

The Appeal of Caldecott Award Winning Books and Their Importance in the Classroom

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### Abstract

The winners of the Randolph Caldecott Medal for picture books can be an excellent tool for teachers to enhance student learning. Teachers must understand the purpose of the Caldecott Medal and the criteria that the committee uses to select winners. Educators must also recognize the elements of Caldecott books that appeal to children including their illustrations, characters, and genres. Caldecott Medal winners can be used to enhance student learning in a variety of ways. They can be used with many grades, integrated with different subjects, related to important character principles, and used as a source of inspiration. Understanding the appeal and potential uses of Caldecott books can help teachers to value these books as vital resources for their classrooms.

### The Appeal of Caldecott Award Winning Books and Their Importance in the Classroom

Each year countless new books capture the hearts of children and teachers all over America. The sheer volume of children's literature published each year can overwhelm readers and educators, making them think that they will never be able to choose the best titles to read and use in the classroom. Children and teachers can narrow the field of potential books by focusing on award-winning literature such as picture books that have won the Randolph Caldecott Medal. In order to use these books to their full advantage, teachers must understand how the Caldecott Medal came to be, and what makes Caldecott Medal books stand out from other children's literature. What is crucial for teachers to realize is that the Caldecott award not only signifies that a book has stunning illustrations, but also that it has quality writing. Also, although the specific features of each Caldecott winner are unique, over the years, trends can be seen in the elements that make the books appealing to children. Teachers should be informed about these appealing elements so that they can select the appropriate books for their students. Overall, Caldecott award winning books are a vital resource for teachers because their vivid illustrations, ability to evoke emotions, relatable protagonists, and various genres appeal to children; furthermore, they can benefit many ages of students, be integrated with all the core subject areas, connected to character principles, and used to inspire students.

#### **History of the Caldecott Medal**

Before teachers can examine the appeal of Caldecott books, or successfully implement them in their classrooms, they should be aware of what exactly the Caldecott Medal is, and how it came to be. According to the Association for Library Services for Children (ALSC) (2008), the idea for the picture book award was proposed in 1937 by Frederic G. Melcher (*The Randolph Caldecott Medal*). Melcher, a prominent book publisher and editor of *Publisher's Weekly*

(Harvard Square Library, 1963), was concerned that picture book artists were not being honored adequately compared to authors of children's literature who had the chance to receive the Newbery Medal each year (*The Randolph Caldecott Medal*, 2010). Following Melcher's suggestion and the subsequent approval of various divisions of the Association for Library Service to Children, the Caldecott Medal was created as an award "to be given to the artist who created the most distinguished picture book of the year" (*Terms and criteria*, 2008, para. 1). The committee decided to name the medal after the well-known English illustrator Randolph Caldecott, whose illustrations were noted for their uniqueness "in both their humor, and their ability to create a sense of movement, vitality, and action that complemented the stories they accompanied" (*The Randolph Caldecott Medal*, 2010, para. 5). Just as Randolph J. Caldecott's illustrations were revolutionary for his time, Melcher's suggestion to create the Caldecott Medal was also ground-breaking as it gave illustrators new incentive to create high quality picture books.

The establishment of the award was finalized with Rene Paul Chambellan's design of the Caldecott Medal itself (*The Randolph Caldecott Medal*, 2010). The bronze seal, featuring a sample of Caldecott's illustrations has now become a well-known symbol of excellence in the realm of children's literature (*The Randolph Caldecott Medal*, 2010). Although the inscription on the medal states that the honor is "[a]warded annually by the Children's and School Librarians Sections of the American Library Association," (para. 1) it is no longer correct. Starting in 1958 winning illustrators have been chosen chiefly by the Association for Library Service to Children (*The Randolph Caldecott Medal*, 2010) Furthermore, in 1978 separate committees were designated to award the Newbery and Caldecott Medals; these committees official began their roles in the selection of the winning books in 1989 (*The Randolph Caldecott*

*Medal*, 2010). Regardless of the official name of the Caldecott committee, the books the members have selected as winners have had tremendous impact on children's literature, meaning that teachers must understand their distinction.

### **Caldecott Medal Criteria**

Due to the widespread influence of Caldecott award books teachers should be aware of the standards that the ALSC has for choosing the medal winners, so that they can be sure of the types of books they are bringing into their classrooms. As stated by the ALSC (2008), the Caldecott Medal "shall be awarded annually to the artist of the most distinguished American picture book for children published by an American publisher in the United States in English during the preceding year" (*Terms and criteria*, 2008, para. 1). The committee also specifies that the artistic work must be authentic and that only illustrators that are U.S. citizens may receive the award (*Terms and criteria*, 2008). The fact that all Caldecott Medal winners are truly American should encourage teachers that they are unique and valuable resources designed to suit the students in their classrooms.

