



Reviews



The Mainstreaming of Controversy in Children's and YA Book Award Winners: How on Earth Did *That Book* Win?

—Robert Bittner

Brooks, Kevin. *The Bunker Diary*. New York: Carolrhoda, 2015. 268 pp. US\$17.99 hc. ISBN 9781467754200. Print.

Reid, Raziell. *When Everything Feels Like the Movies*. Vancouver: Arsenal, 2014. 176 pp. \$15.95 pb. ISBN 9781551525747. Print.

Smith, Andrew. *Grasshopper Jungle*. New York: Dutton, 2014. 388 pp. US\$21.00 hc. ISBN 9780525426035. Print.

Tamaki, Mariko. *This One Summer*. Illus. Jillian Tamaki. Toronto: Groundwood, 2014. 320 pp. \$18.95 pb. ISBN 9781554981526. Print.

Controversies surrounding book awards are not a new phenomenon, especially where children's books are concerned. Concerns are raised continually about genre, format, content, and the composition of juries. Moreover, for many years there has been a building apprehension about whether book awards matter

anymore or whether they are simply a way of showing how out of touch judges are with what is actually being read by children. In addition, there are ongoing discussions and questions about format: how do we judge graphic novels against novels, novels against poetry, or fiction against non-fiction, especially when

it comes to the larger, less specific awards such as the Newbery Medal (USA),¹ the Caldecott Medal (USA),² the Printz Award (USA),³ the Carnegie Medal (UK),⁴ and the Governor General's Literary Award (Canada)?⁵ These discussions take place not only informally online but also among scholars of children's literature (see Crisp; Driscoll; Kidd, "Prizing"; Kidd, "Not"; Silvey). I begin this review article with a discussion of shifts in award criteria and expectations related to issues of format, moving on to a more broad discussion of award criteria in general and to a focus on four award-winning texts from recent years. Each of texts listed above has been at the centre of controversy or shows evidence of out-of-the-box thinking from an award committee.

Many juries for children's literature awards are made up primarily of dues-paying librarians, reviewers, and scholars, at least where the American Library Association's (ALA) awards are concerned. Some recent award winners show that certain juries are able to expand their readings to include books that challenge the expectations of children's librarians, children's literature scholars, and book reviewers. The ALA's Michael L. Printz Award for Excellence in Young Adult Literature published in the United States provides a good example of this phenomenon. In 2007, Gene Luen Yang's graphic novel *American Born Chinese* was awarded the Printz award and thus was recognized as the best of the best in young adult literature. This win raised many eyebrows and many questions about

the place of graphic novels in the greater literary landscape. Since then, a number of niche awards have emerged—particularly in the context of North American literature awards—and graphic novels have become more recognized within other award categories, with accolades going to novels such as Yang's *Boxers & Saints* (National Book Award shortlist, 2014), Cece Bell's *El Deafo* (Newbery Honor, 2015), and Jillian Tamaki and Mariko Tamaki's *This One Summer* (Caldecott Honor, 2015; Printz Honor, 2015).

While graphic novels and other innovative literary formats are becoming recognized to a greater degree—all three 2015 Newbery choices were novels in verse, and a number of non-fiction books that year were up for the National Book Award—perhaps the most complex area of controversy related to children's literature awards is that of appropriateness, particularly in relation to sexual content. When Susan Patron's *The Higher Power of Lucky* won a Newbery Medal in 2007, there was an incredible amount of backlash because the word "scrotum" appears on the first page of the novel (1). Many bloggers, columnists, educators, and librarians were offended that such a book could win the Newbery Medal, an award for children's books that are considered to be of top quality. As editor and book critic Janice Harayda noted in her blog *One Minute Book Reviews*, a site aimed at librarians and book enthusiasts, "[S]ome people have reacted to *The Higher Power of Lucky* [as] though Patron had issued a

manifesto in favor of kiddie porn.” Defending the choice and responding to the criticism of librarians and other critics, Harayda added that “[t]his is hardly shocking language when many 3-year-olds know the words ‘penis’ and ‘vagina’. . . . You would think that librarians would rejoice in the arrival of [such] book[s] . . . instead of rolling out words you are more likely to hear from children, such as ‘dickhead’ and ‘butt-head’ and, of course, the deathless ‘poopy-head.’”

Moreover, when Melvin Burgess won the Carnegie Medal, a children’s literature award from the United Kingdom, for his novel *Junk* (published as *Smack* in the United States), in 1996, many stories and opinion pieces in newspapers and online media expressed concern about the appropriateness of the content of the novel. Burgess and the Carnegie committee received backlash for awarding a book that depicted drug use explicitly and included what many deemed to be dark themes and moral relativism. While members of conservative groups found the book distasteful, Burgess felt that the book was necessary and that even if too-young readers picked it up, they were more likely to stop reading far sooner than expected. According to Geraldine Brennan, “[Burgess] argues that the complex story structure with its nine different narrators will deter readers who are not ready for the content long before they reach the more disturbing passages.” Comparatively, the Caldecott Medal has been at the centre of controversy for issues related to format more than to language or content.

