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ABSTRACT

Each year the Bank Street School for Children (New York City) gives the Irma S. and James H. Black Award to the author of a children's book. What sets this award apart from others is that children are involved in the selection of the winning book. Some notes on how that selection process is managed can be helpful to teachers in all schools, whether an actual award is given to the selected author or not because selecting a best book is a pedagogically fruitful task in itself. It stimulates excitement and worthwhile questions and discussions. At the Bank Street School, the evaluation process was revised. Initially, four children from each of the four classrooms in the intermediate classrooms were selected; they rotated as the year went on so more than 12 children had a chance to make selections. Each week each of the 12 chose books from a list and then reported on them the following week. Since children had difficulty making discriminations between those they had read, it became necessary to force them to choose the one they liked best that week. At the end of the year, both the director of this program and the children decided they did not like the process. A new process the following year began with a list trimmed to 35 or 40 by adult readers. The 35 or 40 books were then divided into four groups and rotated through the four classrooms weekly. At the end of each week the children were asked to vote for their three favorite books.  
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# Picking a Winner: Children as Judges and Evaluators of Picture Books

by Linda Greengrass

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PICKING A WINNER:  
CHILDREN AS JUDGES AND EVALUATORS OF PICTURE BOOKS  
THE IRMA S. AND JAMES H. BLACK BOOK AWARD

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To be presented at the IASL Conference, July 18, 1994

INTRODUCTION

Discussions of fairness. Debates about peer pressure. The meaning of the word "subjective". An examination of the reading habits of seven-year-olds. The economics of the publishing industry. Who would imagine that having children be a part of the process of selecting the recipient of a major book award could lead to discussions of issues like these? But that is just what routinely happens each year at the Bank Street School for Children.

As the number of children's books published each year climbs, the number of awards given to children's books increases as well. Most publisher's catalogs proudly list their award-winning titles right up front as selling points. Many of these awards, however, are selected by adult "experts" in the field. The **Irma S. and James H. Black Award** is one notable exception to the rule. This award, formerly the **Irma Simonton Black Award**, has always involved children in the selection process. And more recently, children play an increasingly important role.

This is as it should be. Children's books are meant to be read and appreciated by children. Too often we underestimate their taste and their ability to appraise. We assume that given the choice, a child will select a comic book over a more substantial work. And while that might sometimes be true, when children are meaningfully involved in a process, they can be discerning critical evaluators of literature.

The Bank Street School for Children is an independent school located on the Upper West Side of New York City that serves children from the age of three through fourteen (the eighth grade). The school itself is divided into three subdivisions for administrative purposes and the classrooms are inter-age grouped. For the purposes of the process, when I assumed responsibility for administering the award, I decided to work extensively with the eight-, nine- and ten-year-olds in the middle school. These youngsters still enjoy hearing a picture book read to them and most of them have the reading skills to read many of the selections on their own as well. This

is also a group that has become well versed in the practice of evaluation both in the classroom and as part of the library program. In both settings children are often asked to report on the books that they are reading and to tell why they do or do not like the story. They are asked to identify what it is about the story that doesn't work for them or that they find unappealing. They are asked to compare a story to others they have read, to identify recurrent themes, to discern genres and not particular characteristics about them. The children are enthusiastic participants in these sessions.

Often I will bring to the library session a book that adults have questions about. Will children understand the plot or message of the particular story? Do they enjoy the book? Is it too old for the supposed audience, or too young? The adults on the Child Study Children's Book Committee at Bank Street College, to which I belong, are often divided on the answer to these questions, so I bring the book to "the source" for a different perspective.

One thing that I have found is that children of all ages continue to enjoy being read to. Even the ten-year-olds will complain if I haven't read a story to them for a number of weeks. So sharing a book about which there is some question is easy. What is harder is to get the children to acknowledge when something is not working for them. Too often, they are reluctant to "hurt the feelings" of the reader by admitting that they did not really find a story enjoyable. That was something I had to work on very hard with them. Fortunately, by the time we began working together on the Black award, the children had become used to the idea of giving not only their genuine opinions but also the reasons for them.

In 1989 I assumed primary responsibility for the selection of the Black award. Coincidentally, at about the time that I began working on the award process, the teachers in the middle school were beginning reading response groups as part of their whole language literature program. As members of these response groups, children are asked to assume increasingly more responsibility for their choice of what to read together, to lead their own discussions about the literature selection, and so on.

