



## Why the Notables?

*by Judie Davie*

**W**ith all of the starred reviews, recommended titles, and focused titles in various reviewing journals, one could wonder why the need for a list which identifies the best in books for children. What purpose does such a list serve? Does it make a difference? Just who are those people making the selections of the outstanding works published for children in a given year? Are children involved in those choices? Who notices the list when it is published?

The Notable Children's Books List identifies outstanding books for children, ages birth through fourteen, published in a given year. Evaluative criteria include: literary quality, originality of text and illustration; clarity and style of language; excellence of illustration, design and format; subject matter of interest and value to children; and likelihood of acceptance by children. Notable Children's Books include works that exhibit commendable quality, demonstrate creativity, and reflect children's interests in exemplary ways.

The Notable Children's Books Committee of the Association for Library Service to Children consists of nine individuals representing school and public libraries; teachers of children's literature; literacy programs; and book-related interest groups from various geographic areas. These individuals nominate, annotate, discuss, and select quality titles written for children. These practitioners initiate activities so that the titles are "tasted, digested, and chewed" by children. Several heads are better than one!

Notable Children's Books is both a process and a product. Newly published titles are scrutinized, annotations are written, and periodic balloting by committee members precede the committee meetings at ALA Midwinter. The group discussion, with the various viewpoints and perspectives, continues the selection process. Committee members discuss titles, first acknowledging the strengths and then the weaknesses of the nominated titles. These reviewers bring experiences from local discussion groups; from sharing with children; from backgrounds in writing, editing, and book design; from genuine interest in identifying what is notable. Progressing from the individual to the group to consensus, the process is arduous, exhilarating, and noteworthy. The final selections result in a list composed of distinguished, landmark works that meet diverse interests and myriad needs. "Something for everyone" results.

As a collection development tool, the list represents a reference point for excellence—a chance to make sure that children and adults have access to the best! It represents a standard that affirms the choices that have been made and reminds us of what is important in selection. Titles overlooked in the initial selection process surface. Titles missed in the "starring" or highly recommended category by an individual reviewer appear. Over time, the list serves as a year to year record of what is best and what will last.

Publishers, editors, authors, and illustrators listen and take notes. As indicators of the open discussions and group process, reference the increase in the quality of artistically crafted picture books, the growing number of picture biographies, the inclusion of indexes and glossaries in information books, the sensitivity in presentation of multicultural settings, the identification of cultural strengths and diversities! Publishing for children is impacted!

Yes, the list serves a purpose—to identify the notable. Yes, Notable Children's Books make a difference. Yes, school and public library personnel, teachers, parents, children, authors, and publishers notice what is notable!



## An Excellent Redundancy

by Harry Tuchmayer, Column Editor

**H**ow many committees, and how many awards do we really need to tell us if a book is any good? After all, most books offered for consideration have already received favorable reviews in countless publications. Why not just add up all three star and four star reviews and compile the list in the same fashion that the Associated Press does when it ranks the top twenty-five teams in the country? After all, if we can't trust the reviews we used to purchase the title in the first place, why waste our time reading them?

What is at issue is not so much the purpose of a notable list as much as the process by which the list is compiled. At the risk of offending someone, I can't help but think this is all a big excuse to go to Mid-winter and party. But, if all that these committees did was party and hobnob with publishers, it wouldn't be so bad. In fact, it would reinforce the one positive by-product of this process, the access to and influence over children's book publishing. But instead, we emphasize the one truly worthless aspect of the process, compromise. What notable or landmark piece of work, except the Declaration of Independence, has ever come out of a committee meeting? While compromise is the genius of our political system, it doesn't make for great literature. In fact, if this were the yardstick by which we measured notables, Babysitters' Club and Sweet Valley High should top our list!

What about the list itself, what purpose does it have? This can't be, or shouldn't be, the basis for the initial purchasing decision. Waiting until the pundits have put their stamp of approval on a title denies kids the very opportunity to read new books as they are released. If we did that to adults, we would be shipped out of town with the last batch of returns. Kids want the newest titles on our shelves as fast as possible, and for the most part libraries have done a good job responding to their demands. So if the list isn't for kids, who is it for? Adults, parents and educators!

Parents and educators are constantly looking for lists of books that they can give to kids for holiday or summer reading. As we've heard over and over again, it's not good enough that kids want to read; they have to read good books. But, if that's all we need the list for, the Children's Catalog should suffice. So, as far as I can tell, these lists are superfluous, or are they? Can it be that they are produced for one reason, and one reason only; they provide documentation in case someone objects to a title's presence in your collection. Unfortunately, this is all too often the case. Thus, awards such as these serve one purpose I can't condemn. They protect controversial books and help guarantee their availability in the library.

Committees by their very nature seek accommodation, not confrontation. Yet what often makes for exceptional reading are those very books that take definitive stands on issues. In short, they are books people feel strongly about; titles people either love or hate; titles for which compromise is impossible. Do these sound like the kind of books that could survive a committee vote? Do they sound like books that offer "something for everyone"? Do they sound like books that will make a notables list? That, I don't know. But do they sound like books that justify a notables list? On that particular point, I guess they do!