When Brian Selznick’s *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* won the Caldecott Medal in 2008, commentators raised concerns that the book did not conform to picture-book conventions in terms of accessibility and age-appropriateness, given that the book has large portions of text interspersed within the hundreds of pages of illustrations.

In an article published in *Publishers Weekly*, Shannon Maughan reminds readers and those paying attention to award winners that

[w]ith any award there’s always the potential for discord over who wins and who doesn’t make the cut, and there is continuous debate about how books are selected, who selects them, and how “popular” the books are. With the Newbery and Caldecott Awards, talk of various criteria—what the Newbery’s age parameters should be, how one defines a picture book, what is meant by prior publication—also abounds.

I would also add to this list the Carnegie Medal, the Greenaway Medal, and many others, all of which have been at the centre of controversy for a variety of reasons. No matter the criteria, people will either ignore or fight back against certain aspects of the awards in order to protect children and their perceived innocence. It is this innocence—or this perception of innocence—that is the most common reason for moralistic and often ferocious



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backlash, reflecting the history of children's literature itself as a field where publishing is concerned. The unfortunate side effect of this type of backlash is a limiting of accessibility to some audiences, since gatekeepers such as librarians and teachers are less likely to include controversial books in classrooms, schools, or children's sections of public libraries. In the opposite vein, controversy also leads to more sales from those who believe that children's and YA books should give young readers material for independent thinking and exposure to new ideas.

These contentious issues that play out within the realm of children's literature awards reflect the assumptions held by many people (often the adult caregivers who are the consumers of children's books and who look to awards to guide their purchases or library borrowing choices) about what constitutes children's literature as a field. At the heart of children's literature studies is the question of what constitutes children's literature, with Roger Sale noting that "[e]veryone knows what children's literature is until asked to define it" (1), much like earlier attempts to define obscenity and pornographic material in the 1960s and 1970s. Jack Zipes observes that "the concept of a children's literature is also imaginary, referring to what specific groups composed largely of adults construct as their referential system. . . . [T]he term *children's literature* . . . is used to distinguish or cast distinction on adults who take privileged positions in determining the value of a literature for young readers" (40). By this definition, children's literature belongs to and is controlled by adults. In terms of children's literature awards, the definition of what constitutes children's literature is underlined by a mixture of assumptions about literature and audience, both of which are more complex than the majority of

individuals looking at awards from outside academia may realize. While children's literature can be defined as literature that is enjoyed or read by children, this is easily countered by the fact that picture books and board books are often designed to be read out loud to a child, not to mention the fact that children also read books typically thought of as adult-oriented as they grow up. These contexts of reception complicate the notion that children are the sole or primary consumers of children's literature. Children's literature is sometimes also defined as a literature in which the protagonist is a child or younger person or that the text focuses on a child, but yet again this is problematic (Nodelman and Reimer 192–93). Take for instance, Emma Donoghue's *Room*, a novel in which the narrator is a young boy who is locked in a small room with his mother for years after she was abducted by a man and held captive. The novel contains intensely dark themes, and although the narrator is very young and innocent of the real world, many scholars of children's literature would hesitate to label the book as children's literature due to its content and implied audience of adult readers. Of course, Brooks's *The Bunker Diary* could be said to present a similar challenge to children's literature, but the frankness with which the story is told opens up this book to more mature readers. Comparatively, Adam Mansbach's satirical picture book *Go the Fuck to Sleep* comes in a traditional illustrated picture-book format but is intended to be read as satire in both content and

format. I should note that the book was rewritten in a more child-friendly form in 2012 (*Seriously, Just Go to Sleep*), although the remake was much less successful in terms of sales, likely due to the fact that the original book was satire. While the remake attempts to be a book *for* children, the subject matter is perhaps too satirical and less appealing to adult consumers.

Beyond the generalizations about the perceived audience of children's literature, ambiguous terminology often cloaks an uncertainty about the age range of what we could consider "children." What about tweens? What about young adults? What about new adults? These categories are very much driven by the publishing industry's marketing teams in an effort to target specific readers effectively, as opposed to hoping books will be picked out of the large body of general (or "adult") fiction. Where does young adult literature get relegated to if there are awards only for children's literature and adult literature (as is the case with the Governor General's Literary Awards in Canada)? What about awards where age criteria overlap? The Newbery Medal, a notable children's literature award, is awarded to books for children aged zero to fourteen, while the Printz Award is awarded to books written for young readers aged twelve to eighteen. Are readers between the ages of twelve and fourteen somehow both children and young adults, or does the age of actual readers not even matter if a book is marketed to a specific age group as decided by the publisher? Often, the intended

audience is used to conform to certain award criteria, but outside of that arena, such as in the context of libraries, much more freedom is given as to where the books can be shelved; in the event of a book whose age categories overlap, it can be difficult to determine its circulation and publicity. In 2013, for example, a book that many assumed would be a Newbery Medal contender due to its intended age range—Clare Vanderpool’s *Navigating Early*—ended up being left out of the Newbery selections entirely, garnering a Printz Honor instead.

