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Popularity and critical acclaim in children's literature

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POPULARITY AND CRITICAL ACCLAIM IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the School of Library and Information Science

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Library and Information Science

by

Dorian Kingman Chong

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ABSTRACT

POPULARITY AND CRITICAL ACCLAIM IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

by Dorian Kingman Chong

To determine significant literary qualities common to books both popular and with literary merit, eleven books which were selected in the Children's Choices surveys from 1975 through 1995 and which also won a Newbery Medal or a Newbery Honor award during the corresponding years were analyzed. The instrument for literary analysis utilized the variables of genre, character, point of view, setting, plot, theme, style, and tone. Values derived from the works under study were assigned to each variable.

Analysis of the values revealed that the eleven books are intellectually accessible to the child reader. Values for the variables which occurred in all 11 books were well rounded characters, unity of character and action, and a chronological plot. Over half of the books had human characters between ages 8 and 20, a single, explicit theme, a single plot, and were realistic. The widest variety occurred in the variables of thematic content, type of plot conflict, and style.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In an essay about writing for children, C. S. Lewis (1952/1982) commented “that a children’s story which is enjoyed only by children is a bad children’s story” (p. 33). This is an oft-quoted line, one that makes repeated appearances in both popular and scholarly writings about children’s literature. Recently it served duty in the *New Yorker* magazine’s annual list of children’s books suitable as Christmas gifts. The author, Sara Mosle (1995), quotes C. S. Lewis in her closing paragraph, adding “But a children’s book which is enjoyed only by adults is equally bad” (p. 102). C. S. Lewis (1952/1982) would agree with this as well, as it is implicit in his essay that children’s books are meant to be read by children. And the good ones continue to be reread as those children mature into adults.

Since C. S. Lewis’ canon seems to be widely accepted, it is worthwhile to determine objectively how to avoid a “bad children’s story” and, perhaps more importantly, to identify the literary qualities in books which are popular with children and esteemed by adults as well. This study is concerned with the intersection of two basic categories of books written for children. There

are books which are popular with children. And there are books which adults identify as good children's books, that is, books with literary merit. (A third group, books with neither literary value nor popular appeal, is not germane to this study.) Is it possible to identify books which are both popular with children and esteemed by adults? If so, would an analysis of the books which overlap both categories reveal significant traits or consistencies in literary qualities? Identification of qualities which characterize popularity while not detracting from literary merit might be useful to the adults who often serve as intermediaries between children and books: librarians, teachers, parents, and, of course, writers.

There are probably as many different notions of what is children's literature as there are children or adults. John Rowe Townsend (1971) has wryly observed that a children's book is one "which appears on the children's list of a publisher" (p. 10). Certainly a great deal of ink has been spilled in the many attempts at an enduring definition. Since C. S. Lewis' words led directly to the research problem with which this study is concerned, it is apt to turn to him again as a place to begin the current effort at defining that elusive term. In Lewis' (1958/1982) essay, "On Juvenile Tastes" he recalls that someone had stated that children are a distinct race. "Children are regarded

as being at any rate a distinct *literary* species, and the production of books that cater for [sic] their supposedly odd and alien taste has become an industry” (p. 49). Lewis goes on to disagree with this viewpoint, arguing that children like adults have a wide variety of tastes ranging from fiction to nonfiction, thoughtful to action-filled, silly stories to stories resonating with universal truths. *The American Heritage Children’s Dictionary* (1994) reinforces Lewis’ observation. Its definition of “literature” is, “written works that have lasting value and interest.” No distinction is made between literature for children and adults, and the definition could be applied equally well to literature for either audience. Indeed, the adult version of *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (1981) provides a remarkably similar definition: “1. A body of writings in prose or verse. 2. Imaginative or creative writing; belles-lettres.”

Rebecca Lukens (1995), who is writing specifically about children’s literature, also defines literature without making a distinction for children’s literature. She refers to literature as “a significant truth expressed in appropriate elements and memorable language” (p. 7). She elaborates that literature gives children pleasure as well as understanding. However, it is the venerable textbook about children’s literature, *Children and Books*

(Sutherland & Arbuthnot, 1986), which provides the working definition of children's literature for this study. Children's literature consists of "books that are not only read and enjoyed, but also that have been written for children and that meet high literary and artistic standards" (p. 5). All of the books under consideration in this study are specifically written for children (including young adults). The sample of popular books meets the first part of this definition (read and enjoyed by children) and the sample of books acclaimed by adults meets the second part (high literary and artistic standards). It is the books which meet both sets of criteria with which this study is concerned.

The books which comprise the group which shall be referred to throughout this study as "popular" have been identified as popular by the well established national survey known as Children's Choices, published jointly by the International Reading Association and the Children's Book Council. Although there are similar surveys done in various states, this survey of children's reading preferences is distinctive for its national scope. Beginning in 1975, each year a national survey has been conducted of children's responses to recently published books; results are published annually in the November issue of *The Reading Teacher*.

The books which comprise the group which shall be referred to throughout this study as “acclaimed” are those books which were named as Newbery Medal winners or Newbery Honor books for the years 1975 - 1995 (the years which correspond to Children’s Choices). The awards are determined by a committee of adult experts in children’s literature, drawn from the membership of the American Library Association. The Newbery awards are one of the most prestigious prizes for children’s literature.

Those titles identified as critically acclaimed were cross-checked against those identified as popular with children. Titles which appear in both populations were considered to be a select group of books both popular with children and critically acclaimed. The research problem was to develop a way of analyzing the literary elements of this select group and to then determine if there are identifiable qualities within the select group of books known to be both popular with children and acclaimed by adults.

The feasibility of this undertaking was greatly increased by the sustained existence of such lists as the Children’s Choices and the Newbery Medals. They provided a ready access to populations of books with established credentials as either popular or acclaimed. The difficulties arose from the subjectivity of establishing literary standards and defining qualities

which are found in popular and/or acclaimed writings. The existing body of scholarly literature about children's literature and literary criticism was of critical importance in establishing the literary qualities and standards necessary to create the instrument of analysis.

If there are identifiable qualities which can be used as predictors of the success of a book both with children and with adults, this would provide a valuable aid to librarians. It is a common goal of children's librarians to build collections that circulate well and to provide individual patrons with books that will actually be read and enjoyed. Personal experience indicates that librarians seem overwhelmingly to believe that a book of any quality (no matter how poor) that is read by a reluctant reader is better than nothing. (This is especially true considering the competition from television and computer games.) However, to know that certain qualities in books of literary merit tend to be popular with children would be beneficial. Practical experience indicates that award winning books are not necessarily popular with children. Indeed, predicted popularity is not usually a criterion of award selection committees. Since the publishing industry is producing children's books at an astonishingly rapid rate (3,000 original works in 1992), the

evaluation and selection process could be eased by the knowledge of certain qualities in literary elements most likely to appeal to child readers.

Beyond such practical considerations, there is the continuous human desire to improve our understanding of why certain writings endure, spark the imagination, resonate within the soul of the reader, cause pleasure and further understanding of the human condition. Northrop Frye (1964) has written that, “no matter how much experience we may gather in life, we can never in life get the dimension of experience that the imagination gives us. Only the arts and sciences can do that, and of these, only literature gives us the whole sweep and range of human imagination as it sees itself” (p. 101). It is to be hoped that this research effort will add a modicum of understanding of how good writing accomplishes such lofty goals.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

During the past one hundred years, many studies have been conducted and articles written about how children choose books to read, what books children choose, how children read, and so on. One researcher has tallied three hundred studies on the reading interests of children from 1897 to 1967. He conjectured that by 1990 the count may have reached a thousand (Sebesta, 1990). One such study was reported in 1980 by Nilsen, Peterson and Searfoss. They systematically studied books from 1950 - 1975 that were highly acclaimed by literary critics. They found a negative relationship between the acclaim of critics and the response of the majority of children.

In 1981, Bauer and Sanborn reported a similar study. The reader's-choice awards (selected by children) from 1940 to 1979 and the finalists of several prestigious awards for children's literature (adult-selected) were compared. Thirty-nine titles, or 20% of the reader's-choice awards, were also acclaimed by adults for their literary quality. The report of this potentially useful study provides little analysis of the data. The primary conclusion of the authors is that the thirty-nine books which appear on both lists "deserve

considerable emphasis by teachers, librarians, and parents because they indicate that children do enjoy books with literary merit. These books are truly the best of both worlds!" (p. 56). Another similar study, also reported in 1981, was conducted by Carter and Harris. They compared titles from the 1980 Children's Choices against critics' choices (for the same year) as selected by *School Library Journal* and *Booklist*. They found that of the twenty-four books in their Children's Choices sample, only three appeared on either of the reviewers' lists. Carter and Harris concluded that, as valuable as the reviews of professionals are, "it is also advisable to consult those who speak for themselves. 'Children's Choices' allows librarians to do so" (pp. 57-58). The conclusions of these two studies, while easy to agree with, are essentially commonsense. They do not provide in-depth analyses of the findings nor do they seek to understand why there is minimal overlap between books children choose and those which win critical acclaim.

This study employed a similar methodology, but moved further into a literary analysis of the books which are both popular with children and acclaimed by adults in an effort to identify consistencies or trends within this highly select group of books. In doing so, the study aims to glean information which may be useful in increasing the number of such books which fall into

place at that elusive intersection of adult and child preference. A review of the literature about children's literature reveals a body of thoughtful writing about qualities inherent in books with literary merit as well as a number of studies which identify qualities significant in popular appeal. Many researchers and literary theorists concur that children like a good read, whereas critics and reviewers are seeking literary merit at a more complex level.

Popularity of books among child readers may be due to a wide variety of factors. Sebesta (1990) reports that topic and genre are not dependable indicators of popularity. Children choose fiction with warmth, optimism, interaction. Children like books in which problems are successfully solved. They like explicit themes and are not put off by didacticism. Nilsen, Peterson and Searfoss (1980) report that popular books engage the reader at the most readable level, which keeps the reader wanting to know what happens next. They also found that a group of books written to a deeper level of meaning had in common a verbal complexity which functioned against engaging the reader at that most readable level. Author Katherine Paterson (1981) writes, "although a work of entertainment may not be art, a work that intends to be art must first be entertaining" (p. 60). Victor Nell (1988) suggests that when

reading for pleasure, readers seem inclined to choose books which are “a good read” over the selection of “a good book” (p. 114). This certainly appears to be the case with child readers. In the ChildRead Survey conducted by Susan Burgess (1985), she found that, “all the students agree that a new book arouses a curiosity about the story” (p. 29). Burgess also reports that mysteries, sports, animal stories, biographies, and contemporary realism are among the types of stories children prefer. Her findings confirm earlier assertions by Leland Jacobs (1955) that realistic literature enjoys a wide appeal for children. Jacobs also defines important characteristics of plot in books which appeal to children, particularly that the plot focuses on one main sequence of events, and does not shift direction. Once a direction is established, children enjoy the feeling of anticipation of what is to come. Endings are simple and natural, avoiding excessive dramatics (pp. 198-199). To this, Hildick (1970) would agree that a level of anticipation of the outcome is exceptionally important to children (p. 25). Hildick also discusses the importance of an immediate means of identification with character and story, both in terms of popular appeal and literary merit:

The process of identification is basic to the whole writer-story-reader relationship. (p. 1)

But it is the power of a work of fiction to draw the reader into this process of identification that gives that work its quality - moral as well as aesthetic. At its lowest level of operation we speak of such a process as "taking us out of ourselves." . . . It can, however, do much more. By taking us into another world it can widen our experience and by widening our experience it can help to cultivate our sympathies, giving them depth and extending their range. (p. 2)

So we have a situation in which it is almost essential to have child characters if one wishes to write good fiction for children about "real life." (p. 3)

Story is a means of imposing pattern or a sense of order on the chaos of human lives. This desire to impose order on chaos and the many ways of attempting to do so is the subject of a collection of essays by Frank Kermode (1967). In *The Sense of an Ending*, he presents the deceptively simple example of a clock ticking.