To further specify what books may be considered for the Caldecott Medal, the ALSC defines many of the terms of the award. Significant definitions include that "[a] picture book has a collective unity of story-line, theme, or concept, developed through a series of pictures of which the book is comprised," and that children up to age fourteen must be the "intended audience" (*Terms and criteria*, 2008, para. 5) of such books. Teachers of older students must note the ALSC's definition of children as up to age fourteen or they might neglect to use Caldecott books that would be age appropriate.

In addition to clearly defining the terms of the Caldecott Medal, the ALSC has comprised an extensive list of criteria that committee members must consider before choosing a winning book.

When determining if a book is truly noteworthy the Caldecott board must judge how well the illustrative methods were employed, how well the pictures represent the story's "plot, theme, characters, setting, mood" (*Terms and criteria*, 2008, para. 13) and other features. They also must be sure that the illustrations are well-suited to the book's intended readers (*Terms and criteria*, 2008). Aside from focusing on the illustrations, the committee must also be sure that the book is "not dependent on other media...for its enjoyment" (*Terms and criteria*, 2010, para.14) and that the other elements of the book, including its text and organization do not detract from its quality (*Terms and criteria*, 2008). Overall, anyone seeking to read or use Caldecott winners should be assured that the books have been through a rigorous selection process and have been deemed as worthy.

### **Appeal of the Books**

#### **Unique Illustrations**

While a wide variety of books have been considered for and won the Caldecott Medal, when viewed collectively the books have common elements that make them appealing to children with their illustrations being at the forefront. Even among the many styles of illustrations, children are specifically drawn to certain features. Specifically, children seem to be most excited by illustrations that push the confines of realism with their content and perspectives, or both.

Children may be more accepting of and drawn to absurdities in illustrations because they have such vibrant imaginations. In her article entitled "Imaginative Leaps," Susan Leach (1998) attests to the strength of children's imaginations when she states that "the freshness of children's unstructured, untrained thought often allows them to wander in realms that skepticism and rationality have closed to adults" (para. 3). Although Leach (1998) expresses concern that



illustrations may stifle children's imaginations she particularly refers to overly elaborate ones that adults appreciate more than children. The nature of the illustrations that Leach is wary of stand in direct contrast to the unique scenes depicted in many recent Caldecott winners. The creativity of the illustrations in numerous Caldecott books could actually be said to cultivate children's imaginations.

David Wiesner's three Caldecott Medal books, *Tuesday*, *The Three Pigs*, and *Flotsam* are all contain illustrations that challenge children's imaginations (*Caldecott Medal Winners*, 2010). The one unique aspect common to *Tuesday*, *The Three Pigs*, and *Flotsam* that children enjoy discovering is that they are wordless books that rely entirely on pictures to tell their stories. Aside from the shared attribute of wordlessness, the books diverge into completely different realms of imagination.

As children look through *Tuesday* they will see frogs soaring through the sky on lily pads in the middle of the night which will spark their imaginations and prompt countless questions (Zingher, 2010). While *Tuesday* plants the idea of flying frogs in children's minds, *The Three Pigs* offers readers a completely original experience of a classic story. Although the story starts according to tradition, the chaos begins after the wolf's breath propels the pigs out of the pages of their story (Zaleski et al., 2001). The pigs' surprising exodus leads to all sorts of creative mayhem as they dart in and out of other stories each characterized by a different artistic medium. According to Gillian Engberg of *Booklist*, Wiesner's ingenious story "encourages kids to leap beyond the familiar, to think critically about conventional stories and illustration, and perhaps to flex their imaginations and create wonderfully subversive stories of their own" (Engberg, 2001, p. 1761). Overall, the unusual plot of *The Three Pigs* as depicted through unusual pictures of many styles excites children and draws them to this Caldecott winner.

*Flotsam*, Wiesner's third Caldecott Medal winner, depicts the story of a young boy who discovers a miraculous undersea world through the film of an old camera that washes up on the beach. Just as he does with *Tuesday* and *The Three Pigs*, Wiesner offers readers unique views of ordinary objects and gives them fantastic ideas, but with *Flotsam* he also explores a new way of organizing smaller pictures within one page (Erbach, 2007). Although Caroline Geck (2007) suggests that some children may have trouble understanding the jumbled composition of *Flotsam's* pictures, she does attest to the fact that "older readers will delight in piecing together the pictures chronologically and will also enjoy the gripping artwork" (p. 71). Because *Flotsam* has no text-based plot could be assumed that children are drawn to the book and other similar Caldecott books for their original illustrations.

Although Wiesner's books are the most explicit examples of children's enjoyment of atypical illustrations in Caldecott award winners, many other books subtly feature similar elements. Even one of the earliest Caldecott winners, Robert McCloskey's 1942 winner, *Make Way for Ducklings*, offers children interesting views of the world (*Caldecott Medal Winners*, 2010) as Mr. and Mrs. Mallard search for a safe place to start a family in the midst of a large city. Throughout the book, McCloskey uses a variety of "vantage points" (Erbach, 2006, p. 17) including both zoomed in and distant views of the ducks, as well as aerial perspectives as the ducks soar over the city streets. The thrilling experience of looking down on the world from above has helped make *Make Way for Ducklings* a classic book that according to Lee Galda's (1990) *Reading Teacher* article entitled "Old Friends" "can still hold spellbound a room full of primary grade children" (p. 51). The fact that children enjoy looking at the world from obscure angles is reinforced by the numerous other Caldecott award winners that have built on of the trend set by McCloskey with *Make Way for Ducklings* including, but not limited to, *Jumanji*

(Pollack, 1981) and *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* (MacPherson, 2008). Although all Caldecott books are generally enjoyed for their illustrations, those that feature unusual views of the world seem to be especially appealing to children. The fact that children enjoy looking at things from different perspectives should encourage teachers to plan imagination cultivating activities for their students and to use creative Caldecott books in their classroom.