#### THE EVALUATION PROCESS

On the Child Study Children's Book Committee, members read books each week and then meet to discuss and recommend or reject what they have read. A recommended book is read by a second member who has to agree before the book is listed on our Books of the Year list. When I began working on the award, I decided to follow the same model with the children. I

invited four children from each of the four classrooms to meet with me weekly to read and discuss the books sent in by the publishers or identified by me as possible candidates. I eliminated from consideration only those items that were clearly not appropriate--books for children much too young or much too old, books that had no text and books that had no pictures. I then invited the children to choose books to take home and read and report back on the following week. We had nearly two hundred books to consider and less than ten weeks in which to make our selections because the final choices had to be in the cooperating classrooms by mid-March. School vacations further complicated the timetable.

The members of the group were rotated monthly to increase the number of children who could participate. The youngsters involved were chosen from among the stronger readers in the classroom where possible, but they were told that it was appropriate for a participant to have an adult read to them. The children were enthusiastic and cooperative, and they tried mightily to read as much as they could. The discussions we held each week were interesting and revealing. For the most part, children tended to serve as advocates for the specific books they read. A child reporting back on two or three books tended to want to recommend all of them. Especially in the beginning, they found it difficult to say when they did not like a book. The hardest thing for the children to understand was that just because a book had gotten published didn't necessarily mean that they had to like it, or even that it was good. Even those books that were good, and that they liked a lot, still might not be appropriate choices for the award.

It became necessary for me to force the children to choose only one book from those they enjoyed that week. To do this we first had to review the criteria that we have established at the onset and which the children were to have been thinking about as they read each book. As the children were quick to understand, many of the books were different from one another and therefore difficult to compare. We had to look at other qualities when trying to decide which of the candidates might be worthy of the award. It was only when they were helped to focus on some of these issues that the children were finally able to make a reluctant choice.

Despite the many problems that ultimately became clear as the process continued that first year, we reached a most satisfactory conclusion. When pressed, the children were, in fact, able to make excellent choices, and the final four candidates that were sent on to the cooperating classrooms were splendid. Many adults had expressed skepticism to me about the children's ability to successfully conclude the task, and I too had been worried. For me, the hardest part

was the knowledge that having empowered the children to make the decision, I would have to accept whatever they decided. To have done otherwise would have betrayed both their trust and the validity of the award.

When the finalists had been selected and their part in the process was complete, I met with the children to review the process together and evaluate what had gone on. I was interested in finding out from them what worked and what they found difficult.

I already knew that the procedure was unwieldy from my point of view. Finding an appropriate time to meet with the representatives from each class was difficult. I had a full schedule of library classes to meet with each week and only certain periods free. Each classroom had its own schedule and it wasn't fair to ask children to relinquish some activities in favor of serving on the committee. There was never enough time for the group to meet and to fully consider the books in a relaxed fashion.

It emerged in the final discussion that the children were equally unhappy with the process. They complained that it was very difficult for them to find the time to read and consider the books. They also felt burdened by the necessity of making the kinds of decisions forced upon them in so short a period of time. While they were delighted to have been part of the process, and in fact they were adamant that children continue to participate in the selection of the candidates, it was generally agreed that the process itself needed to be refined for the next year's award.

#### THE PROCESS CHANGES

I gave a lot of thought over the summer to how the system might be revised. In the course of deciding how best to alter the procedure, I considered some of the comments made during the process by the children as well as statements made by the teachers. Often, in passing, one of the teachers would comment on the excitement in his or her room when the committee members returned from the meeting with new books. They would then go on to describe the pleasure they felt watching the children pore over these books together and comment to one another about them. Some of the casual comments they were overhearing were exactly the things I was hoping children were considering when evaluating the books. So at least I had been reassured that some of the process had been successful. With this as well as the children's comments in mind, I devised a new method of book selection that attempted to combine elements of several of the previous plans.

Although the best solution that I could come up with required a good deal of cooperation from the classroom teachers, I felt reasonable certain that this would not be a problem. The school places great value on children's opinions and encourages children to be critical readers. Our teachers are also quite interested in children's literature themselves and attempt to keep apprised of new children's books. In fact, teachers often bring me suggestions for new acquisitions for the library of noteworthy books that they found in some bookstore or library. I was fairly certain that they would be willing to go along with my new format.