The clock's *tick-tock* I take to be a model of what we call a plot, an organization that humanizes time by giving it form. . . . *Tick* is a humble genesis, *tock* a feeble apocalypse. . . . [Fictional devices must] maintain within that interval following *tick* a lively expectation of *tock*, and a sense that however remote *tock* may be, all that happens happens as if *tock* were certainly following. All such plotting presupposes and requires that an end will bestow upon the whole duration and meaning. (pp. 45-46)

Anticipation of the inevitable *tock* is what keeps children turning the pages of a book in which they are engaged. In Kermode's words:

it seems. . . that in 'making sense' of the world we still feel a need. . . to experience that concordance of beginning, middle, and end which is the essence of our explanatory fictions. (pp. 35-36)

Lillian Smith (1953) addresses the importance of story relative to popular appeal:

The immediate allure of a story for children is in what happens. Where it happens, and to whom, are only there, to a child, because events must happen somewhere and to someone. Place, time, and characters are necessary for the sake of the story, to give it actuality and to increase the pleasure it gives. How and why things happen in a story are seldom analyzed by a child, but in these lie the skill of a writer in luring the reader on to find out "what happens next," in creating an atmosphere in the story of surprise and suspense. If a child does not care what is about to happen, there is no story. (p. 132)

While agreeing that story is of paramount importance in reading for pleasure, C. S. Lewis (1947/1982) argues that, at least for some readers, place, time and characters are equally essential to the story. He uses the example of his reading (as a child) of books about "Red Indians."

Dangers, of course, there must be: how else can you keep a story going? But. . . take away the feathers, the high cheek-bones, the whiskered trousers, substitute a pistol for a tomahawk, and what would be left? For I wanted not the momentary suspense but that whole world to which it belonged - the snow and the snow-shoes, beavers and canoes, warpaths and wigwams, and Hiawatha names. (pp. 4-5)

Lewis, as a child reader, already sensed the importance of literary elements such as character, setting, style, as well as of plot. These elements are important in terms of literary merit as well as of popularity.

Kay Vandergrift (1990) speaks of the formal elements of story. She is critical of the children's literature textbooks which focus exclusively on the four elements of theme, plot, characterization and style as if they were the only elements. It is her opinion that "mood or setting may be key elements in a particular story and that point of view is probably the element most characteristic of the novel as a genre" (p. 11). It is fortunate, then, that Rebecca Lukens (1995) has written comprehensively about all these elements of literature. Her *Critical Handbook of Children's Literature* defines the essential literary components of genre, character, point of view, setting, plot, theme, style and tone. These works of Lukens and Vandergrift provided the foundation for developing the instrument of analysis which was then utilized in the evaluation of the population of select books in this study. Their writings provided the basis for the analysis of literary elements in Chapters Three and Four.

In addition to a discussion of literary merit based on literary elements, a study of literature and reading must consider the perspective of how a book is read; in other words, instead of viewing the book as an independent object it also should be seen as part of an interaction with the reader. C. S. Lewis (1961) has suggested that instead of evaluating the book, one should consider

how it might be read. For instance, consider a book that has been judged to be a bad book. If many people or even one person can read and re-read that book with a lifetime love for it, then the “suspicion is raised” that it might not be a bad book. “Ideally, we should like to define a good book as one which ‘permits, invites, or compels’ a good reading. . . . The ideally bad book is the one of which a good reading is impossible” (p.113).

Leland Jacobs (1983) has contributed important thinking on the subject of the different levels of reading and how they might be defined. He has identified three levels of reading: the first level he labels the verbal level of meaning, since the reader’s attention is caught and held by the words on the page. The second level is more sophisticated: the behavioral level. At this level the reader is compelled to believe what the author is saying. The human conditions and experiences are well conceived and have the ring of truth. “While the verbal level engages the reader’s attention, the behavioral level involves the reader” (p. 99). Finally, the third or transcendent level, contains the deepest literary experience. At this level, the child reader is called upon to think not only about the characters and action of what has been written, but about the more elusive essence of what has been written. Although this

level is dependent upon the written word, it goes beyond the word and is about more than words.

Kay Vandergrift (1980) also refers to three levels of story. These levels she calls the narrative (verbal imitation of action), the interpretive (a believable and convincing aesthetic reality), and the transcendent or residual level (symbolic significance). She observes that these levels are useful both in looking at a work critically in terms of its composition as well as at the reader's response.

A similar idea is described in terms of concentric circles or ripples in a pond by Nell (1988). Where the sentence or pebble hits the water is the central point, analogous to the verbal level of meaning. Depending on what the reader brings to the experience, each successive ripple may move the reader farther and farther away from the literal meaning. Or, there may be no ripples at all (p. 79). Nell distinguishes between absorption and entrancement in reading. Absorption, like Jacobs' first and second levels, does not take the reader as far as entrancement which, like the transcendent level, transports the reader to other places and transfigures the consciousness to make another person of the reader (p. 199).

Although the elusive quality of the transcendent level of meaning is difficult to describe, this has not deterred a multitude of authors and critics from the attempt. Indeed, seeking such descriptions has produced a remarkably productive and satisfying thread of this literature review. Some have written about transcendence from the perspective of the writer, some from the perspective of the reader, as indeed a work must first be written to the transcendent level in order to carry the potential for being read to that level.

Frank Kermode (1967) quotes Descartes observing that “the seeds of knowledge are within us like fire in flint; philosophers educe them by reason, but the poets strike them forth by imagination, and they shine the more clearly” (p. 80).

In a different era and for a different audience, the novelist Willa Cather (1920/1976) expressed an idea similar to Jacobs’ description of the transcendent level. In an essay about the novelist’s art, Cather states fervently that an artist creates more than simple journalistic observations; she also distinguishes between a novel as an amusement and as a work of art. She goes on to say:

Whatever is felt upon the page without being specifically named there - that, one might say, is created. It is the inexplicable presence of the

thing not named, of the overtone divined by the ear but not heard by it, the verbal mood, the emotional aura of the fact or the thing or the deed, that gives high quality to the novel or the drama, as well as to poetry itself. (pp. 41-42)

It appears that she might concur that novels written to only the verbal level, in Jacobs' terms, are novels for amusement, whereas those which create the thing not named achieve transcendence.

Stephen Tennant, in the introduction to Cather's essays, seizes upon Cather's idea and elaborates upon it as seeing "beyond the immediate scene to a timeless sky or a timeless room, in which the future and the past, the unspoken and the unknown, forever beckon the happy reader" (p. v). Indeed, Tennant's essay is titled "The Room Beyond." Cather and Tennant have poetically symbolized Jacobs' concept of the transcendent level as the thing not named, or the room beyond.

The transcendent level is often referred to as fleeting. References to a reader's reaction as a "flash" or a "glimpse" are not uncommon. Anne Lamott (1994) writes, "Think of those times when you've read prose or poetry that is presented in such a way that you have a fleeting sense of being *startled* by beauty or insight, by a glimpse into someone's soul" (p. 99). Madeleine L'Engle (1985) writes of her first "numinous experience" as an "intuitive flash of knowledge that there is far more to everything than the dailiness of the

everyday world" (p. 11). In the preface to one of his novels, Joseph Conrad (1898/1979) writes that when the "difficult and evanescent" aim of the novelist is accomplished, then the reader shall find all which is demanded "to be edified, consoled, amused; . . . to be promptly improved, or encouraged, or frightened, or shocked, or charmed. . . . and, perhaps, also [the reader shall find] that glimpse of truth" for "behold! - all the truth of life is there: a moment of vision, a sigh, a smile" (pp. 147-148).

In *Surprised by Joy*, C. S. Lewis (1956) tells of three similar and significant childhood experiences, two resulting from reading. All three caused him to "glimpse" something indescribable, to feel a desire, a longing so intense that all else was insignificant. He came to refer to this sensation as Joy (p. 18). In her essay appropriately titled "The Unforgettable Glimpse," Eleanor Cameron (1969) notes that J. R. R. Tolkien tells of a remarkably similar experience. His interpretation of Lewis' Joy is a "heart's desire that for a moment passes outside the frame, rends indeed the very web of the story, and lets a gleam come through" (p. 6).

A fleeting glimpse, a flash, a gleam - a moment, a vision, a sigh, a smile: these descriptions are in accord with Jacobs' transcendent level. Stories which inspire the numinous moment leave "a residue of meaning in

the reader's mind" (Jacobs, 1955, p. 194), an indelible impression that lives on after the details of plot have faded.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

This study had two phases. The first phase consisted of identifying a select population of books known to be both popular with children and critically acclaimed by adults. In the second phase an instrument of literary analysis was developed and applied to the select population to identify common literary qualities within this select population.

Phase One

The first phase centered around the identification of a group of children's books known to be both popular with children and critically acclaimed by adults. This in turn required first identifying one group of books known to be popular with children and a second group of books from the same time period known to be acclaimed by adults. These two groups were then cross-checked for titles which overlap, thereby identifying the population of select books for study.

To identify a large population of books known to be popular with children in the United States, there was one obvious resource. The annual

survey known as Children's Choices is unique as a nationally organized, systematic survey of large numbers of children's books published each year and read by thousands of children across the country. This survey includes fiction, nonfiction, biography, and poetry. Children's Choices is sponsored jointly by the International Reading Association and the Children's Book Council. Each year 10,000 school children throughout the United States read and vote on the year's newly published books covering all ages, but primarily focusing on ages five to thirteen. "This [is a] child-selected bibliography identifying titles that can be used successfully in reading programs, can be related to the classroom curriculum, and are known to engage children" ("Children's Choices for 1995," 1995, p. 133).

A consistent process of selection has been in place since the survey's inception. The books to be evaluated by children are first selected either by publishers or by the regional coordinators of the survey. Although this initial selection is made by adults, a review of the books in the survey indicates they are representative of the wide range of books published in the United States for children. The initial selection includes a substantial number of books to be read and voted on by children. For example, in 1990 more than 500 books were preselected from the over 4,500 children's books published that year (of

which about one-quarter were reprints and ineligible for selection). Of about 3,000 eligible books published in 1991, more than 650 were included in the survey. Approximately 800 books were preselected for the 1994 survey. These books are then read by 10,000 school children in five regions throughout the United States. Each region is assigned a children's literature specialist who works in conjunction with the classroom teachers and children. The books are made available to the children and their responses are observed and recorded by the teachers. The children's votes are tabulated and the titles of the top one hundred books (approximately) are then published annually in the November issue of *The Reading Teacher*. This system has been virtually the same since the first survey was conducted in 1974. The first Children's Choices survey was published in 1975 and it has been produced annually since then. The most recent survey published was November, 1995. Therefore, the time period used for the selection of books for this study was the twenty-one year period that the Children's Choices survey has been published: 1975 through 1995. The size of this population of books is 2,380 books. The books in this population are referred to throughout this study as "popular."