Such complications are at the heart of many controversies in recent years. In 2014, Raziell Reid’s polarizing novel *When Everything Feels Like the Movies* won the Governor General’s Literary Award for Children’s Literature (Text), Tamaki and Tamaki’s *This One Summer* the Governor General’s Literary Award for Children’s Literature (Illustration). In the shadow of the controversy surrounding Reid’s novel, *This One Summer* barely found any real push-back as a graphic-novel text with potentially controversial content, at least within Canada. In early 2015, however, when *This One Summer* went on to garner a Caldecott Honor and a Printz Honor in the United States, its win of these honours was contested, mostly by children’s librarians and parents who perceive the Caldecott Medal as an award for texts for child readers as opposed to those for adolescents and young adults. The book discusses sex, abortion, puberty, and divorce, topics that some

reviewers considered inappropriate for the winner of a children’s award: “To me, and I’m willing to bet to most people, the Caldecott is the picture book award. I fear there will be censorship/banning discussions fuelled by parents who are upset that this material landed in their children’s hands by virtue of a sticker” (Hill). In 2014, another novel showed up on the scene, bringing with it a number of reviews decrying the increasingly dark content of children’s and young adult literature: Brooks’s *The Bunker Diary* won the Carnegie Medal in the UK. A review in the *Telegraph* argued that Brooks’s novel “has all the hallmarks of an issue-led discussion piece rather than a literary novel, and seems to have won on shock value rather than merit” (Bradbury). The Carnegie win ensured that Brooks’s novel would find its way into the book markets in North America and elsewhere and cultivate fears for some adult readers and critics that children’s literature texts may be becoming a source of darkness and destruction to the minds of innocent young readers.

Within the same time frame, however, two other books that may have been seen as controversial earlier on were honoured by the 2015 Printz committee—Jandy Nelson’s *I’ll Give You the Sun* and Andrew Smith’s *Grasshopper Jungle*—showing that while darker/edgier material (as some might call it) such as sexually explicit discussions, queer themes, crude humour, death, and drugs may bring controversy into the prizing arena, the debates that result eventually bring about change

in perceptions of what is too mature for children's and young adult literature prizewinners. Just a few years earlier, I would have been surprised if there had been no controversy about an openly gay protagonist at the centre of a Printz-winning novel, let alone an Printz Honor book featuring a bisexual/sexually fluid protagonist, giant horny bugs, many references to sperm and masturbation, and the end of the world. Yet little controversy was raised about those novels after the announcements, raising questions about changes in perception of appropriateness in relation to young adult texts, particularly those with LGBTQ content. One reason that these themes are often seen as more appropriate in YA literature rather than children's books is that the protagonists within YA novels are straddling the boundary between childhood and adulthood, a precarious moment in life where stakes for protagonists increase with every passing year. Jonathan Stephens offers the following definition of the genre: "'Young Adult' refers to a story that tackles the difficult, and oftentimes adult, issues that arise during an adolescent's journey toward identity, a journey told through a distinctly teen voice that holds the same potential for literary value as its 'Grownup' peers" (40–41). As with attempts to define children's literature, as noted by Zipes, young adult literature is equally slippery where strict definitions are concerned.

Marah Gubar notes that while many scholars argue about definitions of children's literature—in relation

to marketing, intended audience, authorial intent, or other issues—perhaps these debates are not altogether helpful to the field: "I contend that we *should* abandon such activity, because insisting that children's literature is a genre characterized by recurrent traits is damaging to the field, obscuring rather than advancing our knowledge of this richly heterogeneous group of texts" (210). Where awards are concerned, the texts under consideration often are based on an age range defined by a publisher, although in some cases the age range is able to change based on the discretion of the award jury in question. Since this is the case, and since it is nearly impossible to compare the core texts against each other directly, it is perhaps best to look at *The Bunker Diary*, *When Everything Feels Like the Movies*, *This One Summer*, and *Grasshopper Jungle* in terms of content, reviews, and the specific award criteria (Newbery, Caldecott, Carnegie, and Printz) in order to understand better what is at play in each case.

Kevin Brooks's *The Bunker Diary*

Brooks's novel for teens depicts the story of six people who are captured by an unknown man and put into an old bunker, where he plays mind games with them for an indeterminate amount of time. Friendships are built, enemies are made, secrets are revealed, and hope is made and lost in the tiniest of moments. Although dark, deeply depressing, and some might say pointless, this text presents a thought experiment

that explores interpersonal relationships and the ways in which people find comfort and deal with hardship within a confined space and various stages of life. The setting is claustrophobic; time is unsteady, speeding up and slowing down throughout the novel. Brooks builds an ultimately distressing narrative that gives readers much to consider about the uncontrollable and unhappy aspects of life in a sometimes nefarious world. The novel begins with an account of the physical space in which Linus, the young protagonist, is trapped, followed shortly thereafter by a description of how he was caught: "I thought he was blind. That's how he got me. . . . [A]s I turned to face him he grabbed my head and clamped a damp cloth over my face. I started to choke. I was breathing in chemicals. . . . His hands gripped my skull like a couple of vices. After a few seconds I started to feel dizzy, and then . . ." (2, 5). There is an almost immediate urgency to the narrative—a sense of panic and despair—that overtakes readers right from the beginning. Soon, Linus is joined by Jenny, a young girl who has been reported missing in the world outside the bunker. The two work together to keep each other company and try to understand their situation, and things go relatively smoothly until adults begin to arrive.