### **Colorful, Detailed Illustrations**

Even those Caldecott books whose illustrations do not explore different ways of looking at the world can appeal to children because of their bold colors and interesting details. Apart from a few exceptions, almost all Caldecott award winning books are illustrated with an array of bold colors. While most people seem to appreciate colorful artwork to some extent, the results of a study conducted by Chris J. Boyatzis and Reenu Varghese (1994) suggest that children especially enjoy bright colors because of the emotions they elicit. Over the years, many Caldecott illustrators have successfully created artwork that caters to children's emotional connections to and overall enjoyment of color. One example, *Song and Dance Man*, the 1989 medal winner illustrated by Stephen Gammell (*Caldecott Medal Winners*, 2010), exudes excitement from every page with bold colored pencil illustrations (Keenan, 1989). The primary colors, such as red and yellow, featured in Gammell's illustrations are ones that children most often associate with pleasurable emotions (Boyatzis & Varghese, 1994). In response to children's delight in bright colors many other Caldecott books besides *Song and Dance Man* also include vibrant illustrations that stimulate children's emotions.

Along with appreciating colorful pictures, children often enjoy poring over large, highly detailed illustrations. Despite the fact that Sara Tulk (2005), a teacher and the author of the article "Reading Picture Books Is Serious Fun," does not specifically mention Caldecott books,

she does make an observation that her students “loved the details of the double-spread pictures” in a book she shared with her class (p. 91). She determined that her students enjoyed the large illustrations because “every time they looked they could spot something new” (p. 91). Tulk’s discovery that children delight in searching through pictures for new details is one of the reasons why Caldecott winners such as *Joseph Had a Little Overcoat* and *Rapunzel* are so popular. Though the styles of the images of both books are completely different, they both contain abundant details.

*Rapunzel*, written and illustrated by Paul O. Zelinsky (1997), tells the classic story of the girl trapped in a tower by an evil witch until a prince rescues her by climbing up her long hair. Zelinsky’s illustrations capture the elaborate Renaissance style of Italy, yet they remain appealing to children with their “rich and elegant” colors and “meticulous details” (Loer, 1998, pp. L5). Furthermore, the book features several two page spreads that allow children to take their time searching the pictures for new and exciting elements. In contrast, the illustrations of *Joseph Had a Little Overcoat*, “a tale adapted from a Yiddish folk song,” (Ludke, 2000, p. 112) are more rustic than highly realistic, yet they still appeal to children for their intricacies. In her *School Library Journal* review of the book, Linda Ludke comments that the “[s]triking gouache, watercolor, and collage illustrations are chock-full of witty details-letters to read, proverbs on the walls, even a fiddler on the roof” (p. 112). As children read *Joseph Had a Little Overcoat* and other Caldecott award winners they are excited by the prospect of hunting for small details amidst the large illustrations. Teachers should remember this fact and should introduce Caldecott books in the classroom to provide children with an opportunity to develop their attention to details.

### **Evocation of Enjoyable Feelings**

While some Caldecott books elicit excitement and emotional responses primarily through their countless details and bold colors, others appeal to children because they evoke more calming emotions. Numerous Caldecott books call to mind pleasant feelings associated with family, with two of the best examples being *Owl Moon* and *The House in the Night*. The twenty one year span between these two winners suggests that soothing family stories appeal to children across generations.

*Owl Moon*, which won the medal in 1988, is the result of author Jane Yolen and John Schoenherr's excellent collaboration (*Caldecott Medal Winners*, 2010). Yolen's text, complemented by Schoenherr's beautiful illustrations, tells the story of a young girl who goes out in the woods with her father on a wintry night to look for an owl. Kay E. Vandergrift (1987) praises the work of Yolen and Schoenherr in her *School Library Journal* book review when she says that "[t]he illustrations perfectly match the mood and sensitivity of the verbal imagery" (p. 78). The overall mood of the story is peaceful and readers are able to feel the comfort of family despite the wintry atmosphere (Cheatham & Korvacs, 1988). The soothing nature of *Owl Moon* makes the book especially appealing to younger children who enjoy bedtime stories.