As with Children's Choices, there was also one obvious resource for the selection of a group of books known to be critically acclaimed by adults. The Newbery awards are pre-eminent among awards for children's books. They have a long history as the most prestigious, most easily recognized, and most well known of awards for children's literature. Since 1922, the Newbery Medal and Newbery Honor Books have been selected annually by a committee of adult experts in children's literature drawn from the membership of the American Library Association. The Newbery Medal is awarded "to the author of the most distinguished contribution to American literature for children published in the United States during the preceding year" (Association for Library Service to Children, 1995, p. 3). Each year one Newbery Medal winner and a varying number of Newbery Honor Books are selected. The Newbery Medal winners and Newbery Honor Books for the same 21-year time period as Children's Choices, 1975 through 1995, constitute the population of books esteemed by adults. These 72 books are referred to throughout the study as "acclaimed."

Having identified the popular books and the acclaimed books, it was then possible to compare the two populations seeking titles which appear in both groups. Each year's Newbery award titles were cross-checked against

the titles of the corresponding year's Children's Choices survey. This year by year comparison of the seventy-two Newbery award titles against the 2,380 Children's Choices titles yielded an overlap list of eleven books which were thus identified as both popular with children and acclaimed by adults. The books in this population are referred to throughout this study as "select."

An annotated bibliography of the eleven select books can be found in the Appendix . Each book receives two annotations, one from the Children's Choices surveys and one from the compilation of Newbery winners published by the American Library Association.

Phase Two

Phase Two of the study was the analysis of the literary elements of each book in the select population to identify qualities characterizing those books which appeal widely to children and are considered of high literary merit by adults. This analysis did not include a comparable look at the qualities of representative books from the popular or acclaimed populations, although it would be beneficial to do so in future research. The immediate challenge lay in developing a method which would eliminate as much as possible the subjective biases that are inherent in attempts to analyze

literature. It was critical to the success of this study that a relatively objective measure be developed.

An instrument for literary analysis was developed based on Lukens' (1995) discussion of the elements which should be considered in evaluating a literary work. These eight elements are: genre, character, point of view, setting, plot, theme, style and tone. These elements function as variables in this study. A set of values was determined for each deriving from the select books under study. Table 1: Literary Elements lists the elements and the values for each element which were found within the population of select books.

Literary Elements

Although literature for children does not differ in any essential way from literature for adults, it may differ in degree. Since children have not yet reached the level of experience or sophistication of an adult, their ability to comprehend and appreciate is naturally limited. Children's literature reflects this by simplifying somewhat the ways in which a story is told. Simplifying by no means diminishes the essential truths to be found in characters, plots, settings and themes. The following definitions do, however, reflect the

GENRE	REALISM: realistic stories, regional realism, historical fiction. FANTASY: fantastic stories, high fantasy, science fiction.
CHARACTER	Gender and age of protagonist, well rounded, growth and change, unity of character and action, personified animals.
POINT OF VIEW	Limited omniscient (protagonist). First person narrative (protagonist). Omniscient.
SETTING	Past, present, future or fantasy time. Real or fantasy place. Integral to story or a backdrop.
PLOT	Chronological. Progressive, episodic, single episode. Suspenseful. Conflict of person against self or person or society or nature or the supernatural. Single or double thread.
THEME	Survival, coming of age, loss of innocence, loss and recovery, hope, good vs. evil, acceptance (by self/others), integrity, outfoxing the fox, quest, courage, freedom, life and death. Theme is implicit or explicit. Single or double theme.
STYLE	Language: understated, spare, elevated, dignified, light, flat, poetic/lyrical, formal, restrained, brisk, musical, rhythmic, dialect, slang, colorful, straightforward, simple, casual, affectless, euphemistic, bland. Literary devices: Imagery, metaphors, symbolism, similes, aphorisms, puns & wordplay, dialogue, poetry, myths. Integral to protagonist. Integral to story.
TONE	Humorous, wise, reflective, light-hearted, flat, matter-of-fact, ironic, affectionate, solemn, lively, formal, serious, compassionate, formal, respectful, spirited, philosophical, awe, wonder. Too obvious: condescending, sentimental, didactic.

TABLE 1: LITERARY ELEMENTS

general level of sophistication of literary elements inherent in children's literature.

Genre

Genre provides a way of classifying books by general category. The most basic division is between fiction and nonfiction. Although both fiction and nonfiction are considered in the Children's Choices surveys and for Newbery awards, all eleven titles of the select population were fiction. Therefore Table 1 was limited to the literary qualities of fiction. Lukens (1995) has defined the four major categories of fiction as realism, fantasy, formula fiction, and traditional literature.

Formula fiction such as mysteries, romantic stories, and series novels follow a set formula of highly predictable plot developments. Characterizations are usually one dimensional and stereotypes are common. Great literature is seldom if ever found in formula fiction and therefore it was no surprise that none of the select population of this study was identified as formula fiction.

Traditional literature includes fables, myths, legends and folktales. These are stories which have endured in an oral tradition down generations

and across cultures. These stories often express the universal themes of human desires and needs and many versions tell the same or similar stories. Recent years have seen an increase in the scholarly collection of traditional tales and many retellings have been written by contemporary authors. Nonetheless, traditional literature is absent from the select population.

The two remaining categories of fiction, realism and fantasy, were represented in the select population. Realism means that the stories are possible (if not always probable). They are set in a plausible time and place; actions and outcomes are believable without the intervention of magic or the supernatural. Lukens (1995) has divided the realism genre into four subgenres: realistic stories, animal realism, historical fiction, and sports stories. Realistic stories focus on problems or social issues. The protagonist is often faced with a difficulty to overcome. Good writing in this subgenre provides believable and complex characters and avoids one dimensional or stereotyped protagonists. Plots and resolutions reflect the complexity of real life and do not succumb to pat answers or unrealistically easy solutions. (Regional realism, in which a realistic story is set in a particular geographic region integral to the story, is a sub-subgenre of realistic stories.) Animal realism is fiction in which the characters are animals portrayed in a true-to-

nature style without sentimentality or attributing human thoughts or emotions to the animals. Historical fiction portrays realistic stories which are set in an accurate setting in the past. They may incorporate historically true figures, but the protagonist is usually fictional. Sports stories, according to Lukens (1995), have moved in recent years from a kind of formula fiction to a more highly developed literary form and so she has included them as a subgenre of realism.

Fantasy stories take place in another world, one which is created by the author. The world created must be sufficiently credible and internally consistent that the reader willingly believes that it could and does exist at least for the duration of the story. Fantasy is comprised of three subgenres: high fantasy, fantastic stories, and science fiction. High fantasy often focuses on the conflict of good and evil and is set in a fantastic world other than our own. Supernatural or magical events are not uncommon. Fantastic stories, on the other hand are realistic in most ways, but contain one or more elements of fantasy which require the reader to suspend disbelief. Science fiction, like high fantasy, is set in a world other than our own but one which is scientifically plausible and consistent. Science fiction emphasizes technology over the supernatural.

Among the eleven select books only fiction was represented. Of the four types of fiction, only realism and fantasy were found. In realism, the subgenres of animal stories and sports stories did not appear. The books fell into the subgenres of realistic stories (four titles) and historic fiction (three titles). In fantasy, all three subgenres of high fantasy (one title), fantastic stories (two titles), and science fiction (one title) were represented. Because the select population was found to be limited to these fiction genres, the instrument of analysis, Table 1, was confined to the genres of realism (realistic stories and historic fiction) and fantasy.

Character

The people or personified animals or objects in a story are the characters. The characters in a story are revealed to the reader by a number of devices such as their actions, their speech, and their appearance as well as by comments about them by other characters or by the author. The central character is the protagonist. Typically, the more important a character is to the story, the better developed the character is. A well rounded character is well delineated and feels like a real person to the reader. Minor characters may be flat, not well developed, and even stereotyped or stock figures.

A well rounded protagonist may grow and change during the course of events in the story. Both the character and the story are more believable if there is unity between the character's personality and the actions the character takes.

The analysis of character in this study was limited to the protagonist. The gender and age of the protagonist were noted, in addition to the qualities of well rounded character development, growth and change in the character, and unity of character and action.

Point of View

The author must decide who is going to tell the story and how much the narrator knows. There are four possibilities an author might consider for the point of view of a story:

1) The first person narrative is told by one character from his or her perspective. This character is often, though not necessarily, the protagonist. The reader experiences the story through the perceptions, feelings and thoughts of the first person narrator.

2) The omniscient point of view is written in the third person. The narrator sees everything and knows all the thoughts and feelings of every character.

3) The limited omniscient point of view is similar to omniscient, except in this case the all-knowing teller of the story concentrates on the thoughts, feelings and perspective of the protagonist (or, less often, of several main characters).

4) Finally, a story could be written from the objective point of view in which the actions are recounted without interpretation or comment by the storyteller.

Only the first three points of view are represented in the select books: the objective point of view is lacking.

Setting

The setting depicts where the events of a story occur in time and place. A story could be set in a past, present or future time. Time can take unusual shapes and some stories may move around in time or outside of time as we know it. Place may be a realistic setting or a fantasy one, completely invented by the writer.

The setting may be integral to the story in which case it is essential that the story take place in that setting - in fact it could not take place in a different setting. Or the setting may be a backdrop - the story could be credibly set in other settings as well. Integral settings must be convincingly described and in sufficient detail to render them vivid to the reader. Generalized backdrop settings may leave much more to the reader's imagination.

Plot

Plot is the narrative order of events in a story and the characters in action. Plot is what keeps the reader wanting to know what happened next. The sequence of events can be arranged by the writer in order to create suspense, tension, mood. Chronological order means the events are narrated in the order in which they occur, just as in real life.

Many plots are progressive in structure. Progressive plots build a series of events one on top of the other, creating suspense and moving toward the climax or turning point of the story, after which follows a brief denouement which wraps up the story. Another type of plot structure is episodic. In these books, a string of events is narrated but they do not build

upon each other. Each one might be able to stand alone as a separate story. They are bound together by common characters and/or a unified theme. In children's literature a book may in fact be a single episode, similar to a short story.

Conflict involves struggle and together with narrative order makes plot. Many plots include one of these five types of conflict:

- 1) Person Against Self. A character, usually the protagonist, is struggling with internal conflict, often between good and evil, or with conflicting emotions.
- 2) Person Against Person. The conflict is between the protagonist and one other character known as the antagonist.
- 3) Person Against Society. Society and social norms provide the framework against which the protagonist is struggling. One or several characters may be representative of the society.
- 4) Person Against Nature. Surviving alone in the wild is the most obvious example of this type of conflict. The protagonist must fight his or her way out of a threatening situation in the natural environment.

5) Person Against The Supernatural. The conflict is between the protagonist and forces of magic. Wizardry, dragons, and other forces which are larger than life create the source of struggle for the protagonist.

