

Danielle Couture – 8.1, Final Paper

"What is commonly called literary history is actually a record of choices."

--Louise Bernikow

Being a social studies teacher, the above quote greatly reminds me of another I've heard often in the social studies field, "'History' is what gets written down." Though I am not aware of who originally coined that phrase, I do feel the two quotes, to some extent, are one in the same. If there's one thing we've learned throughout this course it's that relevant, recognized books are known by us today because they were passed down and kept alive in some way by those who've come and read before us. Whether they be teachers, scholars, librarians, literary committees, or simply parents, they have all contributed to what we now call "literary history" by passing down, and possibly inadvertently doing their part in keeping relevant, books that they personally chose as being "great" or having value.

In Module One we were introduced to a number of different awards available for children's literature, only one of which (though I hate to admit it) I was actually familiar with. In researching each award I was able to become educated in the criteria a book must meet to qualify for each, but I was really surprised to find that the criteria were so broad for a number of the awards. The Printz Award in particular struck me because of its very generalized criteria; one year a book of poems could win, the next year a novel. In some ways I thought it was great that so many books had the opportunity to qualify for this award. On the other hand, it doesn't seem fair that two completely different genres, so impossible to compare in my opinion, could be up for the same award. However, I'm sure each year the literary committee used the criteria for the

award in conjunction with their literary education to make what they considered to be “the best choice” of winner for that year. These winners, I think, are a perfect example of what I believe Louise Bernikow was trying to express. A “choice” was made based on educated literary opinion, and that choice of winner was “recorded,” labeling that book forever as ‘special’ in “literary history.”

But being a professional on a literary committee, I’ve learned, is not the only way to play a part in determining what becomes “literary history.” *Charlotte’s Web* is a perfect example of this. Though *Secret of the Andes* has become part of literary history as it *has* won a very prestigious award, I noticed very few people (myself included) were familiar with it. Even my library which typically has everything (knock on wood) didn’t carry it. *Charlotte’s Web* however is, I would venture to say, a more well-know and beloved piece of literary history. Why? Because the more people enjoy a book, the more they want to share the joy of that book with others, and thus the cycle continues. Again we are seeing a book becoming a well-known part of literary history because of people’s opinions and “choices.” Since this book was only an honor book, it is clear to see that it is still on record as a well-known piece of “literary history” because readers value it and pass it on to other readers, filmmakers, animators, etc. I really liked this particular part of the class and coming to this realization, because it made me feel much better about books that have *not* received awards, but that I still thought were great and deserving for many reasons. During this part of the course I was starting to especially feel really concerned and discouraged about the books I loved as a child that apparently hadn’t been considered “great” enough to win an award, but they were still very special to me and deserving in my eyes. It may sound strange, but I found it comforting to learn that in truth a famous gold or silver stamp doesn’t necessarily make or break the success of a book, and that public opinions and

“choices” really *do* have a significant impact upon what “goes on record” as “literary history.” It is comforting to know that there is a balance, that we can still be excited to check out the pictures in the newest awarded Caldecott book each year and read the most recently chosen Newberry story, but we can decide for *ourselves* whether we like it, love it, and/or if we determine it worthy to pass along and share it with others.

Module Two introduced us to what it means for a book to be a “classic” in literary history, or rather it urged us to try and determine this definition on our own. This was very challenging for me because, though I felt it would be easy to rattle off a big list of books I deemed as “classics,” it was much harder to explain *why* I considered them to be so, and I struggled with this. Was it because they were “old” but still well-known by many? Was it more because they have been kept alive for years and still read? Would books qualify as being classics if they were well-known but *not* commonly still read? I thought so; for example, I had always heard of *Little Women*, but I had never read it. Similarly, I have seen at least six movie and live play versions of Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*, but I have never actually read the book. I also wondered, do classics have to be well-liked in addition to being well known? Am I considering certain books as classics just because I liked them? I hoped not to my ladder idea, because I definitely couldn’t use that as a justifiable determining factor for what defines a classic! I really don’t think, “It’s a classic because I said so,” would have gone over well with my group of the rest of the class. Overall I just really wasn’t very sure. I ended up kind of working backwards on this assignment to help my thinking along. I made my list of classics first, and then looked to see what features the books I chose had in common. I decided these features would be my criteria for creating my definition of what it means to be a classic. I decided to go with: timeless, beneficial to society, and well-known.

Sharing my criteria with my group and discussing theirs also helped a lot! Many of our ideas were similar, but to hear them describe theirs in their own words really helped me to shape my own, especially hearing other's ideas of what they thought it meant to be timeless. I liked Mixsy's definition of timelessness the best. She said that in her opinion "timelessness" meant the book "fit" in the time it was written, "fits" now, and we can predict that it will still "fit" 20 years from now. That was exactly what I was trying to express in my own definition, but was not able to do so in such a clear and succinct way.

The whole class conversation and list of class classics choices was also really enlightening for me. Before the list was posted I wondered many things. Would people choose the same books I did? What if no one picked the books I picked; are they still classics if that happens? What if other people's books don't fit "my definition" of what it means to be a classic? Does that mean my definition is wrong? Is there even a correct definition, or is it all just a matter of opinion? In fact, I was out to dinner with my parents one night during "classics" week, and a song came on the radio at the restaurant. I didn't know it, and my Dad said, "How can you not know this song? It's a classic!" I said, "Dad, unless you're prepared to tell me exactly what you mean by "it's a classic," we are *not* having this conversation, because I've been trying to figure it out for days." He just laughed because he and my mom already knew what we were working on in class that week. Then my mom added that she would have put *The Giving Tree* on *her* classics list if she'd made one, and I told her that one definitely had come up a number of times. But still, no one really elaborated on exactly what it meant to be a classic. The point is, I never really realized how often we all throw around the word "classic" without really knowing what it explicitly means or even being able to express what we *think* it explicitly means.