The current and, I think, successful, format for the award now involves all of the eight-, nine- and ten-year-old children in the third-fourth and fourth-fifth grade classrooms. It also involves the support of the Publications group. The new director, Ellen Schecter, and others in the department are constantly on the lookout for possible candidates and send them to me to hold for later consideration. As books are submitted by the publishers or as I encounter them during the year, I also put them aside.

By the end of December I usually manage to trim the possibilities to approximately one hundred and fifty books. I then invite a number of adults who are actively involved in children's literature at the college, instructors in graduate programs, teachers in the School for Children, and members of the Publications Group, to read as many of the books as possible and recommend those they think worthy of being considered by the children for the award. I then divide the top thirty-five to forty books into four sets. I try to see to it that these sets are well balanced, with equal numbers of folk tales and realistic stories.

Each group of books is then placed in one of the eights-nines and nine-tens classrooms for a week. During the course of the week the books are read and discussed by the children. Some of the books are first read aloud by the classroom teachers, others are left for the children to explore on their own. At the end of the week the children are asked to vote for their three favorite books. I tally the votes and then rotate the sets to the next classroom, where the process is repeated. At the end of a four-week period, a subset of the top ten to twelve books is culled. I then meet with each class for a culminating session. One by one each of the finalists is discussed. A fan of a particular book is asked to volunteer to describe the plot and then tell why he or she thinks the book deserves consideration for the award. If anyone holds an opposing viewpoint, they are welcome to give it at this time. The books are compared to one another and a final vote taken. The top three (or, in the case of a very close vote, four) books are then sent

on to the cooperating classrooms for the final decision.

#### SOME ISSUES THAT ARE RAISED

Although each group of children is different and the conversations that we have vary from class to class as well as year to year, consistent themes emerge over the years. Some of these themes are predictable, but some are surprising. What for me was a fairly straightforward undertaking raised, for the children, surprising social issues I had never considered. And although I have attempted to incorporate some of these issues into my introductory presentation each year, children still pick up on and explore the concerns.

As the time for beginning the award process arrives, I hold preliminary conversations with the older children during our library period. Most of these children were in the sevens-eights classrooms and voted on the finalists in previous years. They are already familiar with the idea of selecting an award-winning book and, in fact, are disappointed to think that they will not be making the final decision again this year. So, when I tell them that they will now be responsible for choosing the books that this year's sevens-eights will vote on, they are most pleased and relieved.

Among the first things the children want to know the first time they participate in the process is who Irma Simonton Black was and how she was related to Bank Street. I describe the history of the award to them and show them some of the books Mrs. Black had written and worked on. Many of the titles, particularly The Little Old Man Who Could Not Read, are familiar to them and are remembered fondly.

The children also want to know where the books that would be considered came from and what other adults would be involved in the process. Was this part of the book committee that I was a member of and from which I was always bringing them books to respond to and evaluation? Most important, the children want to know about the award itself. Is there a cash prize? When they are told that the winning author and illustrator are presented with a commemorative scroll at a luncheon celebration and that the publisher receives special award seals that may be affixed to copies of the winning book, but that there is no monetary award, some children question why the author would care about winning.

This leads to a discussion of the book publishing industry. The children talk about why publishers might be willing to submit a free copy of a book they would like to have considered. They imagine what winning an award might mean for sales of a book and by extension what

increased sales might mean to the author and the publisher. The psychological impact of an award seal on a book to the potential buyer is also discussed. Some of our library copies of award-winning books do not have the seal on them because they became library books before they became award winners. The children are quick to notice this and comment on it. Other children, who have copies of the book in their home mention whether or not it has a seal. To my surprise, very few are unable to remember that detail.

Once this background discussion is completed, we review the criteria for the award. When the children were in the sevens-eights, the final three or four choices that they voted on had been pre-selected for them. They could assume that each of the books they were seeing and hearing was a worthy candidate. Now it would be more difficult. While each of the books they would see would have been deemed appropriate for the award by the participating adults, there would be clear differences among them. This time the children would be trying to decide not which book they liked the best, but which book they felt seven- and eight-year-olds would like best, as well as which book was worthy of an award.