The plot in a story may follow a single thread or the storyline may be woven of double or even multiple threads of conflict.

Theme

Theme refers to the central idea or universal truth that unifies a story. It answers the question, "What does it mean?" The theme of a story is often what is remembered by the reader after the details of plot have faded from memory. Theme may be explicit or implicit. If it is explicit, it will be stated in words by the narrator or a character in the story. Often, though, the theme is implied by the events and actions of the characters and readers must put it into words for themselves. There may be one or more themes. If there is more than one theme, a single theme is frequently the primary theme and the remaining theme(s) are secondary in importance.

Style

Style refers to the language used by the author to tell the story. Style is concerned with how the story is told rather than what the story is about. Style includes literary devices such as imagery, and figurative language such as simile and metaphor. The language used can be understated or exaggerated, straightforward or convoluted. It can be formal or filled with slang. The style may be integral to the protagonist and/or it may be integral to the story. Style is employed by the author to reveal the tone of the story.

Tone

Tone, as conveyed by style, refers to the tone of voice of the author similar to a speaking voice. Tone reveals the attitude of the writer towards the story being told. There are a multitude of possible tones, but some common ones include humorous, serious, light-hearted, affectionate or matter-of-fact. The tone may also convey an attitude which readers may dislike. A condescending tone feels as if the writer is looking down on the reader as immature or unintelligent. Didacticism and sentimentality are kinds of condescension.

Analysis

The instrument for analysis used the eight literary elements defined above as variables. Preliminary values for each variable were obtained from the works about literary criticism and evaluation reviewed in Chapter Two. A content analysis of the population of select books was then conducted to determine which of the preliminary values were present and to identify values which were missing from the original set. Missing values were inserted and extraneous values were eliminated. The set of values for the eight variables, in Table 1: Literary Elements, thus reflected the content of the study population. While this method limits the researcher's ability to analyze what might be called negative values (qualities the books may lack), it has the virtue of allowing an in-depth analysis of the values or qualities which do occur in the population.

The values enumerated in Table 1 were then listed as they appeared or failed to appear relative to each of the eleven select books. The frequency distribution for the final set of values within the select population was determined. The maximum frequency of appearance for a single value was eleven (one value might appear in all eleven books); the minimum was one (a value might appear in only one of the eleven books). Evaluation of this

frequency distribution of values provided the basis for the discussion and conclusions about the literary qualities found in the group of popular and critically acclaimed books under study.

It was expected that the analysis of the select population in terms of the eight literary elements discussed in the previous section would reveal some literary qualities in common among the eleven select books. Since it is a matter of concern that apparently only small numbers of books with literary merit are enjoyed widely by children, the analysis of literary elements was conducted on popular books in which literary merit was also a given. It was anticipated that the analysis would reveal data consistent with the findings of earlier research and the writings of literary critics and reading specialists in terms of what contributes to popularity. As discussed in Chapter Two, such predictable characteristics of popular books include interesting characters easily identified with by the reader, a simple, forward moving plot, realism in story and setting, and a colorful writing style that creates vivid images in the reader's mind. These qualities of accessibility into the story are most readily linked to the verbal level of meaning as defined by Leland Jacobs (1983), but are not exclusive of the behavioral or transcendent levels of meaning. Since the select population is made up of books both popular and

with literary merit, it was anticipated that the data would be consistent with books written to the higher levels of meaning as well.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONTENT ANALYSIS

Phase One

Using the populations described in Chapter Three, Methodology, the seventy-two titles of the acclaimed group were cross-checked against the 2,380 titles of the popular group for the purpose of identifying titles which overlap the two populations. This yielded a total of eleven titles which are thus known to be both popular with children and critically acclaimed by adults. This population of eleven titles is referred to as “select” and was the subject of a methodical literary analysis, element by element, to identify common trends and consistencies.

The select group represented 0.46% of the large population of popular books and 15.27% of the considerably smaller population of acclaimed books. These results are at odds with the negative relationship between acclaim and popularity found by Nilsen, Peterson and Searfoss. However, these findings are consistent with the findings of Bauer and Sanborn and those of Carter and Harris. In each of these studies a small percent ranging from 4% to 20% of the popular choices are also critically acclaimed. The variation of

percentages in large part is due to the difference in the ratio of the sizes of popular to acclaimed populations in the various studies.

An annotated bibliography of the eleven select books can be found in the Appendix. Each title receives two plot summaries, one from the Children's Choices surveys and one from the compilation of Newbery awards published by the American Library Association.

Phase Two

In this phase, the select eleven books were analyzed systematically in terms of each of the literary elements identified by Lukens (1995). Table 2: Literary Analysis of the Select Population is a graphic summary of this analysis which may be read across the rows of elements or down the columns of books for quick access to the relevant information.

Genre

All of the select titles are works of fiction. Of the four major categories of fiction, only realism and fantasy appear in the select population. Seven of the select books fall into the genre of realism; the remaining four are fantasy. Of the four subgenres in realism, only realistic stories and historical fiction

TITLE	<i>The Giver</i>	<i>Sarah, Plain and Tall</i>	<i>The Hero and the Crown</i>	<i>Like Jake and Me</i>	<i>The Sign of the Beaver</i>	<i>Doctor DeSoto</i>	<i>Ramona Quinby, Age 8</i>
GENRE	Fantasy Science Fiction	Realism Historical Fiction	Fantasy High Fantasy	Realism Realistic Story	Realism Historical Fiction	Fantasy Fantastic Story	Realism Realistic Story
CHARACTER	Jonas (M) 12 Well rounded. Growth and change. Unity of character and action.	Anna (F) about 8 Well rounded. Unity of character and action.	Aerin (F) 12-20 Well rounded. Growth and change. Unity of character and action.	Alex (M) about 7 Well rounded. Unity of character and action.	Matt (M) 12-13 Well rounded. Growth and change. Unity of character and action.	Dr. DeSoto (M) adult. Well rounded. Unity of character and action. Personified mouse.	Ramona (F) 8 Well rounded. Unity of character and action.
POINT OF VIEW	Limited omniscient (Protagonist)	First person narrative (Protagonist)	Limited omniscient (Protagonist)	Limited omniscient (Protagonist)	Limited omniscient (Protagonist)	Omniscient	Limited omniscient (Protagonist)
SETTING	Fantasy society set in the future is integral to story.	Pioneer prairie setting is integral to story.	Fantasy kingdom is integral to story.	Contemporary western setting provides backdrop.	Colonial Maine wilderness is integral to story.	Contemporary but unique dentist's office is integral to story.	Contemporary small town Oregon is backdrop
PLOT	Chronological. Progressive. Suspenseful. Person against society. Single thread.	Chronological. Progressive. Suspenseful. Person against person and against nature. Double thread.	Chronological. Progressive. Suspenseful. Person against society and the supernatural. Double thread.	Chronological. Single episode. Person against person. Single thread.	Chronological. Progressive. Suspenseful. Person against nature. Single thread.	Chronological. Single episode. Person against person. Single thread.	Chronological. Episodic. Person against person. Single thread.
THEME	Loss of innocence and coming of age. Freedom. Explicit. Double theme.	Loss and recovery/hope. Implicit. Single theme.	Coming of age/quest to conquer evil. Implicit. Single.	Acceptance of self/others. Implicit. Single theme.	Coming of age/survival. Explicit. Single theme.	Outfoxing the fox with integrity. Good vs. evil. Explicit. Single theme.	Self-knowledge and self-acceptance. Explicit. Single theme.
STYLE	Flat, affectless, spare language. Colorless images. Bland euphemisms. Integral to protagonist. Integral to story.	Poetic in rhythm, language, and imagery. Formal. Recurring metaphor of singing. Integral to story.	Elevated, formal diction. Vivid imagery.	Understated. Recurring metaphor of dancing. Simple.	Restrained. Straightforward. Boyish. Integral to protagonist.	Light and brisk. Straightforward.	Casual language, child friendly slang effectively convey the intensity of everyday life. Integral to protagonist. Integral to story.
TONE	Serious. Wise, and sometimes ironic. Reflective. Not didactic.	Serious. Solemn. Affectionate. Not sentimental.	Serious. Compassionate. Formal.	Light-hearted, but not condescending, treatment of a serious subject.	Serious. Matter-of-fact. Respectful of the characters and the story.	Humorous. Affectionate attitude toward all the characters. Non-didactic morality tale.	Humorous. Affectionate toward main characters. Sense of wonder about ordinary, everyday life.

TABLE 2: LITERARY ANALYSIS OF THE SELECTIONS

	<i>The Sign of the Beaver</i>	<i>Doctor DeSoto</i>	<i>Ramona Quimby, Age 8</i>	<i>A Ring of Endless Light</i>	<i>Ramona and Her Father</i>	<i>Dragonwings</i>	<i>Phillip Hall Likes Me I Reckon Maybe</i>
	Realism Historical Fiction	Fantasy Fantastic Story	Realism Realistic Story	Fantasy Fantastic Story	Realism Realistic Story	Realism Historical Fiction	Realism Regional Realism
er	Matt (M) 12-13 Well rounded. Growth and change. Unity of character and action.	Dr. DeSoto (M) adult. Well rounded. Unity of character and action. Personified mouse.	Ramona (F) 8 Well rounded. Unity of character and action.	Vicky (F) 15 Well rounded. Growth and change. Unity of character and action.	Ramona (F) 8 Well rounded. Unity of character and action.	Moon Shadow (M) 8-15. Well rounded. Growth and change. Unity of character and action.	Beth (F) 11-12 Well rounded. Unity of character and action.
	Limited omniscient (Protagonist)	Omniscient	Limited omniscient (Protagonist)	First person narrative (Protagonist)	Limited omniscient (Protagonist)	First person narrative (Protagonist)	First person narrative (Protagonist)
	Colonial Maine wilderness is integral to story.	Contemporary but unique dentist's office is integral to story.	Contemporary small town Oregon is backdrop.	Contemporary New England Island is backdrop.	Contemporary small town Oregon is backdrop.	Historic, realistic, urban setting is integral to story.	Contemporary, rural Arkansas is integral to story.
	Chronological. Progressive. Suspenseful. Person against nature. Single thread.	Chronological. Single episode. Person against person. Single thread.	Chronological. Episodic. Person against self. Single thread.	Chronological. Progressive. Suspenseful. Person against self. Single thread.	Chronological. Episodic. Person against self. Single thread.	Chronological. Progressive. Suspenseful. Person against society. Single thread.	Chronological. Episodic. Person against self. Single thread.
	Coming of age/survival. Explicit. Single theme.	Outfoxing the fox with integrity. Good vs. evil. Explicit. Single theme.	Self-knowledge and self-acceptance. Explicit. Single theme.	Acceptance of death/affirmation of life. Explicit. Single theme.	Self-knowledge and self-acceptance. Explicit. Single theme.	Coming of age/courage to follow your dream. Explicit. Single theme.	Self-knowledge and self-respect. Explicit. Single theme.
	Restrained. Straightforward. Boyish. Integral to protagonist.	Light and brisk. Straightforward.	Casual language, child friendly slang effectively convey the intensity of everyday life. Integral to protagonist. Integral to story.	Straightforward, detailed narrative. Heavy dialogue. Poetic. Recurring symbol of dolphins. Integral to protagonist.	Casual language, child friendly slang effectively convey the intensity of everyday life. Integral to protagonist. Integral to story.	Formal. Chinese to English translations. Similes. Myths. Recurring symbols of dragons and flying. Integral to protagonist/story.	Regional/cultural dialect. Colorful. Similes. Aphorisms. Wordplay. Slang. Integral to protagonist. Integral to story.
ut	Serious. Matter-of-fact. Respectful of the characters and the story.	Humorous. Affectionate attitude toward all the characters. Non-didactic morality tale.	Humorous. Affectionate toward main characters. Sense of wonder about ordinary, everyday life.	Serious. Philosophical and spiritual. Awe.	Humorous. Affectionate toward main characters. Sense of wonder about ordinary, everyday life.	Serious. Wise. Compassionate. Some humor. Sometimes didactic.	Humorous. Affectionate. Contains a sense of the extraordinary in the everyday.