Fred, a drug addict, and Anja, a self-important real-estate agent, change the entire dynamic, becoming the in-charge adults who believe they know best. The conflict between the two pairs grows steadily until they

are joined by Russell—a queer-identified scientist with a disability and a terminal illness—and a businessman by the name of William Bird. When all six end up together in the bunker, tensions mount and all sense of decorum breaks down. The adults see the young people as useless, Linus begins to build plans for escape, and Jenny is traumatized and begins to withdraw into herself. As the group dynamics become increasingly chaotic, the invisible man upstairs begins to play games: he sends down drugs and alcohol, cigarettes and pornography, in what Linus can only assume is a twisted experiment.

When those who are captured get unruly, the man, their captor, sends down a dog: "without a sound, dog shot out of the lift and launched itself at [William] Bird. No growling, no barking, nothing—just a black streak and a flash of wicked teeth. It was breathtaking. . . . It jumped up and sank its teeth into his neck, just above the shoulder" (159–60). Eventually, Bird's wound becomes infected and he reaches a point of mental instability during which he attempts to kill the others. The man upstairs plays various games and uses sound, darkness, and poison gas to torture the group, even tempting them with offers of freedom if they would just kill one another. Within the final fifty pages, Anja is strangled by one of the others, Bird is killed by Fred, Russell ends up killing himself by slitting his wrists, and Fred drinks bleach after the lights go out and he can no longer stand the withdrawal symptoms. As Linus and

Jenny starve to death, the words on each of the final pages grow more and more sparse; the increasing white space and eventual disappearance of any text at all, indicating Linus's own death. One page simply contains the following:

Jenny dies in my arms.
Goes to sleep, doesn't wake up.
My tears taste of blood. (253)

Another reads:

this is what i know
it doesn't hurt any more
this is (257)

With no survivors and no explanation of why these events occurred, it is easy to understand how some might consider the novel as lacking purpose for readers. In her review of the novel in the *Telegraph*, Lorna Bradbury writes, "The reader's experience over 250 pages is to watch six people sink into despair and to inflict damage on each other in the process. And we are left with the uncomfortable feeling that, like the prisoners, we have spent time being manipulated by a psychopath and pervert." Similarly, in *Independent*, Amanda Craig notes that "as a children's critic, [she] refused to review [the book] on publication," adding that the committee's decision "is the latest

in a trajectory for the Carnegie prize which nobody who loves children's books can possibly applaud." In contrast, an unsigned review in *Kirkus Reviews* suggests that "Brooks' latest is not an easy novel" but is "one that begs for rereading to suss the intricacies of its construction of plot, character development and insight into the human condition."

When given the opportunity to speak to the inclusion of darker elements within his novels, Brooks stated that

[t]here is a school of thought that no matter how dark or difficult a novel is, it should contain at least an element of hope. As readers, children—and teens in particular—don't need to be cosseted with artificial hope that there will always be a happy ending. They want to be immersed in *all* aspects of life, not just the easy stuff. They're not babies, they don't need to be told not to worry, that everything will be all right in the end, because they're perfectly aware that in real life things *aren't* always all right in the end. To be patronizing, condescending towards the reader is, to me, *the* worst thing a Young Adult fiction author can do. ("Press")

One important point of clarification within Brooks's statement concerns the label of "young adult," a category of texts that include more death, violence, and trauma than in books for younger readers. Such elements within books that are marketed to children or



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in books that have won children's awards therefore often bring about debate over appropriateness. *The Bunker Diary* exemplifies some of the blurriness between definitions of children's and YA literature in relation to awards. Although the book is not explicitly defined as a young adult novel in the Carnegie press release about its award, many reviewers appear to have assumed children would be the intended audience of the book. Much like the Governor General's Award for Children's Literature, however, the Carnegie Medal does not have a rigidly defined age range within its criteria, giving the committee ultimate authority to decide if books fit within the realm of children's literature (and this may blur into content often assumed to be for older audiences but deemed appropriate by committee members).

Helen Thompson, chair of the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) Carnegie and Kate Greenaway Medal committees, observes in response to criticisms of Brooks's text that

[c]hildren and teenagers live in the real world; a world where militia can kidnap an entire school full of girls, and where bullying has reached endemic proportions on social media. Exploring difficult issues within the safe confines of a fictional world creates essential thinking space, and encourages young people to consider and discuss their own feelings and reactions. ("Press")

It is the unfortunate reality that not all situations are hopeful for young people, yet there is an inherent desire to protect children from this realization. Given that negative realities reside in the lived experiences of young people and that the Carnegie guidelines do not have an explicit age range for intended audience, *The Bunker Diary*

does seem to fit within the framework of the particular award, if barely, and to the consternation of some adults interested only in the protection of childhood innocence. Although the sentiment behind Brooks's book is dark and depressing, the experiences of trauma and violence at its heart could potentially be part of real experiences for young people and adults in their lives.