To give the children a frame of reference within which to consider the candidates, I read the list of previous award winners and show them the books. The children are familiar with most of the titles, and it is always a pleasure to hear someone exclaim, "Oh, I love that book!" as I hold it up. If we come upon a title most of the children find unfamiliar, I make note and read it aloud to them at our next meeting.

As we read and discuss the previous winners, we talk about what the qualities of the books were that made them worthy of the award. While it was true, as some youngsters pointed out, that we were unable to compare the winners with the other contenders for that year, we could at very least generate a list of factors to be considered. Is the story in any way different or unusual? Are the illustrations striking or distinctive in and of themselves? Do the illustrations support the text, enhancing the mood of the book and helping to tell the story? Does the story have something to say to children that they would be able to understand? Is the language used in the text familiar or comfortable for listeners? Would you want to give this book as a present to someone?

While all of these factors would be considered by the children, they clearly felt that a "yes" answer to each question was not essential. Some of them could quite eloquently argue for a book that did not meet all of the criteria and yet was more than worthy of the award. Some

of the previous winners reinforced that point. *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick* by Chris Van Allsburg (Houghton Mifflin, 1984) had no "story" and yet the children found the illustrations so compelling and engaging to their imaginations that they felt the award was justified. *The Stories Julian Tells* by Ann Cameron, illustrated by Ann Strugnell (Macmillan, 1981) has very few illustrations and is more a chapter book than a traditional picture book. Yet the family life depicted in that book spoke volumes to children, who argued that it does exemplify excellence in text and illustration.

Using *The Stories Julian Tells* as an example, two ten-year-old boys raised the first objection. They insisted that seven was already too old for picture books. By seven, they felt, children were reading chapter books and would not care for any of the picture book candidates. Other children in the group disagreed. They still enjoyed picture books themselves at ten, and so they were sure that the seven- and eight-year-olds would too. Some of the children had younger siblings the right age who, they maintained, still read and enjoyed picture books. Other children had younger siblings who didn't. Some children correctly pointed out that often the language and vocabulary in picture books was more difficult than that in many beginning chapter books, so most seven-year-olds probably couldn't even read many of these picture books themselves.

After much conversation about this issue, it became clear that we had a dilemma. What could we do? The children who had raised the original objection came up with the perfect solution. A delegation would go to the sevens-eights classrooms and interview the children! They would ask them about the kinds of books they liked to read and whether or not they were still interested in picture books. And that is precisely what they did. Fortunately, the sevens-eights agreed that they quite enjoyed reading and hearing picture books. In fact, I suspect that some of the older children might have been responding to their own memories of when they first conquered chapter books. Clearly their empathy with beginning readers was strong. To be perceived as still liking picture books at seven or eight, much less at ten, held negative connotations for them which might have been a prime factor in their raising of this concern.

The next issue raised was the fact that different people like different things. How wondered the children, could they decide which of the books was the "best?" We talked about the meaning of the word *subjective*, and I explained that most decisions about award books, even those made by adults, were ultimately subjective. I pointed out that we could, and had, set

objective criteria for the award, but that conclusions about whether or not a certain book met those criteria, by their very nature, had to be subjective. That, I explained, was why we would vote on the books and why a majority of the votes would determine the winners at the various stages of the procedure.

This led to still a new concern being raised -- the issue of fairness in the voting. Might not some children vote for a book simply because their friend wanted them to? For children this age the issue of peer pressure is a very real concern. They might know all the right things to say about not succumbing, but often that is more easily said than done.

There were no easy answers. We tried to air the issue fully. The children talked about what was fair to the authors of the books and what was fair to the process, and ultimately what was fair to one another. By raising and dealing with these concerns, we could hope that children would vote their own minds, but there was no way we could assure it. A secret ballot would help to insure fairness in voting and the children discussed strategies for dealing with friends' questions about which books they had voted for and why. We also talked about why it might seem important to some children that a book they liked would win, and how children might feel if a favorite of theirs did not even make it to the finals. Clearly, children invest a lot of themselves in the process of reading and evaluating books. And every contest carries with it the elements of winning and losing, no matter how you try to frame the discussion.

Another thing that we discussed in those preliminary sessions was how the children might deal with the large number of books to be read in addition to all the other things that were going on in the classroom. Since this had been a problem for the group that first year, I was prepared for this very realistic concern. We talked about strategies the children might employ from week to week. The only limitation was that the books could not leave the classroom. It would be too disruptive if a child were to take a book home and then forget it the next day, or lose it. The children themselves had no real problem with that rule. While they might have preferred the extra time that taking a book home would offer, there were only eight or nine books in each set and twenty-eight children. The mathematics of that, and the logistics necessary to ensure fairness, did not escape them.