LITERARY ANALYSIS OF THE SELECT POPULATION

appear in the select group. There are four realistic stories, including *Philip Hall Likes Me*. *I Reckon Maybe*, which can be classified as the sub-subgenre regional realism, and three stories are historical fiction. There are two fantastic stories in the select group, and one each of high fantasy and science fiction. To summarize, the incidence of genre in the select population is:

Realistic Story	4
Historical Fiction	3
Fantastic Story	2
High Fantasy	1
Science Fiction	1

In addition to the realistic stories and historical fiction, one fantastic story can be counted as largely realistic. *A Ring of Endless Light* is placed in the fantastic story category because the protagonist, Vicky, has a supernatural ability to communicate with dolphins. However, the book is a realistic story in every other way. Therefore, in terms of content, there are eight books which are realistic or primarily realistic. Three books are fantasies, set in alternative worlds.

Character

Gender is perhaps the most basic aspect of character. The select books are divided almost equally, with six female protagonists and five males.

Age is another basic aspect of character. The age range of the protagonists is broad and slightly older than the age of the readers. Readers' ages range from five to thirteen; ten of the eleven protagonists range from seven to fifteen (two age several years in the course of the book; see discussion below). One is an adult. The distribution is centered on the lower and middle parts of the range, with five seven and eight year olds, four eleven and twelve year olds, and one teenager (fifteen).

Nine of the eleven protagonists stay the same age (within a year) throughout the story. Two, however, grow seven or eight years in the course of the story. Moon Shadow ages from eight to fifteen years, thus staying within the range of the other books, but Aerin is twelve years old at the beginning of the story and may be considered an adult at twenty when the book ends.

The characters of all the books are people except *Doctor De Soto*, in which the characters are personified animals. In all eleven books, the protagonists are well rounded characters. They embody a complexity of character and they feel believably real. Their actions are convincing and consistent with their character (unity of character and action). For example, in *The Hero and the Crown*, Aerin is portrayed as smart, clumsy, tenacious, stubborn, fearless. The reader sees that although Aerin sometimes feigns

indifference, she desperately wants to prove, both to herself and to the people around her, that she is worthy of her position as the king's daughter. That she becomes a dragonslayer is in keeping with her character. Royalty do not usually slay dragons, but she is half "foreign" and considered by many to be impure in any case. Aerin is an effective dragonslayer, but she makes mistakes and she gets hurt in the process. Luck, stubborn persistence and above all courage contribute to her success and she comes to feel proud of her ability to slay dragons. There is unity of character and action in the portrayal of Aerin.

Growth and change in the protagonist is an important factor in defining character. In *The Sign of the Beaver*, Matt virtually grows up the summer he is twelve years old. His father leaves Matt alone in the colonial Maine wilderness to protect their newly homesteaded property while he returns to Massachusetts for Matt's mother and sisters. Matt learns a great deal about loneliness, self sufficiency, survival, and friendship. He learns about the importance of family and loyalty. When his long delayed family finally return to him well into winter, he is no longer the boy of the previous spring, but a young man. Such significant growth and change is evident in five protagonists. Although growth and change is not completely lacking in the

remaining six protagonists, it is evident only at a more subdued level. For example, in *Doctor De Soto* the dentist, a mouse, has succeeded in meeting the challenge of treating the fox's bad tooth without getting eaten by the fox. He is satisfied that he was able to act professionally while avoiding danger, but is little changed except a bit wiser. Therefore Table 2 does not list growth and change for those books in which it is secondary.

Point of View

There is a high degree of consistency among the eleven books in their point of view. Ten books reflect a strong bias toward telling the story through the thoughts, feelings and experiences of the protagonist: six stories are told in the third person from the limited omniscient point of view of the protagonist and four stories are narrated by the protagonist in the first person. The remaining book (*Doctor De Soto*) is told from the omniscient point of view; none of the books were written in the objective style.

Setting

The stories take place in a wide variety of times and places. The present is the most common time, with half of the books in a contemporary

setting. Three books are set in the past and one in the future. One book takes place in a fantasy time outside of past, present or future. However, since transportation is by horse and weapons are swords or spears it is reminiscent of the distant past.

The places where the stories are set are realistic in nine of the books. Although there is a marked consistency toward realism, there is no trend toward a specific type of setting within the boundaries of realism. Among the realistic settings is a wide variety of locations and type. Two settings are rural, one takes place in the wilderness and one on the prairie, two are in a small town, one is urban. One is on a vacation island off the coast of New England and one is in a dentist's office. All the realistic settings are spread throughout the United States, except the portions of *Dragonwings* which are set in China.

Only two are set in fantasy worlds. One of these is set in a future society on earth that has apparently evolved from contemporary society. It is one of a group of self-contained societies that could be anywhere in the United States. The other takes place in a fantasy kingdom made up of cities, towns and countryside as well as supernatural locations outside of conventional time and place.

There are more settings (seven) which are integral to the story than settings which provide a non-essential backdrop (four). Not surprisingly, the three fantasy stories are set in places integral to the story. *The Giver* could not take place anywhere other than the futuristic society which is so clearly described. The premise of the story is intertwined with the oppressive constraints of that society. The same is true of *The Hero and the Crown*. Aerin's story derives from the society into which she is born; the slaying of dragons and fighting of evil forces are specific to the setting. The special characteristics of Dr. De Soto's dental office are integral to the story and integral to his practice for animals both large and small. The special split staircase to accommodate different sized patients, as well as his special room and equipment for extra large animals are vividly illustrated and essential to the story.

Four realistic settings are integral to their stories as well. The best example of this is *Philip Hall Likes Me. I Reckon Maybe*. Events such as catching a turkey thief, running relay races, winning a calf-raising contest and attending the county fair are so vividly described and in such detail, they could take place only in Pocahontas, Arkansas.

Less critical are the settings which function as backdrop. In these books settings are more vaguely described and could be changed without an impact on the story. The small town Oregon setting in the *Ramona* books could be any small town in the United States. There is a universality about the background that transcends a specific location. In *Like Jake and Me* the reader is told that Jake is a “real” cowboy and there is a sense of a rural western background, but it is not clearly described and the story is independent of the location.

Plot

Without exception, the books are written in a chronological narrative order. The framework of six of the stories is progressive, in which events build on each other toward a climax and denouement. *The Giver* begins as Jonas is wondering what his assignment will be - all the twelve year olds are assigned to the jobs they will hold for their working lives. After he learns he is to be the new Receiver, he and the reader learn only gradually the significance of that assignment. When Jonas fully realizes that he alone must carry the crushing burden of the collective memory of his society, he then makes some difficult decisions. Each event in the plot develops out of what has happened before.

The climactic scene describes Jonas's escape, and the brief denouement is about what the future holds for Jonas and for the society he has left behind.

Three books are constructed in an episodic fashion. In the *Ramona* books and *Philip Hall* a string of individual episodes are loosely tied together. Although some of the episodes could function independent of the whole, they are enriched by the common threads which pull them together. For example, in *Ramona and Her Father* Ramona is very concerned about her father being out of a job. And she is intent that he stop smoking cigarettes. The impact of these factors on the events of Ramona's daily life increases the reader's level of involvement and provides a single lens through which to view the individual episodes.

Two of the books are a single episode each and are the only books under study with sufficient illustrations to be classified as picture books aimed at the youngest audience. *Like Jake and Me* is about a single event in which Alex and Jake take a step toward a better understanding and acceptance of each other. The single episode in *Doctor De Soto* is about the dentist finding a way to treat the fox's tooth while avoiding being eaten by the fox.

Whether progressive or episodic, all of the books are sufficiently suspenseful to keep the reader wanting to know what happens next. About

half are very suspenseful, providing the reader with a charge of excitement and an intense curiosity to know how the conflict will be resolved. These books were classified as suspenseful. The other half have a quieter level of suspense coupled with a certainty that somehow all will be well in the end. Suspense, therefore, is somewhat less significant in these five books and they were not classified as suspenseful. There is a relationship between degree of suspense and progressive or episodic structure. All of the books classified as suspenseful are progressive, and all of the books not classified as suspenseful are episodic or single episode.

The nature of conflict in plot involves a struggle between the protagonist and another force. In the select population, the conflicts occur as follows:

person against self	4
person against person	3
person against society	3
person against nature	2
person against the supernatural	1

This totals thirteen conflicts, two more than the eleven books under examination; two books have a double plot thread.

Theme

As with plot, which exhibited a preponderance of single conflicts, there are primarily single themes throughout the select population. Only *The Giver* can be said to have a double theme. That Jonas loses his childhood innocence and comes of age represents one theme; the second theme is about the nature of freedom and its risks juxtaposed against the security of a rigidly controlled environment. The theme of coming of age appears in four books in different guises: there is a quest to conquer evil forces, a challenge to survive alone in the wilderness, learning to have the courage to follow one's dream, and Jonas's decision to risk everything for freedom. All of these journeys result in the loss of some innocence and a degree of maturation within the protagonist.

Knowledge of and acceptance of oneself and/or of others occurs as a theme four times. Two stories embody the theme of loss and recovery. One story, the only one which is told from the omniscient point of view, provides a model of adult characters successfully surviving a threatening situation with their integrity intact.

Theme is implicit in three books; in eight books it is stated explicitly.

Jonas's thoughts as he leaves his familiar society at the end of *The Giver*

explicitly reveal his attitude about freedom and his new maturity as he has come of age:

All of it was new to him. After a life of Sameness and predictability, he was awed by the surprises that lay beyond each curve of the road. . . . During his twelve years in the community, he had never felt such simple moments of exquisite happiness.

But there were desperate fears building in him now as well. The most relentless of his new fears was that they would starve. . . . You have never been starving, he had been told. You will never be starving.

Now he was. If he had stayed in the community, he would not be. It was as simple as that. Once he had yearned for choice. Then, when he had had a choice, he had made the wrong one: the choice to leave. And now he was starving. But if he had stayed . . .