In reference to the above quote, I actually don't think the definition of a classic is as important as the titles people choose as being classics. There is no "Classic Award," only people passing down cherished titles over the years, keeping them alive by sharing them, teaching them, and sometimes revamping them and turning them into cartoons, movies, plays, more modern versions of themselves, etc. as the times change. Classics are the best examples of literary history being "a record of choices," because classics only become classics by being chosen over and over again by society for many years. If this didn't occur, a classic wouldn't be a classic, but rather just a forgotten book deemed irrelevant now if even remembered at all. To me this is a sad thought, as I'm sure a great many wonderful books do *not* become well-known, and *do* fall through the cracks never to become classics. But sad or not, it does strengthen the accuracy of Bernikow's quote that, "What is commonly called literary history is actually a record of choices." Classics in literary history, despite how we choose to define them, are a matter of collective opinions, people's "choices" of books that continue to be well-known, to be relevant and applicable across the times, and become records of literary history by, again, being passed down and kept alive by those that favor and see value in them.

As we move now into Module Three, and I reflect upon where I was at the beginning of this course, the journey I've taken throughout the course, the many things I've learned along the way, how my views have been shaped or have changed, and finally, where I am now, there is clearly much to consider. Though I have a middle school language arts certification and endorsement, it's been a long time since I have taught ELA independently, and I was really starting to miss it, especially the children's literature aspect which was one of my favorite things when I was in school. That was a large contributing factor in my choosing to take this class, but the other main reason I wanted to take the class was because I was beginning to feel like I was

falling out of the “ELA loop” in terms of being up-to-date on what was “new,” “good,” “relevant,” and “beneficial to share with kids” in terms of children’s literature. Basically, coming into the class I was expecting and excited for someone to tell me, “Okay, these are all the ‘good books’ that kids should be reading right now, and here’s why. Go buy them.” However that’s not what happened at all! Instead I learned that, despite my preconceived notions, there is no such simple cookie-cutter answer as to what are “great books” that kids should be reading. I found myself being challenged to think critically on many levels from analyzing the criteria itself for a given award, to analyzing the people that gave the award. I feel now that my opinion may be just as valuable as those on a literary committee, and that though I was originally looking for someone to tell me “what’s good,” there are probably a number of students and parents looking to *me* to tell *them* “what’s good.” The choices I make and share with students and parents make the above quote true just as much as the choices that literary committees make and share with society do. Similarly the choices of literature parents make and pass down to their children have the potential to make a large impact as well. In these ways, as well as the many ways I reflected on above, literary history *really is* a record of people’s choices.

I was surprised to learn over the weeks that what designates a classic or what wins an award is merely the opinions of a small group of people with a background rooted in literacy education. Though there are specific criteria that pertain to each award and that we associate with what it means to be a classic, it is still very subjective and a matter of educated opinion. Having said that, the biggest thing I am taking away from this class is the knowledge and confidence that, now armed with an understanding of the multitude of awards in existence and great suggestions from both awards lists and classmate’s “classics suggestions,” ultimately *I* must make the decision for myself as to what would be relevant and beneficial to my students. I

no longer feel I need someone to *tell me* what “good books” my kids should be reading. I now believe I *am* capable of reading children’s literature and making an educated decision on my own based on what I’ve learned. The books I see as “good” or “valuable” and choose to share with others could potentially grow to become part of literary history in time simply because I enjoyed them, shared them, and the people I shared them with enjoyed them further and continued to pass them along to others. I was most excited when I came to the realization that, in a way, I’ve already done this! Last year I had a lot of reluctant readers in my class. One day I discovered a series called *Skeleton Creek*. It is a novel infused with movie clips. Ryan writes letters to his friend Sarah about their haunted town. Sarah in turn sneaks out to videotape creepy places and people she encounters in the town. She uploads her videos to a “secret website” and sends Ryan a secret code so only he can view them. When we get to certain parts in the book, we have to go online to the secret website, put in the secret code listed in the book, and watch in suspense right along with Ryan what Sarah has caught on film. It’s very “Blair Witch Project,” but in a student friendly way. Now I’m quite certain this series does not have the necessary literary merit to ever win an award, at least not any of the awards we’ve studied thus far, nor do I think it will one day become as classic, but infusing books with movie clips has been a huge success in getting my reluctant readers to really “get into” some books and *want* to read more; not to mention the “Skeleton Creek Movement” as we joking called it, spread rapidly across the 6th grade to the extent that six other teachers were using it as a read aloud, and the kids informed me that both Border’s book stores near our school were sold out of it. I hadn’t realized it at the time, but I guess I’m kind of responsible for part of that. No one else had been familiar with the series in our school. I guess what I am trying to say is that, in a small way, I feel I am part of Bernikow’s

quote as well, as it was my “choices” that went on record and may become literary history at our school.

Since we are focusing on quotes this week, I think it only fitting to end with this one as it relates so well to my many experiences in this class. “If you give a man a fish, he will eat for a day. But if you *teach* a man to fish...” I think we all know the rest. Thank you for a great literature experience. At times it was very challenging for me, but well worth it in the end!

Warmest Regards,

Danielle Couture