The question of strategies for dealing with all the books that must be read in only a week was first raised by a child in the eights-nines. Although I assumed it was an issue for the younger children only, it quickly became clear when I brought the question to the nines-tens that

although they might not have spontaneously raised it as a question themselves, it was indeed a matter of great concern. In one of the eights-nines groups, it was suggested that the pictures in the book could be looked at first. If they were not immediately appealing to the reader, the book could be put aside for later consideration. Another child in the class protested that we had already said that how one liked illustrations was an individual decision and that sometimes even if we didn't think something was beautiful, it was still so perfect for the story that it ought to be considered. "I didn't say eliminate it," the first child retorted. "I said put it aside for later, if you have time to get to it." It was agreed by the group that it was one possibility. Since you might not have time to fully read everything, it was fair to delay reading books you "felt" you might not vote for.

Another strategy suggested was that of asking the teacher to read aloud books that looked most appealing at first glance by a number of children. In that way, the whole group would hear at least some of the prime candidate. That would leave fewer of them to be read independently.

In the nines-tens group, the suggestion was made to read the summary or blurb on the book jacket first in order to eliminate a full reading of a story that was of no interest. This led to a discussion of the purpose of a book's blurb, something that had been talked about with all the children as part of my regular library instruction program. We have examined the parts of a book, of which the blurb is a very important component, in library class. When children are trying to make a pleasure reading choice and ask me for some suggestions, I usually hand them a number of items that fit the parameters of what they have asked for and tell them to "read the blurbs." We have also talked about the job of the blurb, which the children are aware is to "sell" the book to a purchaser or a reader. This, the children agreed, made reading the blurb a very appropriate strategy, for if the part of the book that is expressly designed to make you want to buy it does not make the book sound appealing to a reader, it is unlikely that the book will win one of the reader's three votes for the week.

Skimming the pages was another of the suggestions offered by the children. It would be possible to glance through the pages, read a little of the beginning to see if you were "grabbed," then read some of some of the middle parts to further judge the language, and if you liked what you read, you could go back and read the whole thing more carefully. If not, you could just skip to the end to find out what happens.

The children decided that you could also listen to some of your friends' conversations

about some of the books. If someone really liked a book, it would be fair for them to recommend that other children try to read it before other books. This would not be the same as trying to influence a vote, the children argued. Rather, it was a way of insuring that enough attention was paid to a particularly enjoyable item. It did not mean that you had to vote for it, just that it was a good idea to try to read it fully.

One of the remarkable things about the whole process is how similarly children think about things, whether they are in the eights-nines or nines-tens. Although the exact words might not be the same from group to group, the broad concepts or strategies proposed were much the same. Only rarely has it been necessary for me to introduce an idea to one of the groups that has been raised by another. I have found that if I am willing to wait and let the conversations proceed on their own, whatever the point is that I hope they will consider, they will bring it up themselves. There have been very few exceptions to this.

One of the things that I enjoy most about the whole process is hearing the children's comments when they come in to the library once they have begun the process of reading and choosing the books. They very much want to talk to me about what they have liked and not liked that week. Sometimes it is clear that they would like to hear some validation of their opinions. As the weeks wear on, the children are curious about the number of votes a certain book might be getting in other classrooms. Since I do not tell the children how the vote is going, other than in the most general of terms, they want to know if other groups have responded as they did. When I am specifically asked about the vote, I try to make a general comment like "It's doing fairly well, " or "I'm not sure if it will make it into the top twelve." While I would like to play down the contest aspect of the process, I also do want to give the children a sense of how things are going.

Once the sets of books to be considered go into the classrooms, a lot depends on the involvement of the classroom teacher. How a teacher shares a book with his or her students can affect how the students themselves feel about the book. If the teacher does not provide time for the children to work with the books and a separate space to house them, the children quickly forget about them as the crush of the week's schedule overwhelms them.