His thoughts continued. If he had stayed, he would have starved in other ways. He would have lived a life hungry for feelings, for color, for love. (Lowry, 1993, pp. 172-174)

Matt, too, has come of age after surviving alone in the wilderness for six months in *The Sign of the Beaver*:

He had passed some sort of test. Not by any means with flying colors; he had plenty of bruises to remind him of that. But at least he had not disgraced Attean. He felt satisfied. And for the first time since his father had left him, he did not feel alone in the forest. (Speare, 1983, p. 105)

In *Dragonwings*, Moon Shadow comes of age and learns about the courage to follow a dream:

I knew there were plenty of problems still ahead of me. . . . Tons of problems, and while I was not about to dismiss them as little ones, I was not afraid of them. I knew that I could meet them with the same

courage with which Father had pursued his dream of flight and then given it up. (Yep, 1975, p. 245)

The theme of self-knowledge and self-acceptance is explicit in both books about Ramona. From *Ramona Quimby, Age 8*:

Deep down inside, she felt she herself was nice all the time, but sometimes on the outside her niceness sort of - well, curdled. Then people did not understand how nice she really was. Maybe other people curdled too. (Cleary, 1981, p. 188)

And from *Ramona and Her Father* (Cleary, 1977):

I don't really mean to be horrid. It just works out that way. (p. 172)

I'm really a nice person. It's just that nobody understands. (p. 175)

Ramona was filled with joy. . . .Her parents loved her, and she loved them, and Beezus, too. Ramona could not contain her feelings. (p. 186)

Beth learns to understand and respect herself in *Philip Hall*:

Where in the good book is it written that a girl's calf can't be in the same contest with a boy's calf? Well, Mister Philip Hall, for too long I've worried that you wouldn't like me if I became the number one best student, ran faster in the relay race, or took the blue ribbon for calf-raising.

Well, I reckon I'm still worried, but with a difference. Now I'm worried that I might not win and that would give you entirely too much satisfaction. (Greene, 1974, pp. 118-119)

Vicky and her grandfather use poetry to help them accept that death is a part of life in *A Ring of Endless Light*. Vicky's grief is "a deep but dazzling darkness" from which she is ultimately able to emerge into "a great ring of

pure and endless light” (L’Engle, 1980, p. 70). She also takes solace in swimming with the dolphins who represent great joy to her. “And joy, Grandfather would remind me, joy is the infallible sign of the presence of God” (p. 279).

Finally, the theme of *Doctor De Soto* (Steig, 1982) is explicitly stated on the last page: “Doctor De Soto and his assistant had outfoxed the fox. They kissed each other and took the rest of the day off.”

Style

Style is created by the author’s use of language and literary devices. Each story in the select population is told in language distinctive to its protagonist and to its plot, setting and theme. In this light, it is fair to say that the style of each book is unique; there are no patterns or similarities of style among the select books (except, of course, the two *Ramona* books which are part of one series and in the same style). The full range of styles in these books is listed in Table 2. It includes language which is spare, elevated, casual, slang, colorful, formal, and bland. Among the literary devices listed are metaphors, symbolism, aphorisms, similes, wordplay, and poetry. In all of these different ways, language creates vivid images for the reader.

However, viewed in a different light there are some discernible patterns in the style of the books in the select population. In seven of the eleven books, the story is told in language which is integral to the character of the protagonist. As discussed above, most of the stories in the select population are told from the perspective of the protagonist. Whether narrated in first or third person, the style often reflects the language that is credible to that character. The two *Ramona* books are told in the language of a seven or eight year old girl. Beth's language in *Philip Hall* is not only true to her age, but to her regional dialect. There is a boyish forthrightness in *The Sign of the Beaver* that is true to Matt's personality. In *Dragonwings*, Moon Shadow's style is somewhat formal and even stilted, fitting for an immigrant learning a second language. The language of *The Giver* reflects both the boyish spirit of Jonas and the impact upon him of the affectless and oppressive society in which he lives. And the style in *A Ring of Endless Light* matches Vicky's chattiness and use of dialogue alongside her more thoughtful grappling with difficult issues which are often expressed in poetry.

In six books the language is notable for being integral to the specific story it has to tell. In the *Ramona* books, there is an overarching sense of the ordinariness of everyday life for an eight year old girl and her family in a

small town in Oregon. The style of language is child-friendly and casual, the language of a child like Ramona. The language of *The Giver* is integral to the bland, emotionless and colorless society of the future in which the story is set. In *Sarah, Plain and Tall* the spare and poetic language reflects the intensity of the pain the characters feel due to the death of their mother and their yearning to find solace. It is also in keeping with the austere and often difficult life of pioneers on the midwestern prairie. The style of language in *Dragonwings* emphasizes the learning of a new language and culture by italicizing English words that are new to Moon Shadow. Explanations of cultural differences are woven into the narrative. Differences between eastern and western ways of thinking about many things are highlighted. The colorful and regional language of *Philip Hall Likes Me. I Reckon Maybe*. vividly sets the story in one place, and no other is possible. Although the specific choice of language and imagery varies widely from one story to the next, the books in the select population exhibit a slight bias toward melding the style to the storyteller and to the story.

In four of the stories, one can trace a recurring metaphor throughout the story which symbolizes and illustrates in a poetically vivid way the primary

meaning of each story. It is a powerful device for enhancing the meaning of the stories for the reader.

The metaphor of singing in *Sarah, Plain and Tall* stands for a mother's love. The children and father remember and talk about singing when their mother was alive but they do not sing any more. When they learn that Sarah may visit them and stay to be their mother, they want to know if she sings. And finally, when Sarah comes and begins to love them and accept their prairie environment, she brings new songs to them, signifying that, although she cannot take their mother's place, they can learn together to find a new happiness.

To Alex in *Like Jake and Me*, dancing is important, but it also symbolizes the many ways in which he and his stepfather, Jake, are worlds apart. It is also used to symbolize how Alex's father and stepfather are different from each other. Throughout the story, dancing symbolizes Alex's conflict between his love for dance and his desire for Jake's respect and approval. In the end, Alex proves his courage to Jake who is terrified of spiders and they celebrate by dancing together.

In *The Ring of Endless Light*, the dolphins symbolize life and death, deep grief and soaring joy. Dolphins in the story suffer and grieve at the loss

of a baby dolphin. The dolphin family that Vicky learns to communicate with symbolizes new life and a joy that is transforming and life affirming. Their interactions with Vicky are woven throughout the story and help her cope with the loss of her beloved grandfather who is dying of leukemia.

The symbolism of dragons and of flying are tied together in *Dragonwings* as even the title implies. Together they signify the driving force for Moon Shadow and his father to overcome all difficulties, including a hostile social environment, to realize the father's dream to build an airplane and fly it. Dragon myths are used throughout the story in different ways, primarily to emphasize the differences of the eastern and western cultures and to illustrate the complexities of good and evil. The myths are a source of strength and comfort for Moon Shadow as they help him to understand his father and ultimately himself.

There are pronounced poetic elements in three of the books of the select population. *Sarah, Plain and Tall* is told in a poetic style that wastes no words and is the more powerful because of its poetic rhythms and images. There are songs/poems recited in the course of the story. Poetry is liberally quoted and worked into the story of *The Ring of Endless Light*. Many of the issues Vicky struggles with are expressed through the poetry of others and the

poems she writes herself. Similarly, the telling of traditional Chinese myths is woven into *Dragonwings*, contributing poetic symbolism to the telling of Moon Shadow's story.

Although each book's style is distinctive to the story it has to tell, there are some apparent trends in style among the select books. Seven books are written in language integral to their protagonist, and six in language integral to their story. In three books, the poetic elements are striking. Four books are effectively enhanced by a recurring metaphor. All of the books are strengthened by the use of language which creates vivid images in the mind of the reader.

Tone

Tone conveys the author's attitude about the story, as if it is the author's tone of voice. Each story has its distinctive tone, but there are some common tones which run through the select population. A sense of the author's fondness for at least the main character and many other characters as well is present in all eleven books. It is more obvious in the lighthearted or humorous books, but it can be felt in some degree throughout all of the books of this group.

Six books are serious in tone. Along with seriousness comes a solemnity, or wisdom, or spirituality or even irony which create distinctions even among the four books which can be defined as serious. One of the six is less serious than simply matter-of-fact. In *The Sign of the Beaver*, Matt is left on his own for the summer. He is to protect the new home and land in the Maine wilderness while his father returns to Massachusetts to bring back his mother and sisters. The story is told in a matter-of-fact tone that respects the seriousness of the circumstances and avoids the sentimentality a more overwrought tone might convey.

Doctor De Soto treats a serious subject light-heartedly. It is one of the five books which can be described as humorous or light-hearted. In all the books of this group, the humor is gentle and manifests itself in a variety of ways such as comic characters and events or by wordplay and puns.

None of the books is condescending or sentimental in tone. Only one book (*Dragonwings*) occasionally crosses the line into didacticism. This occurs when the author through Moon Shadow tries a little too obviously to teach the reader about the two cultures of China and California.

Summary

The study identified a population of select books known to be popular with children and critically acclaimed by adults. The eleven select books were analyzed individually and compared with each other to determine if there were literary qualities in common among them. It was found that while each book retained its individuality there were a number of qualities which they held in common.

Of the eleven fiction books, seven are realism and three are fantasy. The protagonists are evenly divided by gender and represent an age range similar to the readers' ages. All of the protagonists are well rounded characters who exhibit unity of character and action. About half exhibit major growth and change in the course of the story. All but one of the stories are told from the point of view of the protagonist. Three fourths of the settings are real places in the present or familiar past; more than half of the settings are integral to the story. All the plots are chronological and most have a single thread. About half are progressive and suspenseful. The remaining half are episodic and less suspenseful.

Four books have coming of age themes, four are about self-knowledge and acceptance, two are about loss and recovery and one is about outfoxing the

fox. One book has a double theme, whereas a single theme suffices for ten.

Theme is explicit in eight books. Each book has a distinctive style, but all create vivid images. In half of the books the style is integral to the protagonist, and in just over half it is integral to the story. Tone is divided fairly evenly between serious and humorous.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Phase One

In establishing the method for identifying the books in the select population, an assumption was made that there would be select books which would overlap the popular and acclaimed populations. The results yielded eleven titles out of the 2,380 popular titles and 72 acclaimed titles. This is a percentage of 0.46% and 15.27% respectively. The highest possible number of Newbery award books among the popular titles would be 3.03% based on the 72 Newbery awards given in the time period of this study. The highest possible number of popular titles among the Newbery award books theoretically is 100% because all of the Newbery award books from the time period presumably were included in the Children's Choices surveys. It would be misleading to conclude that no more than 0.46% of the popular books have literary merit. This study simply indicates that 0.46% of the books in the popular population have won a Newbery award. Establishing a mathematical relationship between popularity and literary merit has not been accomplished here, nor was it the intention to do so. The populations

were established in order to provide a reasonably representative group of popular and acclaimed books for closer analysis, and that has been accomplished.

Phase Two

An instrument for the systematic analysis of children's books was developed for this study. From a review of the literature about evaluating children's literature, a set of variables was formulated based on the literary elements of genre, character, point of view, setting, plot, theme, style, and tone. Values derived from the works under study were then assigned to each variable and analyzed. Because this study was limited to an analysis of the select books only, it was not possible to determine how the select population compared to the popular or acclaimed populations. However, it did provide a way of profiling the qualities of a group of books which rate highly in both popularity and critical acclaim.