*The House in the Night* also exemplifies how an author and illustrator partnership can result in a calming story that pleases children. The simple story of *The House in the Night* invites readers into a warmly lit home full of familiar objects and then takes them out soaring on the wings of a bird through the night sky ("Gaiman, Krommes Win Newbery, Caldecott," 2009). The *Children & Libraries* article reporting it as the 2009 Caldecott medalist praises Kromme's illustrations which "evoke the warmth and comfort of home and family, as well as the joys of exploring the wider world" (p. 52). Numerous other reviews of *The House in the Night* also

noted the comforting, yet exhilarating emotions that readers feel as they look through the book. Furthermore, reviewers note that the calming nature of the book makes it one that will be cherished by both adults and children ([review of the book *The House in the Night*], 2008). Teachers should understand that while gentle books like *Owl Moon* and *The House in the Night* may be designed primarily for younger children they still represent one of the main reasons why Caldecott books are appealing.

### **Relatable Protagonists**

Another element of many Caldecott award books that draws children in are their relatable protagonists as conveyed by both the illustrations and text. Although the Caldecott Medal winners cover a wide range of genres and topics that not all children can understand, a large number of them at least feature main characters that display realistic personality traits. David L. Russell (2005), author of *Literature for Children: A Short Introduction*, supports the idea that children, especially between the ages of four and seven, appreciate realistic stories because they are in the “Intuitive Stage” of what Jean Piaget named the “Preoperational Period” of child development (p. 31). While numerous factors contribute to whether or not a story is realistic, true-to-life characters are a necessity if a story is to be completely valid (Russell, 2005). However, as demonstrated by several Caldecott winners, the strength of a relatable protagonist may overcome other improbabilities and allow children to enjoy stories that are a blend of reality and fantasy.

Emily Arnold McCully’s *Mirette on the High Wire*, which won the award in 1993 (*Caldecott Medal Winners*, 2010), is a key example of a Caldecott book that portrays a realistic main character that children appreciate despite their inability to directly relate to the overall plot line. *Mirette on the High Wire* is the story of a young French girl named Mirette who learns to

tightrope walk from the former famous tightrope walker, Bellini. Despite his past glory, Bellini has developed a fear of the wire that Mirette eventually helps him conquer. Even though the events of the story are less accessible to American children, the book is still appealing because of Mirette's endearing, childlike personality. Like most young children Mirette has an adventurous spirit and intense curiosity. When Bellini mysteriously arrives at Mirette's mother's boarding house, Mirette is immediately wonders about him, just as most young children are intrigued by new people and new situations. After children connect to Mirette's initial spark of curiosity they can easily understand and share her strong desire to walk the wire and to convince Bellini to face his fears. In her review of *Mirette on the High Wire* for *Horn Book Magazine* Mary M. Burns (1992) describes Mirette first as "fascinated" (para. 1) by Bellini's talent, and then stubborn as she tries to walk the wire herself. Both character qualities make Mirette realistic, and therefore, relatable to an audience of children.

Just as children can relate to Mirette because of her curiosity and determination, they are also able to connect to the unnamed main character of *Flotsam*, even though the story strays far from reality. Though *Flotsam* has no text-based plot, Wiesner clearly conveys the childlike emotions of his main character through his high quality, uniquely arranged illustrations. For instance, even before the camera washes ashore, the boy's curious nature is revealed as he peers through a magnifying glass and gets down at eye-level with a peculiar sea creature. Caroline Geck (2007) affirms Wiesner's success at creating a relatable protagonist in her *Library Media Connection* review when she states that "[u]sing sequences of photos done in watercolors, the author introduces an inquisitive character...The camera and the mystery of the sea fuel his wild imagination" (p. 71). After the boy discovers the camera, Wiesner further characterizes him by revealing his childlike impatience and restlessness as he waits for the film to develop. A series

of small pictures fill a page with scenes of the boy constantly shifting positions on a bench outside the store offering one hour photo development. This scene of eager expectation manifested through fidgety behavior provides a strong opportunity for children, especially rambunctious boys, to relate to the young boy. The unique and somewhat absurd nature of *Flotsam* supports the idea that children might be more likely to overcome peculiarities and enjoy bizarre elements of books as long as they have a relatable main character. This realization can guide teachers to select Caldecott books with realistic protagonists to motivate their children to explore new ideas.

### **Genres**

While the relatable protagonists of many Caldecott books enable children combinations of reality and fantasy, most award winners are appealing simply because of their straightforward genres. In *Literature for Children*, Russell (2005) elaborates extensively on which genres different ages of children enjoy based on their stages of development. Janice DeLong (2009), an Associate Professor of English at Liberty University, summarizes Russell's ideas in her lecture on "The Child and Literature." Almost all the genres Russell and DeLong describe are represented on the list of Caldecott Medal winners which implies that the books maintain their appeal throughout different stages of childhood.

Caldecott award books are most obviously appealing simply because they are picture books. DeLong (2009) asserts that different levels of picture books are enjoyed from age two all the way up to age twelve. DeLong's age limit could potentially be extended even two more years due to the ALSC's designation of fourteen as the cap of childhood (*Terms and criteria*, 2008). On the other hand, one genre specifically suited to two- to four-year-olds that is represented among Caldecott award winners is nursery rhymes (DeLong, 2009). In fact, the



1946 Caldecott Medal winner, *The Rooster Crows*, is actually a collection of nursery rhymes (*Caldecott Medal Books*, 2010). Although *The Rooster Crows* is an older book, children can still get pleasure from its classic rhymes and poems.