The first week of the first year I tried this method, I walked into the classroom with ballots on Friday morning only to be greeted by panicked looks in the eyes of some of the children who had not found time to look at more than half of the books. Would they be allowed

to vote anyway, they wondered. I decided to leave the ballots and the books with them for the rest of the day and not pick them up until after morning meeting on Monday. This would give the children at least a little time more to read and review the set. I also said that yes, they could vote even if they had not read all of the books. I reasoned that the choices they were making about which books to look at first were in themselves significant. I also reminded them about the strategies we had discussed for skimming through a book when time was short.

In one case, a teacher remarked to me how fond he was of a particular book. He loved the message it was sending to kids, the simplicity and yet rich complexity of the story, and the wonderful illustrations. It was not surprising to me when at the end of that week, that the book received a very large number of votes from the children in his group. But as the set of books traveled on to the other rooms, the teachers there apparently did not feel quite the same way about the book, or at least did not communicate their enthusiasm to their class. Very few other children gave it their vote. The book did not make it to the final twelve, much less the final four, that year.

There are also some clear differences among the age groups. The books that ultimately make it to the final discussion of twelve were uniformly liked by all ages. Nevertheless, many titles appeal more to older children than to younger ones, and vice versa. This appears to be more an issue of theme than one of format. It is not how many words the author uses to tell the story, but rather the story that is being told. Charlie Anderson, written by Barbara Abercrombie and illustrated by Mark Graham, would appear on the surface to be much too young for eight-, nine- and ten-year old readers. There are very few lines of text on each page. Yet the message of the story being told clearly touched a chord in readers of all ages. Charlie Anderson, the cat of the title, has two homes, much like the children in the story, whose parents are divorced. The reassurance children found in this story made it the winner in 1991.

As I have said earlier, I try very hard to balance the sets of books that go into the classrooms. If possible, each set contains an equal number of fairy tales, folk tales and realistic stories. All children, it appears, enjoy a good, well-constructed story regardless of the genre. Illustration is another matter entirely. It is almost impossible to make generalizations about the kinds of pictures to which kids will respond. The only exception to that statement is that subtlety, as expressed by fuzzy, non-distinct images, is not highly regarded by the eight to ten set. Bold is better, whether represented by color or by detail. Even black and white line

drawings are admired if they are expressive.

Humor is a characteristic that appears to be universally enjoyed. But the humor has to be inherent in the character or the situation. Kids have very little patience for a story that is just plain silly. Frequently, something that adults are highly amused by are little more than groaners to many kids. That having been said, there have nevertheless been a number of recent books that children seemed to greatly enjoy and laugh over together, pointing out particular funny passages or pictures, but which received very few votes when the final decision was made. I am not certain whether this is because the children somehow feel that the award is serious business, and something too funny or silly just is not a suitable choice. If that is how they feel, the message was not conveyed by me, nor do I believe it came from the teachers. It might have been an instinctive decision on their part.

#### THE FINAL CONVERSATIONS

At the end of the four week period, the time comes for me to count all of the votes and identify the ten to twelve top choices. The number of semifinalist may vary, depending on the balance of votes. I then meet with each group individually, either in the classroom or in the library, for a minimum of one hour. In this session, the children are asked to review for one another the plot and positive characteristics of each book, stressing why they believe it made it this far, and why they feel it deserves to be one of the finalist. There are always some surprises at this point. Some of the titles in the batch turn up because they received a large number of votes from one or two of the other groups. In many cases, this causes the children to look at the titles in a different way. Also, the balance of the final set is quite different. Many of the strongest choices are now together, confronting one another as it were. There might be a surfeit of fairy tales, as there often is, and only a few of the more realistic stories. The children are forced to regard the books in a different light. What might have seemed special before, in a different context, now seems far more ordinary. Different kinds of comparisons must be made.

At the beginning of each discussion session I ask the children to review the criteria that they applied when considering each set of books. What are the things they were thinking about when they were reading and voting on the books? What are the things they are looking for in a good book? Predictably, the first things the children talk about are the qualities for which the award is given. They will invariably say that they considered whether the illustrations and text of each book were "excellent" and whether they went together well. It is an automatic, almost

rote, response.

One of the most surprising aspects of these final conversations, however, is that while there might be clear differences of opinion over particular books, children, regardless of their ages, appear to want the same general attributes in a book, and they have no difficulty articulating what they are. Children like a good, exciting story; they prefer that it have some humor in it; and they insist that it be believable. Across the board, in all of the discussions, these attributes emerge.