What follows is a discussion and interpretation of the data derived from the analysis of these books. One of the underlying reasons for conducting this study was to seek a better understanding of why relatively few critically acclaimed books are popular with children. The framework of the literary

analysis is based on Lukens' (1995) work regarding the structure and evaluation of children's literature. It is explicit in her title (*A Critical Handbook of Children's Literature*), and implicit in her discussion that the methods of evaluation are focused on books with literary merit. Thus, the framework of analysis developed in this study implies that the evaluation is conducted in terms of what is meritorious in works of literature.

Furthermore, the values used in assessing the qualities of each variable derive from the books themselves, further reinforcing the bias towards literary merit, since the select books by definition have literary merit. Given that the select books have literary merit and that they are evaluated in literary terms, the discussion of the results of this study will now focus on the factors in the eleven books which might have contributed to their popularity. While it may be equally interesting to examine further why these books are award winners, that is not the immediate focus of this discussion.

In considering the interpretation of the results of the analysis of the eleven select books, it was useful to develop a table graphically displaying the numerical incidence of each value. Table 3: Numerical Incidence of Values, shows the values of each variable (literary element) in numerical order, from

	Genre	Character	Point of View	Setting	Plot	Theme	Style	Tone
11 8 0 0 K S		Well rounded. Unity of character and action.			Chronological.			
10		People. 8 - 20 years old.				Single.		
9				Real place.	Single thread.			
8						Explicit.		
7	Realism.			Integral.			Integral to protagonist.	
6		Female.	Limited omniscient (protagonist).	Present time.	Progressive. Suspenseful.		Integral to story.	Serious.
5		Male. Growth and change.		Backdrop.				Humorous or light-hearted.
4	Fantasy.		First person narrative (protagonist).		Person against self.	Coming of age. Self knowledge and acceptance.	Recurring metaphors.	
3				Past time.	Episodic. Person against person. Person against society.	Implicit.	Casual. Poetic.	
2				Fantasy place.	Single episode. Person against nature. Double thread.	Loss and recovery.	Formal. Straightforward.	
1		Personified animal. Adult.	Omniscient.	Future time. Fantasy time.	Person against the supernatural.	Freedom. Outfoxing the fox. Double.	Flat. Understated. Restrained. Light and brisk. Stilted. Regional dialect.	Didactic.

TABLE 3: NUMERICAL INCIDENCE OF VALUES

the qualities occurring most frequently to the qualities occurring least frequently among the select books.

Genre

It is noteworthy that only two fiction genres and no nonfiction genres are represented in the select population. Casual perusal of the Children's Choices surveys over the years reveals a wide variety of both fiction and nonfiction genres on the lists. However, review of the Newbery Medal and Newbery Honor books indicates a narrower range of genres, with only occasional appearances by nonfiction.

About two-thirds of the stories in the select group are realistic in nature. This is in keeping with Burgess' (1985) finding that interest in contemporary realism is consistently high for children of all grades. Jacobs (1955) also reports on the wide appeal to children of realistic literature. There is a level of accessibility in this type of story that lends itself to popular appeal while not detracting from the possibility of attaining stature as acclaimed literature. Realistic stories are plausible and may feel familiar; in well-written realistic stories, the problem is resolved believably, avoiding unbelievable, oversimplified and sentimentalized resolutions.

Character

According to Lukens (1995), character is probably the most important element of fiction in terms of creating a pleasurable and lasting literature for children. Carter and Harris (1982), in studying the responses in Children's Choices surveys, found that character was the literary quality most frequently mentioned by junior high school students. Burgess (1985) reported that what children liked best about a new book are the characters.

Character is the literary element with the highest incidence of values in common among the select books. In all eleven books, the protagonist was well rounded, and there was unity of character and action. In ten books the characters were people (not personified animals or objects). In ten books the age of the protagonist was within or slightly older than the age range of the child readers of these books.

As with genre, the qualities of the protagonists in the select population pose no obstacles to the reader and even encourage easy identification with and interest in their stories. As Hildick (1970) has observed, the reader's ability to identify with the protagonist is crucial to a story's popularity. Well rounded characters are well-delineated, realistic, believable and interesting. It is easy to identify and/or empathize with them. If the protagonist is

similar in age to the reader, identification with the character is facilitated as well. These attributes of the protagonist appear to be among the most significant factors in contributing to a book's popularity.

Point of View

The stories are told either in the first person by the protagonist or, similarly, in the third person from the protagonist's perspective. That the stories are written from the perspective of the protagonist in ten of the books reinforces the opinion that accessibility may be a major factor in popularity with children. A story written from the point of view of a sympathetic main character readily engages the reader. Identification of the character as similar to the reader or people the reader knows enhances interest in the book. Stories written from the protagonist's perspective make it easier for readers to feel that they are inside the characters and are experiencing firsthand the events of the plot.

Setting

As the discussion of genre above has indicated, realism is important in terms of popularity with children. This preference is reinforced by the results

of the analysis of setting among the select books. In nine instances the story is set in a real place in this world. In one instance the setting is in a realistically believable future world. And even the fantasy setting of the remaining select book is rendered so as to feel familiar. Although the latter two books require an extra effort by the reader to learn the environment in which the story is set, the settings of all the select books are sufficiently familiar and credible for the reader to imagine them easily.

Time as well as place is an important factor in setting. Six books are set in the present time. Three are in the past and the remaining two are either in the future or in a fantasy time. Setting in time does not appear to be as critical as setting in place among the select books. Nonetheless there is a gentle bias toward the familiar, as nine books are either contemporary or in a historical setting that would be familiar to most American school children.

Within the select group, there is only a slight indication (seven instances) that a setting integral to the story is preferred over a backdrop setting (four instances) which could easily be changed without an impact on the story.

Plot

Plot is the only category other than character in which there occurs complete agreement among the values of all eleven books: the narrative order in all the books is chronological. The plot has a single thread in nine of the books. A single thread of plot narrated in chronological order is the least complex, least sophisticated of possible plot structures. That all or almost all of the books are written in this simple form is again indicative that accessibility is an issue with regard to popularity. Jacobs (1955) concurs that children prefer plots with a single main sequence of events.

Vandergrift (1980) states that children prefer plots with a strong progressive plot or an episodic plot structure. In the select population, the plot qualities of progressive (six) and episodic /single episode (five), are evenly divided. In degree of suspense, and type of conflict (person against self, person, society, nature, or the supernatural) no clear trends emerge. About half of the books are suspenseful. All of the five types of conflict are represented, but none is represented more than four times.

Theme

In theme there is a wide range from highly consistent values to those which exhibit no discernible patterns. The clearest pattern is in the value of a single or double theme, wherein nearly all of the books (ten) have a single theme and only one has a double theme. This is parallel to the simplicity of the single thread plots of most of the books. Similarly, eight books have explicit themes; only three are implicit. This is in agreement with Sebesta's (1990) assertion that children like books with explicit themes. The general tendency away from complexity toward simplicity in the select books is reinforced by these aspects of theme.

However, the quality of specific thematic content falls at the opposite end of the scale, exhibiting few commonalities. Four books have some variation of the coming of age theme and another four have a theme of knowledge and acceptance of self and/or others. Two books are about loss and recovery, one book incorporates the theme of freedom, and one book is about outfoxing the fox and retaining one's integrity.

Style

There are no major consistencies within the style category, although seven of the books are written in a style that is integral to the protagonist and six have a style integral to the story (there is some overlap: of these books, in five style is integral to both protagonist and story). For three books, style is not characterized as integral to protagonist or story. If a protagonist has qualities with which the reader can easily identify or empathize, by extension then the language of that character is likely to be more accessible to the reader. Similarly, if the style is integral to the story and the story structure lends itself to accessibility, it follows that the style is part of the accessible nature of the book. The clearest example of this is in the book *Philip Hall Likes Me. I Reckon Maybe*, in which the style is inextricably entwined with both the protagonist and the story. The language of Beth is vivid, colloquial and easy to “hear” as it is being read. Her expressions such as “a jillion acres and a trillion pines” and “tired as a toad” are colorful, descriptive and readily understood. The descriptions of the surroundings include such phrases as “watermelon-shaped lakes and popcorn clouds.” Similes and aphorisms dot every page resulting in a distinctive style that is inseparable from the story

itself and one which is both charming and entirely accessible to the least sophisticated reader.

Jacobs (1955), Hildick (1970), Vandergrift (1980) and others write about the importance of language in telling stories. Use of language is critical to mood, suspense, images. It facilitates the reader's comprehension of the story. Even though there is a wide variety of styles among the select books, it can be said that each one conveys vivid imagery. Use of recurring metaphors, catchy similes, homely aphorisms, friendly slang, and colorful language depict story in a memorable and graphic way. In all of the styles, the writing creates clear pictures of the environments, people, and events.

Tone

It does not appear that tone is as significant a variable in terms of popularity, as variables such as character, plot or theme. The select population is nearly evenly divided between books with a serious tone (six) and those which are humorous (five). Children seem to like both.

The most significant trend in the category of tone is in the lack of condescension. Although there is a clear bias towards accessibility in the other categories, it does not follow that the tone speaks down to the reader.

Condescension, didacticism and sentimentality are almost entirely absent from the select books.

Limitations and Recommendations

The limitations of this study are primarily factors of scope. Utilizing the instrument of analysis developed in this study, a more comprehensive future study could and should include a literary analysis of books in the popular and acclaimed populations as well as of those in the select population. The results would make it possible to compare and contrast the literary qualities of each of the three populations. At the very least, it would be useful to determine if the qualities common among the select population, as identified in this study, are exclusive to that population.

Other questions might be answered as well. Are the acclaimed books which are not popular less accessible and/or more complex than those which are popular? Are there common literary qualities of popular books which are largely lacking in the acclaimed? Learning the answers to such questions could lead to further exploration of ways to increase the number of books with literary merit which become popular with children.

A closer examination of the Children's Choices survey process and results is recommended. This study did not examine the process of adult preselection of the books read and voted upon by children. It might be especially interesting to study the written responses of children to learn more about why they vote for or against a book and what elements in a book are most likely to affect their reactions.

It would also be highly useful to know the calendar parameters of eligibility for the Children's Choices surveys. The introductory paragraphs to each year's Children's Choices survey do not make absolutely clear if the eligible titles were published during the previous calendar year. Since they refer only to "recently published" books, it is possible that there is a mismatch between this loose definition and the strictly observed calendar year of publication for Newbery eligibility. Therefore, the possibility exists that a Newbery award winner could have been included in a Children's Choices survey in a different year than the year of its publication. In such a case, that award winner would not have been included in this survey.

It is recommended that a future study develop a method for quantifying with a higher degree of mathematical certainty the number of books which are both popular with children and acclaimed by adults. The inclusion of other

standards of literary merit in addition to the Newbery awards would increase the size of the sample of acclaimed books, thereby strengthening the results.

Another topic for further research is to study genre in terms of literary merit and awards earned as well as popularity. The focus of this study was limited to the narrow range of genres which appeared in the select population. If there are significant numbers of books of folktales, poetry, biography, science and other genres being read and enjoyed by children, then one would hope that comparable numbers would receive critical acclaim. Since that does not appear to be so, at least in the case of the Newbery awards, one wonders if it is because quality books in those genres are not being written, or if they do exist but are not receiving sufficient critical attention. An exploration of this would make a good topic for further research.