Even the many kinds of folktales, which are especially appealing to children from ages two to seven (DeLong, 2009), can be found on the Caldecott Medal list. When defining what he calls “folk literature,” Russell (2005) delineates many subgenres including “Animal Tales,” “Fables,” “Marchen or Wonder Tales,” and “Pourquoi Tales” among others (pp. 150-158). Countless Caldecott books such as *Kitten’s First Full Moon*, *The Three Pigs*, *Make Way for Ducklings* etc. could be categorized as animal tales that appeal to young children because their main characters are in fact animals (Russell, 2005). One Caldecott book that both features animals and falls into the fable category of folklore (Russell, 2005) is Jerry Pinkney’s *The Lion and the Mouse*. According to the ALSC’s announcement in *Children & Libraries* of *The Lion and the Mouse* as the 2010 winner, Pinkney’s tale actually is a retelling of one of Aesop’s classic fables (“Stead, Pinkney Win Newbery, Caldecott,” 2010). The 1955 winner, *Cinderella, or the Little Glass Slipper* (*Caldecott Medal Winners*, 2010), fits into what Russell (2005) labels “Marchen or Wonder Tales” (p. 150) which are miraculous tales of good vs. evil, with the primary characters often being royalty. The dramatic plots and supernatural elements of “Marchen or Wonder Tales” about princesses like Cinderella have captivated children for generations and continue to make Caldecott books of this style appealing.

A less common, but still attractive type of folk literature called a “pourquoi tale” is also represented by Caldecott winners. According to Russell (2005), “[a] pourquoi tale seeks to explain natural phenomena” (p. 152); therefore, the Caldecott medalist, *Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People’s Ears* is a prime example. Teachers should have no trouble understanding why students

are fascinated by “pourquoi tales” due to the fact that children naturally question everything in their surroundings. Although young children are most likely unable to distinguish between the various categories of folktales, they still enjoy the unique qualities of the folktale genre; consequently, many Caldecott Medal winners are attractive.

As children get older they enjoy different genres of Caldecott books that also fit into the genres that DeLong lists. For example, around the ages of seven to nine children are excited both by “realistic stories” and “stories of other lands” (DeLong, 2009). Although several of the Caldecott books noted for their relatable protagonists have some less realistic elements, numerous others conform to realism in their entirety. *Song and Dance Man* for example tells the story of a probable encounter between a grandfather and his grandchildren, and *Owl Moon* features both realistic illustrations and a believable plot about a father and his child.

On a contrasting note, many Caldecott books take place in unusual locations; this too excites children around middle childhood. According to Maurice Sendak (1965), children appreciate fantasies like his Caldecott Medal winning adventure in a distant land, *Where the Wild Things Are*, because they allow them to escape from the frustrations of life. Therefore, although surface-level elements of some books may initially captivate children, the psychological relief offered by the journey through the pages may subconsciously be what makes them so appealing. Educators should recognize children’s desire to travel far away through literature, and should therefore, provide students with Caldecott books such as *Where the Wild Things Are* to help them to escape from their daily struggles.

Although older children can still benefit from the escaping to other worlds through literature, they tend to be attracted to genres that are less represented by Caldecott award winners. Nevertheless, nine to twelve year-olds can still find pleasure in Caldecott books that

feature elements of “high fantasy” (DeLong, 2009). Russell (2005), who uses the term “heroic fantasy” (pp. 221), characterizes such fantasies as stories in which heroes set out on great quests to save the world from evil. *St. George and the Dragon*, which won the Caldecott Medal in 1985 (*Caldecott Medal Winners*, 2010) is a prime example of an epic hero tale. According to the Amazon.com “Product Description” (2010), *St. George and the Dragon* is a retelling of a portion of Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*, “in which George the Red Cross Knight, slays the dreadful dragon that has been terrorizing the countryside for years and brings peace to the land” (para. 3). The heroic elements of *St. George and the Dragon*, and other similar Caldecott books like *Rapunzel*, make them highly satisfying reads for older children. Teachers of upper elementary grades should consider students’ interest in hero tales when selecting literature for their classroom, and should remember that Caldecott books can help meet their needs.

Caldecott Medal winners appeal to children for numerous reasons involving both their visual and textual elements. The fact that Caldecott books are well-catered to children’s interests should encourage teachers to use them in their classrooms. If teachers recognize the appealing features of Caldecott award books, they can be confident that bringing them into their classrooms would delight most children. In addition to pleasing students, teachers can employ Caldecott winners to enhance instruction and overall classroom learning.