When children insist that a story be believable, they do not mean that they do not like fantasy. In fact, the opposite is true. A disproportionate number of the final choices, and previous years' winners, have been fantasies. What children expect is that the plot be possible, if not probable. If there were really magic in the world, could the events in the story take place? That a particular situation may be unlikely is of little consequence. More important is that the logic be acceptable and the events exciting.

Humor, while important, cannot exceed the bounds of logic either. Children like the story to be funny, but it cannot be ridiculous. The humor has to stem from the characters or the situations, but the rule of logic must apply here too. It cannot be out of character or alien to the situation.

One of the rules of the final discussion session is that it is never sufficient for the children to say that they liked a book, that it was nice, funny, pretty, or any of the usual bland trivialities. The child describing or advocating for a book needs to find a way of expressing what was different, special, distinctive, important, or unusual about the book. They must compare it positively to other titles, either the titles in the set or to previous award winners, or other favorite books.

This is a very difficult thing for anybody to do, adult or child. Very often we respond to something on a level which is very hard to put into words. Children, particularly younger children, find it extremely challenging to articulate exactly what it is they like or dislike about a particular item. They often respond to this challenge by employing a technique in which they have been well trained by their response group literature experiences. They find a particular passage or illustration and share it with the group as a way of concretely expressing why they enjoy the book.

The dynamics of the discussion are also interesting and sometimes surprising. Certain

books have an intense effect on some children. More than once over the years I have held up a particular book and heard someone say "Oh, I loved that book." Conversely, the presentation of a book has also been greeted by groans of "How did that get in the final bunch?" Spontaneous negative comments of this nature can be very intimidating to those who liked the book, especially if they are met with any kind of agreement by other children in the group. That enough other children felt as they did, or the book would not have made it to the final twelve, often is lost sight of in the heat of the moment. When this happens, I first remind them of the fact and then I will ask someone who might have voted for the book to tell why they did so. Very often, the child who volunteers for the assignment is a very eloquent spokesperson for the book in question. More than once, the volunteer has been a surprise to me and to the classroom teacher. A child who may be a poor or reluctant reader, who might have other learning or attention issues, will have been strongly affected by a particular book. Maybe he or she relates to the message of the story in a very personal way, or it might just be that this book was one which the child was able to come to successfully -- that the child was able to read and understand this title like few others. Whatever the case, the advocate is usually able to make a case for the book in a thoughtful and eloquent manner. More than once over the years, a book that was greeted with loud groans on its presentation to the group received among the largest number of votes at the end of that group's session and ended up among the final four.

The effect of the final conversation on the vote varies with the sets of books under discussion in a particular year as well as with the group. Often books that have been spoken about with great enthusiasm by a large number of children in the group ultimately do not garner the most votes. Yet the conversation itself seems to change very few minds. Children are able to advocate for a particular book, recognizing its merits, without choosing it over the others. In these instances it would appear that the first impression is the most lasting. Sometimes the points raised in the discussion are so compelling that opinions are altered. Other times, the entire group can agree on a point, seemingly a negative point, about a book, and yet that book remains the winner.

For example, when the book under discussion was The Enchanted Wood, the children pointed out the generic qualities of the fairy tale: three brothers, failure of the first two at the task at hand, an enchantment, magic intercession, and so on. The familiarity and predictability of the tale was commented on, agreed to by the whole group, in all four sessions, and yet it

emerged the clear favorite in all of the voting. Perhaps the beauty of the illustrations outweighed the familiarity of the story in the minds of children, or perhaps the familiarity of the story was the very quality that appealed to them. Whichever the case, there was no doubt about the final vote. The Enchanted Wood was the clear favorite in all of the groups.

Sometimes a book will have a very clear appeal for one age group, but not for another. A case in point is the lovely, nostalgic tale, Roxaboxen, written by Alice McLerran and illustrated by Barbara Cooney. Teachers particularly loved this gentle story of children immersed in imaginative play while creating their special work ( a town they called Roxaboxen) complete with such essentials as jail and cemetery. Older children, too, found the story appealing. During discussions, there were many comments such as "Oh, I used to do that, too," which suggested nostalgia was at play for them as well. Very young children (four-, five- and six-year olds) who were read the story also enjoyed and related to it as a reflection of their present lives. However the seven- and eight-year-olds were not as enchanted. For these children, just beginning their climb out of childhood, there seemed to be a reluctance to acknowledge behavior they perceived as childish. Nor were they old enough to be nostalgic about an earlier period in their lives.