Raziel Reid's *When Everything Feels Like the Movies*

Controversy surrounding the representation of experiences of trauma and violence is at the centre of many of these debates about award-winning children's literature. Another key question that arises concerns the degree to which obscene language and explicit/graphic sexual content are allowable or appropriate in books for young readers. This is the question at the core of the long-lasting debate surrounding Reid's winning the 2014 Governor General's Literary Award for Children's Literature (Text) for *When Everything Feels Like the Movies*. Upon announcement of the award, the novel caused quite a stir, inspiring thousands of Canadians to sign a petition requesting that the award be rescinded and that the author be stripped of his honour (McCooney). Speculation about the intended audience for this book is mixed, whereas its content has been questioned over and over again. Commenting on this situation in an *Atlantic Books Today* article, Rebecca Rose, president of Breakwater Books, explained the slipperiness inherent in age categories, noting that

"there's a lot of crossover between . . . categories, and it's not easy, nor do we want, to limit any particular title to just one classification" (Fegan). That said, *When Everything Feels Like the Movies* does cover some rather controversial subject matter, including rape fantasies, cannibalism in one instance, abortion, and the subject of sexuality and homophobia leading to violence and death.

The difficulty with the Governor General's Literary Award is similar to that of the Carnegie Medal in that the age range is not explicit and, in this case, publishers are responsible for submitting to what is deemed to be the most suitable category. One of the difficulties with this system is that publishers can latch onto a current trend, namely the popularity of YA literature, and submit books under that particular label in order to garner more attention and sales. This element of the process makes the audience categorization even trickier for juries. In the case of Reid's text, although many are noticeably upset about the inclusion of the novel under the category of children's text, perhaps the real question is why, given the content of the novel and the narrative voice (discussed in greater detail below), *When Everything Feels Like the Movies* was not marketed as an adult novel. The protagonist of the book, Jude, lives in a grand delusion, believing that school is a film set: haters are the paparazzi, his friend Angela is a supporting cast member, the other kids are extras, and Jude is the star. But he is not actually the star, so instead of finding his

place in the glamorous faux-Hollywood he has created, he works to disrupt and break down the world around him. Jude is self-involved and crude, caring for no one but himself throughout the entirety of the book and having no thought for the consequences of his actions.

Lisa Doucet of Wozzles Children's Bookstore in Halifax noted in the *Atlantic Books Today* article that the store had decided not to carry Reid's novel: "We have a lot of books that deal with LGBTQ issues, that fit with what we tend to carry and what we know that people tend to look for here. . . . With that particular title, we were advised this would definitely be for a more mature audience" (Fegan). The majority of concerns relate to a passage that includes a seduction scenario (which some have described as pedophilic) and pseudo-cannibalism:

The letters from my stalker started coming when I got cast in a movie as a Boy Scout. I was pederastic cotton candy. My manager tried to hide the letters, but I found them. They were the first thing I ever masturbated to. I was a child star—quite jaded. The letters became more and more graphic: I want to nail you to a cross and cut off your phallus, I want to bite off chunks of your face, chew on them until they're mush, and then use it as lube. . . . My stalker was my Shakespeare; his love sonnets were going to immortalize me. I started doing subtle things on screen, just for him. I'd lick my lips or even nibble them, if I wanted to make him go really crazy. For

wide shots, I'd stick out my butt and arch my back. A few times, I even looked into the camera lens like it was his eyes. (35)

Doucet speaks to this, although somewhat abstractly, in her defence of the decision at her bookstore to keep the novel off the shelves: "We certainly want to be aware and know how gratuitous it is. Is it really necessary for the book, for the plot, for what they are trying to achieve in that book, or is it really for shock value?" (Fegan). Reid's choices in language and imagery revel in the grotesque and skirt the boundaries of sexual acceptability, relying on near-cannibalistic imagery and the eroticization of a child's body. Reid appears to delight in shock value, given that the passage cited above is the one he chose to read for his acceptance speech at the Governor General's Awards ceremony.