### **The Importance Uses of Caldecott Books in the Classroom**

#### **Classroom Literacy Instruction and Reading Materials**

While children have many reasons for choosing to read Caldecott winners for pleasure, teachers can broaden the scope of the award winners to make them valuable resources for classroom reading and literacy instruction. When deciding what books to use in their classrooms, teachers should not disregard Caldecott Medal winners as merely well-illustrated

books that do not feature high quality writing. On the contrary, many, if not all Caldecott books have interesting and well-written plots, characters, and overall story-lines that make them great reading material for the classroom. In their article entitled “Caldecott Medal books and readability levels: Not just ‘picture’ books” Julia Chamberlain and Dorothy Leal (1999) confirm that many of the books have “great literary as well as artistic merit” (p. 901). Moreover, after evaluating the reading level of numerous Caldecott books Chamberlain and Leal (1999) also discovered that the range of books match children’s interests and reading abilities throughout their early childhood and elementary school years. As a result, Caldecott winners can be used as a source of high quality literature to help them learn to love reading (Chamberlain and Leal, 1999).

**Read-alouds and shared reading.** One way that Caldecott award winners are able to support the literacy of all ages of students is that they are suited to being read aloud. According to J. Allen, as cited in Gail E. Tompkins’s (2010) textbook, *Literacy for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A Balanced Approach*, “read-alouds are an important component of literacy instruction at all grade levels” (p. 46). Therefore, contrary to the popular belief that reading stories aloud is only done to bring young children enjoyment, it is actually an activity that can offer academic benefits to students of all ages. Timothy V. Rasinski (2003), author of *The Fluent Reader*, supports the idea that read-alouds promote students’ vocabulary development, comprehension, enthusiasm, and fluency. In addition, Rasinski encourages teachers who are unsure of what books to use in their classroom as read-alouds to select Newbery and Caldecott Award winners. Overall, the fact that Caldecott books are so appealing to children, and are written at a wide variety of reading should encourage teachers to use them as classroom read-alouds.

Though essentially all Caldecott books, aside from the wordless ones, could be read-aloud to support the attainment of literacy skills, certain books feature special characteristics that make them even more beneficial. For instance, the “rhythm and repetition” of *Joseph Had a Little Overcoat* “make it a perfect story-time read aloud” (Ludke, 2000, p. 112). In addition to the literary features making the text fun to listen to, they also make *Joseph Has a Little Overcoat* and other Caldecott books with rhymes excellent resources for teachers to use with beginning readers through shared reading. Tompkins (2010) describes “shared reading” (pp. 132-33) as a process in which teachers read books aloud to students to model fluency and other skills while allowing students to join in reading at times, and she emphasizes that books with repetition, rhyme, and rhythm are ideal for this activity. Besides *Joseph Had a Little Overcoat*, other Caldecott winners such as *Drummer Hoff*, *White Snow*, *Bright Snow*, and *The Rooster Crows*, can also benefit students through shared reading due to their rhyming verses. As versatile as Caldecott award books are, teachers must still carefully read and evaluate the book to make sure that it will help them accomplish their goals for instruction. However, they should be reassured that within the wide variety of available Caldecott winners, suitable read-alouds can be found for all elementary grade levels, and are therefore excellent additions to classroom libraries.

Caldecott books are not only valuable to teachers as read-alouds, but they are also suitable for students of all ages to read by themselves. As noted by Chamberlain and Leal (1999) “the literary content of many, if not most, of the award winners is strong enough to provide excellent reading material for all elementary-level students” (pp. 900-01). The range of readability levels in Caldecott books can be exemplified by comparing winners such as *The House in the Night* which has very few words, to *Jumanji* which has an abundance of text and some complex vocabulary. The fact that Caldecott books cover such a wide range of reading

levels makes them great resources for teachers who may have to switch grades over the years, and who will have to deal with a diverse body of students who read at many levels.

### **Subject Area Integration**

**Art.** Caldecott books are a crucial classroom resource for future teachers because they can be integrated into many subject areas, the most obvious one being art. Claudia E. Cornett (2003), author of *Creating Meaning Through Literature and the Arts* also strongly advocates the use of picture books, such as Caldecott Medal winners, to teach students “to examine elements of color, line, shape, and texture to understand what the artist has done” (p. 57). Cornett also includes several Caldecott award books in her list of books to use to teach about artistic media. For example, she categorizes *Make Way for Ducklings* as “Drawing,” *Lon Po Po* as “Mixed Media,” *The Polar Express* as “Pastels (Chalk),” *Jumanji* as “Pen and Pencil/Ink,” and *Owl Moon* as “Watercolor” (pp. 167-170). Additionally, Cornett encourages teachers to have their students actually experiment with the different techniques and to use picture books as a source of material for art projects such as collages and puzzles. Since the illustrations of Caldecott winners are already appealing to children, the books offer teachers a perfect opportunity to expose students to artistic techniques and creative ideas.