#### THE AWARD WINNER IS SELECTED

After the votes are counted, copies of the four top vote-getters are sent to several cooperating schools in the northeast as well as to the two sevens-eights classrooms at Bank Street. Teachers are asked to share the books with their children several times over the next three weeks by reading them aloud and then making them available to the children for further examination on their own. At the end of that period, the books are reviewed and the children are asked to comment on the relative merits of each book. Then they vote. All of the votes from all of the participating classrooms are counted, and the winner is announced.

Conversations with the teachers and librarians who have participated in the final selection this year have revealed some interesting aspects of the classroom dynamic. One teacher reported that in his classroom a few very powerful children dominated the final discussion. They were extremely forceful in their advocacy for a certain book and the teacher became concerned that their preferences might overwhelm the rest of the class. He decided to ask the children to vote for a first and second choice among the four finalists instead of voting for just one book so that those who might have felt pressured could vote for their true favorite as the first (or second) choice and perhaps a clear second choice would emerge. It didn't. The clear winner in that

classroom remained The Bracelet by Yoshiko Uchida, the book which had been the favorite of the powerful students. This book had become a finalist because of the strong advocacy for it by the children in one of the older groups who work on stage one of the process. In this classroom the teacher had, coincidentally, devoted a great deal of time during the year to Asian American culture. The children in this group, while worried that younger students might not understand all of the book, felt it nevertheless deserved to be a finalist. They believed that most teachers would be able to explain to their students anything that they might not understand.

In yet another classroom that voted on the finalist, issues of sexism dominated the discussions about the books. In this room the teacher devotes a good deal of time and energy seeing to it that her students are sensitive to concerns about fairness, racism and sexism. Trained, therefore, to be aware of these things, it was not surprising that it would influence the decision. The children in this room preferred Children of Lir by Shelia MacGill-Callahan because they felt, strongly that boys and girls were portrayed as equally powerful in the story. The book that won the Irma S. and James H. Black Award this year, Three Sacks of Truth by Eric A. Kimmel, was scorned by this group because of what they saw as a stereotypical sexist interpretation of the queen and princess. Most of the other voters were inclined to focus on the humor in both the story and the illustrations by Robert Rayevsky.

Children who participate in the selection of the Irma S. and James H. Black Award seem to have a real investment in the outcome. When the older children, those who participated in their selection, are told the titles of the final four to be voted on by the younger participants, the information is greeted with responses ranging from smiles of satisfaction to groans of disappointment. Then they ask almost daily whether the final winner has been selected yet. When the final winner is finally announced, it is generally greeted with smiles and nods of agreement and satisfaction, regardless of how they might have originally voted. It seems they believe that they "own" all of the finalists, having sent them on for consideration by others, and they take great pride in the process. Years later, when these children notice a previous winner, or even an contender, on a library table, they will comment to one another about it, remembering together an activity that obviously made a strong impression.

#### DO IT YOURSELF

Although the process of selecting an award-winning book is clearly enhanced by the fact that there is a public culminating event supported by Bank Street College, it is possible to do

many of the same things, and have many of the same kinds of conversations, on a smaller scale. Any school or classroom could select a "picture book of the year" or "best book" of any kind. The entries might be chosen from the new acquisitions for the year or from the entire collection. A particular genre might be selected, humor or fantasy for example, and the "best" or "favorite" title within that parameter named. When we prepare our summer reading suggestions together at the end of the year, the children and I have fascinating and intense discussions about the placement of certain books within the appropriate genre. Does Roald Dahl belong under humor or fantasy? Is A Wrinkle in Time fantasy or science fiction? What is the difference between an adventure and a mystery? Such concerns can help children to focus on the attributes of the various genres in literature, giving them an excellent grounding for the future.

Children could be asked to participate in setting the criteria for an in-house award, to help determine the procedures involved in selecting a winner, even to determine how to celebrate the choice. If the library's new materials budget is small, this might become a fundraising activity in which parents might be encouraged to donate "contestant." Middle school children might select several "best books" that they would then bring into classrooms of younger children to share with them and solicit their opinions. The issues are the same, regardless of the scale of the undertaking. And the things that are learned, by both adults and children, are remarkable.