Other readers of children's texts have noted various levels of (dis)comfort with the subject matter of Reid's novel and with the book as a whole. Scott Robins, in a review on his Goodreads account, writes that it is "[a] difficult book to read and an even more difficult book to review." Although he does feel the book redeems itself in the end, he notes that initially he "was ready to give this book a bad review—the writing felt shallow, far too immersed in extremes and shocking for shocking's sake. The characters felt utterly unlikeable." Like other readers, Robins felt that the depiction of bullying and abuse came across, in the

end, as “raw and brutally honest,” which coincides with other views on the award being given for didactic content over writing style and literary excellence. In a review by Jeffrey Canton, Reid’s book is once again the subject of scrutiny over audience: “I can’t make up my mind if it is truly YA or not.” Commenting on the overall camp aesthetic of the novel, he adds, “I don’t doubt that Reid wants to create a realistic portrait of Jude’s struggles with his identity . . . but I think it is also too focused on clichés of the degenerate teen world where every teen is a drug-crazed booze hound who is hopped up all day and night—all the straight boys are thugs and all the straight girls are tramps—give me a break.” While such stereotypes may work within the overall campiness of the novel, they end up serving to portray teens as drug-fuelled and focused entirely on violence and sex. Reid’s text, then, ends up reinforcing existing assumptions of teens as troubled, violent, and constantly engaging in diverse sexual practices. The novel has been understandably controversial in terms of sexual—and even sexually violent—content, although what seems to be left out of many of these conversations is the literary quality itself. Whether or not readers agree on the necessity of the sexual content and whether or that the book is young adult in classification, the actual quality of the writing is often dismissed within critical conversations. The purpose of this piece is not to question the decisions of any award juries but to examine how these decisions provoke

conversation and critical debate, and in this case, the debate appears to have moved away from literary value and style to the question of whether or not the book is an appropriate choice for a children’s literature award. Where the novel—in a more formalist sense—is concerned, however, there are faults that are addressed rarely within the overall conversation, including the fact that the narrative voice sounds much more mature than the junior high voice in which it is told. Jude talks in a campy aesthetic reminiscent of Stonewall-era queer culture associated with the hyperbolic aesthetic of drag queens, Liberace, ostentatiousness, and over-the-top theatricality, which creates an impression of characters who are senior students in high school or young university students as opposed to young people in their early teen years. Even the “bohemian” aesthetic that Angela strives for seems somewhat beyond the narrative style of a younger teenager: “Angela took Polaroids because she thought they made her bohemian, which is the same reason why she smoked cigarettes and had unprotected sex” (9).

Furthermore, much of the discussion about the inclusion of Reid’s book in the Canada Reads competition, which was “unprecedented for a slim, YA volume such as this one,” according to the *Globe and Mail* (Lederman), brings with it a much-needed dialogue about what it means to be defined as children’s or YA and who gets to make this decision: authors, publishers, retailers, or readers. Could it be that Reid’s novel made

it into an “adult” book competition because it does not read like YA? In my own review of Reid’s novel for *Canadian Review of Materials*, I questioned the intended audience right from the start. While the protagonist is a teenager, the voice of the narrator sounds like an individual in his mid-twenties trying to sound young in order to reach a younger audience. The controversial content was not on my radar so much as the question of the audience the book was trying to reach, and it was this contradiction in the writing that made me question its suitability. Of course, rape fantasies and other such content may not be suitable for a teen audience in the opinion of some, but the language choices paired with the content may present a significant need to start thinking about devising a new category for the Governor General’s Literary Awards.

Mariko Tamaki and Jillian Tamaki’s *This One Summer*

In this graphic novel, Rose heads to Awago Beach with her parents for their annual getaway. Windy, Rose’s vacation friend—practically her little sister—is always there to help Rose escape. This particular summer, though, Rose’s parents will not stop fighting, and Rose and Windy search even harder than usual for distractions from the drama. Of course, as so often happens when we go searching for escape, Rose and Windy end up finding another set of problems as they navigate their own adolescence and start following around a group of older kids who live in the town and

cannot keep out of trouble. Even with all the drama and mischief and fighting, however, Windy and Rose keep each other company and comfort each other until the inevitable parting at vacation’s end.

In reference to this text, the 2015 Caldecott Medal jury notes that the “[i]ntricately detailed illustrations in shades of indigo are masterfully layered with the text in this graphic novel. The pacing and strong imagery evoke myriad emotions and ground this poignant and painfully realistic coming-of-age story” (“Kwame Alexander”). In a similar vein, the Michael L. Printz jury writes, “Adolescence in its precarious first bloom is the subject of this sensitive graphic novel. The team of Mariko and Jillian Tamaki show and tell about one special summer in Rose’s life, in a brilliant flow of pictures and text” (“I’ll Give”). Author and illustrator have seen their fair share of awards seals, receptions, and ceremonies since their graphic novel was published. According to the jury descriptions, it could be assumed that there is little not to love about this graphic novel. Even though the Printz award has seen no controversy over its selection of the book, however, the Caldecott Medal is another story entirely. Although it is explicit from most of the product descriptions available, including a review in *Kirkus Reviews*, that the book is marketed as a YA text, the Caldecott seal has become synonymous with child-friendliness. The child-friendly nature of this book—or lack thereof—is what has become the focus of the opposition to the Caldecott jury’s decision.