Along with being great resources for technical artistic study, Caldecott books are also sources of inspiration for researching illustrators (“Caldecott connections, part 1,” 2008). Lamb and Johnson (2008) suggest many ways that teachers can have their students use technology as they look up information about illustrators’ lives including their school and family backgrounds. Beyond simple fact recall, illustrator studies can prompt students to think critically as they compare styles of various books, evaluate the development of an illustrator over time and predict who might win the Caldecott Medal next (“Caldecott connections, part 1,” 2008). Overall, the

possibilities of integrating Caldecott Medal winners into the art curriculum are limitless; thus, they are a valuable classroom resource.

**Language arts and critical thinking.** Caldecott Medal winners can also be used to enhance the language arts curriculum and to promote critical thinking beyond comparing illustrators. For instance, Tompkins (2010) advocates using award-winning picture books as a basis for “literature focus units” during which “teachers guide and direct students as they read and respond to a book” (p. 330, 332). Not only are Caldecott books well-suited to be used as a part of literature focus units centered on picture books, but also ones examining specific genres or authors (Tompkins, 2010). Following these units students can use Caldecott Medal winners as inspiration creating their own characters and picture books (Cornett, 2003). Cornett’s ideas align with Tompkin’s (2010) suggestion that younger students benefit from using other familiar books to “structure their [own] writing” (p. 350). Considering that Caldecott books align with the interests and reading abilities of elementary school students they are ideal models for beginning writers.

Perhaps one of the best ways that Caldecott award winners can benefit students is by helping them develop their ability to think critically. Cornett (2003) emphasizes that literature’s ability to “provoke higher-order thinking” (p. 82) is one of the key reasons why teachers should incorporate them into their curricula. She even cites *Owl Moon* as a book that can encourage children to consider “the problem of an endangered species, the spotted owl, from the point of view of loggers” (p. 83). With regards to less serious topics, Caldecott books can still help children learn to analyze and evaluate material. For example, Cornett recommends having students compare artistic features of a picture book such as *Mirette on the High Wire*, to the work of a well-known artist with a similar style. Similarly, she describes a way to have students use

Venn Diagrams “to record likenesses and differences between the same story written and illustrated by two different picture book artists” (p. 188). This activity could be done with Caldecott Medal winners such as *Rapunzel* which has several picture book versions listed on Amazon.com (2010). Contrary to people’s ideas that picture books are only to be read to children for pleasure, Caldecott Medal winners are actually able to challenge students to think critically, and they can inspire engaging language arts lessons.

**Social studies.** In addition to recognizing the importance of Caldecott books as a springboard for language arts learning and critical thinking, teachers should realize that they are also able to support social studies and science lessons. Lamb and Johnson (2008) bring out the social studies and science curriculum aspects of Caldecott winners when they suggest that they help students to “visualize people, places, and events” (“Caldecott connections: part 2,” para. 5). They specifically recognize that “[m]any historical events have been retold through picture books” (para. 7) and that such books “can bring scientists and historical figures alive” (para. 11). The scientists and important figures that Caldecott books can make real to students include Philippe Petit, Snowflake Bentley, Abraham Lincoln, Louis Bleriot, Harriet Tubman, and many others (*Caldecott Medal Winners*, 2010).

Moreover, Caldecott books are set in many different time periods and locations which can expose students to the traditions and struggles of other cultures. As an extra part of their study on the reading levels of Caldecott Medal winners, Chamberlain and Leal (1999) also noted the “cultural focus” of the stories (pp. 899-900). Although their list only covered the winners from 1938-1998, Chamberlain and Leal still discovered Caldecott books representing approximately fourteen different cultures including French, Spanish, Chinese, Japanese, African, Native American, and many others. Since Chamberlain and Leal’s study, more recent winners



have carried on the tradition of Caldecott books highlighting different cultures. Due to the wide range of historical topics and cultures covered by Caldecott winners, social studies teachers would be remiss in not integrating these books into their curricula.

**Science and math.** What may come as a surprise to teachers is that many different science and math concepts can also be drawn out from Caldecott Medal winners, which makes them even more valuable in the classroom. Although the unlisted author of the article entitled “Literature Links” does acknowledge that science and math focused children’s literature is hard to find, he or she also recognizes that many books actually do “incorporate crucial science and math concepts: problem-solving, curiosity, inventiveness, persistence, and trial and error testing, mechanics, and making do with what is at hand” (2005, p. 20). The author specifically cites Alice and Martin Provesens’ Caldecott winner, *The Glorious Flight: Across the Channel with Louis Bleriot*, as an example of a book that involves science and math processes because it depicts the story of Louis Bleriot’s many attempts to “devise a flying machine” to cross the English Channel (“Literature Links, 2005, p. 20). In addition to helping students to understand important science process skills, the Provensens’ book could also be used to teach students about the technology of airplanes. Other Caldecott books such as *Make Way for Ducklings*, *A Tree is Nice*, *Kitten’s First Full Moon*, and *Snowy Day* could be used to introduce children to concepts such as animal habitats, natural resources, moon phases, and weather patterns, respectively.