Conclusion

The results of this study, consistent with similar studies, indicate that literary merit and critical acclaim do not ensure the popularity of a book. Leland Jacobs (1983) writing about the three levels of meaning at which a book is read contributes a useful and important perspective in the attempt to understand why this is so. Jacobs defines the three levels at which a book is

read as the verbal, behavioral and transcendent levels. At the verbal level, the reader is engaged and wants to know what happens in the story. At the behavioral level, the reader's involvement is increased. This is a more sophisticated level at which the reader is compelled to believe in the characters and events in the story. The transcendent level evokes and illuminates an inner understanding of life's meanings.

Nilsen, Peterson, and Searfoss (1980) reported that critically acclaimed books consistently rated very low in popularity and that the most popular books rated high on the verbal, but low on the behavioral and transcendent levels. The verbal level relates directly to accessibility. It is the level at which it is easiest for a child reader to enter into a book. The simplest, most superficial level Jacobs describes as the verbal level of meaning. "This is the basal level at which attention is caught and held in such ways that line after line will be read and page after page will be turned" (1983, p. 99). Accessibility is a significant factor at this level. One clear pattern that has emerged from the results of this study is that the select books are highly accessible. They exhibit very few literary qualities which create obstacles to rapid engagement of the reader and they avoid the complexities which require a more painstaking or sophisticated level of

reading. In each category of literary element in which there is a high number of common variables, those variables tend to be the qualities which make a book accessible. Sympathetic, well rounded characters in familiar settings, simple plot configurations, explicit and single themes, vivid and familiar language and a tone that avoids talking down to the reader are the qualities which appear most frequently in the select books.

The consistent trend toward accessibility in the select books indicates that simplicity is favored. Simplicity is not to be confused with simplistic. Often the books which appear simple, which are crafted so gracefully as to appear effortless in their creation, are the most difficult to create. Part of the power of the impact of a simple story derives from its very simplicity. There are several eloquent examples of this from the select books. *Sarah, Plain and Tall* is a very slender volume in which there seems to be very little action. However the reader is drawn in immediately by the strength of emotion in the seemingly simple story and soon feels as keenly as do the children their desire for Sarah to come to them, and to stay on as a member of the family. It takes only the single episode of Sarah's trip into town alone to convey their intense fear that she will leave never to return. The *Ramona* books are also deceptively simple. The very ordinariness of Ramona's life at home and in

school is made to feel fresh and interesting to the reader, made so by the vitality of Ramona and the intensity of her feelings. They are simple stories beautifully crafted to endure for generations of readers.

For a book to be read at the transcendent level, first it must be written to that level of meaning. However, a book written at the transcendent level will not necessarily be read at that level by all readers. It may be read at the verbal and behavioral levels, or simply at the verbal level. The quality of the reading experience, even for readers who stop at the verbal level, is enriched by books in which the behavioral and transcendent levels are strong.

“In contrast to the way that children evaluate books, the majority of critics seem to approach the task from the opposite direction. They look primarily at level three, that of evocation and illumination, and then secondarily at level two, that of behavioral involvement” (Nilsen, Peterson, & Searfoss, 1980, p. 532). The potential to find the transcendent level of meaning lies in the theme of a book.

The themes of the select books reflect an underlying common thread which bears further examination. There are four instances of books about coming of age and four about self knowledge and acceptance. Two books are about loss and recovery and one is about integrity. The specifics of theme as

they relate to the plot, characters and setting of a story can be stripped away. If one reduces theme to its most elemental form, it is possible to see this group of books as having one common theme. Each one of the select books is in some way about loss. The protagonists suffer a variety of losses such as loss of childhood, innocence, mother, country. The degree of loss and the intensity of pain endured varies enormously in the different stories, but it is fair to say that loss is an underlying theme. As a result of the experience of loss each protagonist undergoes some type of transformation, gains a higher level of maturity and knowledge, and secures a measure of satisfaction and happiness. The single unifying meaning that emerges is hope. Each protagonist's situation is resolved in believable, unsentimental ways in which there is a measure of hope: hope for the future, hope that life's difficulties can be resolved, hope that future challenges will be well met.

The select books are about what is lost and what is gained in the process of growing up. These are compelling issues for child and teen readers. It is not difficult to believe that the potential for children to read books at the transcendent level exists in well written books that carry this underlying theme. The possibility of the numinous experience - a flash of insight, a

glimpse of the room beyond, a brief moment of joy - enriches the reading experience and the life of the reader.

A well written book is greater than the sum of its parts. The analysis of the select books by their literary elements fosters an understanding of the ways in which a well written book may be constructed, but cannot fully explain how one well crafted book is a work of art while another is not. The possibility of its being read on the transcendent level helps to define the distinction. To paraphrase C. S. Lewis (1961), if even one child is able to read a book on the transcendent level, then it must be worthy of consideration as a good book.

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APPENDIX

Select Population (Eleven Books)

Newbery Award and Newbery Honor Books Named in Children's Choices 1975 - 1995

1994

The Giver. Lois Lowry (Medal)

In this exciting science fiction novel, 12-year-old Jonas has received his lifetime assignment, an apprenticeship under his society's most important member, the Giver. Learning their shocking history forces Jonas to take extreme measures. An outstanding read-aloud and discussion generator. (Children's Choices)

Twelve-year-old Jonas performs well in the impressively ordered society that the Elders have developed. But when he is selected to be the new "Receiver," Jonas begins to unravel the truth that underlies his world. (Newbery)

1986

Sarah, Plain and Tall. Patricia MacLachlan (Medal)

This year's Newbery winner is a poignant story of a lonely pioneer family. When Papa writes for a mail-order bride, Sarah answers and agrees to come and visit. Anna and Caleb wonder--what will she be like and, more importantly, will she stay? (CC)

Life on the prairie with two children and no wife is lonely and difficult, so Caleb and Anna's father advertises for a wife. Sarah answers his ad and soon agrees to come all the way from Maine for a visit. Captivated by her, Anna and Caleb worry that Sarah misses the sea too much to stay with them. (Newbery)

1985

The Hero and the Crown. Robin McKinley (Medal)

A strong female protagonist, high fantasy, great adventure, and a subtle love story with a happily-ever-after ending cause young fantasy lovers to rate this “one of the best books I’ve ever read.” (CC)

The daughter of the king of Damar and his second wife (a witch woman from the north), Aerin does not fit in at court. Unable to succeed her father to the throne, she must instead find her own destiny. Wielding her blue sword, she not only defeats dragons but finally becomes the hero of the kingdom. (Newbery)

Like Jake and Me. Mavis Jukes (Honor Book)

A story within a story develops as Alex’s new stepfather, Jake, leads Alex on a hilarious and frantic search for a big, hairy spider thought to be in Jake’s clothes. The illustrations are full page, full color, and a perfect complement to the subtle, broader story of family relations. (CC)

Alex wants to be liked by his rugged cowboy stepfather, but there are still barriers between the two. When Alex notices a wolf spider on Jake’s neck and calmly mentions it, the rugged cowboy totally panics, admitting his terror of spiders. Alex comes to the rescue, and the two finally come to appreciate each other and their differences. (Newbery)

1984

The Sign of the Beaver. Elizabeth George Speare (Honor Book)

Set in the wilderness of Maine in the late 1700s, 13-year-old Matt is left alone to guard his family’s newly built cabin. More than a compelling story of survival, the often conflicting relationship between early White settlers and Native Americans is explored through Matt’s friendship with the proud Indian boy, Attean. The book is read closely and appreciatively, and is extremely popular with children. (CC)

Left alone in the Maine wilderness, Matt first loses his rifle and food and then is savagely stung by bees. Found by Saknis, chief of the Beaver tribe, Matt is cared for in exchange for teaching the chief's grandson to read. As the boys' friendship develops, Matt gains an appreciation for the heritage and skills of the Beaver tribe. (Newbery)

1983

Doctor De Soto. William Steig (Honor Book)

An old theme is retold in a fun-to-read and fun-to-listen-to book with a surprise ending. A positive atmosphere is created for those dreaded trips to the dentist's office. Natural instincts are handled with true malice toward none. (CC)

As mice dentists, the diminutive De Sotos have always refused to treat dangerous animals until a miserable fox appears begging for help. The compassionate mice cleverly find a way to rid the fox of his pain while guaranteeing their own safety. (Newbery)

1982

Ramona Quimby, Age 8. Beverly Cleary (Honor Book)

Ramona begins third grade in a new school determined to help her family, which is struggling on one and a half paychecks. The author continues in her humorous way to make everyday occurrences seem major tragedies, but nothing is ever so bad that it can't be made right by a Sunday dinner at the whopperburger. (CC)

Ramona is now starting the third grade and her life is full of the usual hilarious trials that cause her to be labeled a "nuisance and show-off" by her new teacher. Whether she is deciding she prefers her printed Q to the floppy cursive one, getting raw egg in her hair, or facing an interminably boring Sunday, Ramona is always a memorable character. (Newbery)

1981

A Ring of Endless Light. Madeleine L'Engle (Honor Book)

Another book about the Austin family in which Vicky, who was 12 in *Meet the Austins*, is now 16. Her telepathic powers permit her to communicate with dolphins. This relationship with the dolphins eventually allows her to recover from her depression over her beloved grandfather's terminal cancer and a family friend's death while rescuing a would-be suicide. (CC)

Sixteen-year-old Vicky and her family spend the summer on a New England island with her dying grandfather. All summer long she and her family are preoccupied with the mysteries of life, death, and eternity, yet there is still time for Vicky to help with a Marine Biology Station dolphin project and to date two boys. (Newbery)

1978

Ramona and Her Father. Beverly Cleary (Honor Book)

When Ramona's father loses his job, Ramona's well-meaning attempts to help during the family crisis are both humorous and touching. An anti-smoking campaign is almost more than Mr. Quimby can bear on top of his other problems. This book was read repeatedly by the children. (CC)

Ramona is in second grade when her father loses his job and her mother begins to work full-time. Ramona tries her best to help her family through the crisis, even starting a campaign to get her father to quit smoking. Her worries, problems, and joys, presented with lively good humor, are common to many children her age. (Newbery)

1976

Dragonwings. Laurence Yep (Honor Book)

Well researched historical novel set in early 20th century San Francisco Chinatown, giving vivid details of Chinese folklore, racial relationships, the 1906 earthquake and a fictionalized account of a Chinese man who built a flying machine with help from the Wright brothers. Excellent discussion material countering Chinese-American stereotypes. Received 1976 IRA Children's Book Award. (CC)

In 1903 Moonshadow leaves the Middle Kingdom to join his father in San Francisco. To make the father's dream of building an aeroplane come true, the two of them leave the close-knit community that shelters their Chinese culture to live among white demons. Humorous accommodations are made between the different cultures as they grow in understanding and friendship. (Newbery)

1975

Philip Hall Likes Me. I Reckon Maybe. Bette Green (Honor Book)

This is a warm story of a Black family in Arkansas and a school girl's universal escapades with clubs, parties and competition. Upper grade Black girls became attached to the book and claimed it as their own. (CC)

Eleven-year-old Beth Lambert, a spunky heroine, realizes she has been letting Philip Hall be number one in school because she is afraid he will not like her if she surpasses him. With gentle prodding from her family, Beth decides to go ahead and do her best--even if it means beating Philip Hall. (Newbery)