... those who rely only on the appearance of an award seal on the cover of a book without taking the time to familiarize themselves with the contents or the award criteria are going to be disappointed



The illustrations show nothing in particular that could be considered questionable, so why is the book being questioned? The first seventy pages alone mention lesbianism, breasts (35–36), and sex (54, 66–68) and use the words “slut” (39) and “asshole” (40). Throughout the book, there are mentions of pornography (60–63), oral sex (60–61, 63), pregnancy (143), domestic violence (143), birth control (213), a miscarriage (299–300), and breasts again (312). For some commentators, the presence of these elements in the text would make this book entirely unsuitable for a children’s book award. That said, guidelines about age range—the Caldecott Medal awards books for children from birth to fourteen years of age—do blur assumptions about what can be included in children’s literature, especially in a category that is often seen as an award for child-friendly picture books. While there is a popular sentiment that a Caldecott winner *should* be accessible to young children because the seal indicates such an appropriateness, the fact remains that those who rely only on the appearance of an award seal on the cover of a book without taking the time to familiarize themselves with the contents or the award criteria are going to be disappointed, and not just in this particular case.

What is remarkable, besides the controversy over the language and sexual references in *This One Summer*, is the fact that this is the first time a traditionally formatted graphic novel has received Caldecott recognition. Selznick’s *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* broke boundaries when it won the award in 2008, but while some called his book a graphic novel, the format itself defies easy categorization. *This One Summer* is an important reminder to all who watch and pay attention to awards literature not to take for granted what is eligible or what can change as assumptions and tastes change while creators manipulate and experiment with textual forms.

Mainstreaming and the Benefits of Categorization

It is possible to see from these award-winning texts that times are changing and that formats and content are evolving quickly. Perhaps it is time to start rethinking eligibility criteria for the awards that attract controversy in order both to alleviate fears about content and to make way for the recognition of novels not currently considered eligible in many cases. The awards announcements made at the 2015 Youth Media Awards (YMA) did turn a number of heads and cause many gasps from the those in attendance, especially with a Caldecott Honor going to *This One Summer* and a Newbery Honor going to *El Deafo*. The exhibit halls were buzzing with discussion about the need (or not) for a new graphic novel award or category at the 2015 Midwinter Conference of the American Library Association in Chicago, although the YMA announcements gave reason for such an idea to be put on hold, since graphic novels were present in a number of unexpected places. More niche awards also tend to garner less attention simply because of how long the larger awards have been around. The YMA announcements make it clear that the ultimate rewards for attendees and viewers are the Caldecott and Newbery Medals, even as many are still entertained by the other announcements. One award that has become more noticeable for its status as the first award specifically for young adult literature is the Michael L. Printz award. Although only fifteen years old, the award

has garnered nearly as much praise and controversy as many of the older awards.

For example, “In 2007, *American Born Chinese* became the first graphic novel to receive the ALA’s Printz Award for young adult literature. The award recognized the author, Gene Luen Yang, for his funny and edgy trilogy of comic-style stories, but it also demonstrated new respect for the rapidly evolving field of illustrated narratives for teens” (Perl). In 2015, one of the honours went to *This One Summer*. As I noted earlier, there was no controversy over the appropriateness of the book within this category, even though the age range for this award begins at twelve years old. Although some winners of the Printz have been deemed too obscure—likely due to the fact that the award considers novels from around the globe as long as they are published in the United States eventually—controversies have rarely been due to content. Arguments about content specifically have led to discussions about adding a young adult category to the Governor General’s Literary Awards and perhaps even noting specific criteria for the awards. The Carnegie Medal and the Governor General’s Literary Award would both benefit from an emphasis on the ambiguity around age range of the intended audience in the criteria and, as a result, change and challenge assumptions about the innocence of child readers.

The 2015 Printz Award went to Nelson’s *I’ll Give You the Sun*, which focuses on two teens, Jude and Noah,

who have grown apart over a number of years. There is a gay relationship involving Noah's brother and a subplot involving violence and Jude's sister. Although it is less graphic or explicit than Reid's and Brooks's novels, the inclusion of an explicitly queer relationship in an award winner in the children's category may still be seen as inappropriate for this age range by some readers and critics. In fact, honours seem to be awarded to books with more questionable content, and the fact that they are not seen as controversial speaks to the need to rethink categorization and children's book awards.

Andrew Smith's *Grasshopper Jungle*

Smith's young adult novel has been met with much praise from mainstream reviewers and won both a Michael L. Printz Honor in 2015 and the Boston Globe-Horn Book Award for Fiction in 2014. In a somewhat ironic book blurb, Michael Grant, author of the *Gone* series, writes that *Grasshopper Jungle* is "[o]riginal, weird, sexy, thought-provoking and guaranteed to stir controversy. One hell of a book." Even though Grant predicts that the book will be controversial, it has stirred up very little in mainstream conversations, with most review sources giving starred or at least positive reviews. The novel follows sixteen-year-old Austin Szerba and weaves together the history of his family line with the story of how he and his best friend, Robby, accidentally unleash an unstoppable army of six-foot-tall insects and bring about the end of the world. Along the way, Austin

tries to understand his own sexuality, his seemingly indiscriminate sexual appetite, and connections throughout history.