Math integrations can be inspired by various aspects of Caldecott award winners. John A. Van de Walle, Karen S. Karp, and Jennifer M. Bay-Williams (2009), authors of an elementary and middle school math textbook advocate the use of children’s literature as a basis for creating engaging math problems (“Teaching Through Problem Solving”), and as a source for data (“Developing Concepts of Data Analysis”). Even though Van de Walle and his fellow

authors do not specifically mention Caldecott literature, many winning books are suitable for their suggested activities. For example, some of the poems in *The Rooster Crows* and other rhyming books could be used “to tally words in repeating verse” (Van de Walle et al., 2009, p. 342). On a different note, Cornett (2003) suggests that picture books can be used to teach students about the “math necessary to make a book” including the “number of pages (usually 32), size of pages, words per page (or in the whole book), and other elements” (p. 146).

Teachers who wish to implement Cornett’s activity could capitalize on the range of lengths of Caldecott books to make the math processes more or less difficult for different students based on their abilities. Overall, both the content and structure of Caldecott Medal winners enables them to enhance even math and science lessons, making them a key classroom resource.

### **Character Principles**

Teachers should also realize that Caldecott books are an important part of every classroom because they can be related to character principles and important values. According to Sheryl O’Sullivan (2004), author of the article, “Books to live by: Using children’s literature for character education,” society has always desired that schools train their children to be good people as well as academically smart. O’Sullivan emphasizes that “[one] of the easiest ways to integrate character education with the curriculum is through the literature we ask children to study” because “stories provide good role models for behavior as well as rules to live by (p. 641). She specifically prescribes books that feature “admirable, but believable characters about the same age as the students” (p. 640). Therefore, the relatable nature of many characters in Caldecott winners not only makes the overall books appealing, but also allows them to be integrated with character education.

Once again, *Mirette on the High Wire* can serve as an example with Mirette being a role model of bravery, courage, and determination. Also, *Flotsam* can be used to prompt discussions about the importance of honesty because the young boy exemplifies honesty by trying to turn in the camera he found to the lifeguard. While using *The Glorious Flight: Across the Channel with Louis Bleriot* for a social studies or science lesson, teachers could also promote the value of perseverance. In reality, important values could be drawn from almost any Caldecott book which makes them invaluable to teachers who need to find ways to integrate character education into their already crammed curriculum.

On the other hand, as relatable as Caldecott books are to character principles, teachers must exercise caution when promoting these values because of the differing backgrounds and worldviews of their students. All teachers need to keep in mind that they do not necessarily have the right to teach students specific morals. Even so, teachers should still consider Caldecott books an indispensable part of their classrooms because they support character education.

### **Cultivation of Creativity and Imagination**

Not only are Caldecott books a vital resource for teachers because of their connections to character principles, but also because they can be used to inspire students. Again, *Joseph Had a Little Overcoat* can be used as an example because according to Ludke (2000), it is “a book bursting at the seams with ingenuity and creative spirit” (p. 112). As students read and see the story of Joseph transforming his worn overcoat over and over again, they learn that “you can always make something out of nothing” (p. 112). Also, Wiesner’s three Caldecott award winners are all wonderfully imaginative and can be used to inspire children. Gillian Engberg (2006) comments in his *Booklist* review of *Flotsam*, that “[a]s in his Caldecott Medal Book *Tuesday* (1991), Wiesner offers another exceptional, wordless picture book that finds wild magic

in quiet, everyday settings” (p. 76). Although *Flotsam* is wordless, teachers can still use it because as students look at the pictures, they make up their own version of the story which stimulates creativity. Engberg (2006) further expresses the inspiring nature of *Flotsam* when he says that “viewers will eagerly fill in the story’s wordless spaces with their own imagined story lines...this visual wonder invites us to rethink what we see, out in the world and in our mind’s eye” (p. 76). By encouraging students to read Wiesner’s stories and other Caldecott books, teachers can help students to break into new realms of creativity with their own art, writing, and overall thinking.

Caldecott Medal winners can also help students to develop big dreams and goals for the future. After reading books such as *Mirette on the High Wire*, *The Glorious Flight: Across the Channel with Louis Bleriot*, *So You Want to Be President?*, and many others, teachers can encourage students to pursue new talents and to aspire towards exciting and meaningful careers. Moreover, the sheer variety of story lines and illustrative styles represented by Caldecott award books can encourage students to develop their writing and artistic skills either as hobbies or as possible career paths. Caldecott winners should not only arouse creativity in students, but also in teachers who should be excited by the prospect of using them as a significant classroom resource.

### **Conclusion**

Teachers must recognize that Caldecott award winning books are an essential part of every classroom because they are suitable for all grade levels, cover many subject areas, contain character principles, and inspire students. Since Caldecott books appeal to children for numerous reasons including their illustrations, ability to evoke emotions, relatable protagonists, and alignment with genre preferences, teachers should use them to motivate student learning in

many areas. Although the Caldecott seal does not automatically make a book perfect for the classroom, educators can be assured that most Caldecott award winning books have both high quality text and stunning illustrations. Therefore, when faced with the daunting task of choosing literature for their classrooms, teachers should remember the standard set for Caldecott Medal books and look to the list of winners as a guide.

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