder (hints of reincarnation) of their lost loved one. It's a strange and depressing book with a warped, pantheistic worldview that kids will find confusing if not alarming. Pass on this one. (N.R.)

105. **Criss Cross** by Lynne Rae Perkins (2006)

Essentially this is a book about a search for meaning, where meaning and purpose are hard to find. The worldview is very much pantheistic, integrating Buddhism and Hinduism, resulting in little hope and no

real grounding in truth. Sprinkled throughout the book are crass and vulgar language, as well as themes not appropriate for any student younger than seventh grade. (N.R.)