The lack of controversy raised by *Grasshopper Jungle* in the public media is somewhat surprising considering that the novel contains sexual content on almost every page, descriptions of violence, six-foot-tall male insects in search of food and females, and passages such as the following: "Within days, the sealed-off McKeon Industries lab facility was completely packed—from attic to cellar—with full-grown, hungry Unstoppable Soldiers, all of which engaged in a round-the-clock unstoppable orgy of sex and cannibalism" (291). One cannot help but consider the controversy such a scene would have created had the award it was presented with—a Michael L. Printz Honor—not been defined explicitly for young adults instead of children more generally. Instead, the book is praised often for its depictions of sexual confusion and fluidity as related to the protagonist, Austin, who is in love with both of his best friends:

So I sat there and thought about how I was ripping my own heart in half, ghettoizing it like Warsaw during the Second World War—*this area for Shann; the other area for queer kids only*—and wondering how it was possible to be sexually attracted and in love with my best friend, a boy, *and* my other best friend, a girl—two completely different people at the same time.

I was so confused. (162)

Of course, the significant stylistic difference between Smith's text and Reid's is that one is darkly comedic and purposefully absurd while the other is based largely on cliché and camp aesthetics. Whereas *Grasshopper Jungle* takes place in a pseudo-science-fiction world in which giant bugs just want to eat and have sex—allowing for a sexually provocative but funny interrogation of more serious socio-political issues—Reid's novel flirts with the vulgar in the hopes of eliciting a particular response from readers, one of shock or disgust (such as the extracts quoted earlier reveal). Discussions of cannibalistic fantasies, desires for sexually abusive encounters, and other equally traumatic moments differ greatly in tone from the adolescent, masturbation-obsessed musings of the teen protagonist of Smith's text. In any case, whether or not the audience and content are contested, much of the controversy (or lack thereof) seems to be based primarily on attention garnered through awards and critical recognition and assumptions about the intended audience defined by the publishers and the awards.

Concluding Considerations

Awards are never without controversy. Even the Printz winners and nominees discussed in this article may be considered controversial by some, even if in less obvious ways as the challenges raised in the cases of the more child-centred awards (Newbery, Caldecott, Carnegie, and even the Governor General's).

Books that some expect to be winners will always be skipped by juries, while others that nobody expects sometimes will end up winning. The processes of award committees are, in most cases, very much set, but the members who serve on these committees and who are given flexibility in their interpretations of the rules can effect change. Initially, many of the older awards (Newbery, Caldecott, Carnegie) relied on a small pool of children's literature specialists, limiting the range of specializations of those serving on the committees. As younger librarians, scholars, and book enthusiasts from different backgrounds and specializations incorporate new ways of thinking into their reading practices and interpretations of nominated texts, interpretations of awards criteria will shift, continuing to blur boundaries and to change expectations. Including more diverse voices and fields of knowledge within committee discussions will make changes in the landscape of award-winning children's and teen books inevitable.

There is also the possibility of creating new award categories as a consequence of these discussions and controversies. One of the most important aspects of challenging and controversial books winning awards and honour titles is their influence on the awards process, future juries and their thoughts on acceptability, and the community of children's literature scholars' interpretations of children's literature. Although controversy often is frustrating, it is also a part of the process of mainstreaming certain themes and topics

and challenging normative perceptions about the experiences of young people. Books such as *The Bunker Diary* give individuals much to discuss in terms of trauma and violence, while books like *When Everything Feels Like the Movies* give children's literature scholars food for thought on subjects around sexual orientation, gender, and the limits of sexually explicit content in literature for young readers. *This One Summer* also serves to push boundaries of acceptability in format and audience, ensuring a continued conversation about the place of graphic novels for teen readers in

children's literature awards. Without discussions around books such as these and debates about the suitability of such themes for various age ranges, it is unlikely that books such as *I'll Give You the Sun* and *Grasshopper Jungle* would be as high profile within literature circles today. If these challenging books are fuel for larger discussions about what is appropriate and necessary in children's literature, awards are the means to showcase these books and to make them noticeable to a larger audience, encouraging further public dialogue about texts for young people.

Notes

¹ "The Newbery Medal was named for eighteenth-century British bookseller John Newbery. It is awarded annually by the Association for Library Service to Children, a division of the American Library Association, to the author of the most distinguished contribution to American literature for children" ("Welcome to the Newbery").

² "The Caldecott Medal was named in honor of nineteenth-century English illustrator Randolph Caldecott. It is awarded annually by the Association for Library Service to Children, a division of the American Library Association, to the artist of the most distinguished American picture book for children" ("Welcome to the Caldecott").

³ "The Michael L. Printz Award annually honors the best book

written for teens, based entirely on its literary merit, each year. In addition, the Printz Committee names up to four honor books, which also represent the best writing in young adult literature" ("Michael L. Printz").

⁴ "The Carnegie Medal is awarded annually to the writer of an outstanding book for children" ("Carnegie").

⁵ "The Governor General's Literary Awards are given annually to the best English-language and the best French-language book in each of the seven categories of Fiction, Literary Non-fiction, Poetry, Drama, Young People's Literature (Text), Young People's Literature (Illustrated Books) and Translation (from French to English)" ("Governor").

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