

# home run research

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*"Home Run Research" offers short columns that present new, original research in a digestible, easy-to-understand way, research that has implications for librarians and others interested in literacy development.*

Education professionals consider book awards to be important and influential; it is assumed that books that receive the awards will be widely read (Jacobs, Mitchell, and Livingston 2004). The goal of this study was to determine if prize winners are as popular among children as they are among critics. Are prize-winners bestsellers? Are they taken out of the library by children and adolescents?

Nilsen, Peterson, and Searfoss (1980) provided evidence that books that were "highly acclaimed" by adults were not especially popular with children (see also Ujiie and Krashen 2005). Popularity was determined, however, by librarian opinion. In this study, we look at children's actual behavior—to what extent prize-winning books are taken out of public libraries.

## Method

We obtained data on book sales of children's books from the children's fiction Bookweb list of bestsellers <[www.bookweb.org/booksense/bestsellers](http://www.bookweb.org/booksense/bestsellers)>. This list is based on data from 400 independent booksellers, and lists the top 15 fiction bestsellers for each month. Three lists were consulted for use in this study: bestsellers for the month ending January 9, 2004; May 27, 2004; and December 16, 2004.

For each of the bestsellers on the January and May lists, circulation and inventory data was gathered from six southern California library systems (Long Beach, Los Angeles, Orange County, Palos Verde, Torrance, Cerritos), consisting of 127 separate libraries. Data collection took place

## Are Prize-Winning Books Popular Among Children? An Analysis of Public Library Circulation

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in November 2004. The data was summed to provide an overall picture of books checked out and total stock for the Los Angeles, Long Beach, and Orange County area. The January and May lists were used for this purpose because it generally takes libraries several months to process patron requests and get ordered books on the shelves for check out; thus, a time lag was considered appropriate.

Prize-winning books were selected from Newbery and Caldecott award winner lists from 2003 and 2004. A total of eight Newbery and eight Caldecott winners were utilized, one award winner for each year as well as additional honor books. There was no overlap between the lists. For each book on the prize-winner list, circulation and inventory data from the same six southern California library systems was gathered.

Readability was calculated with the Flesch-Kincaid readability formula, applied to three 100-word passages selected randomly from the beginning, middle, and end of each text.

## Results

Very few award winners were on the fiction bestseller lists: The 2004 Newbery winner, *The Tale of Despereaux* (Dicamillo 2003) made all three lists, and *Hoot* (Hiaasen 2002), a Newbery Honor book for 2003, made the May list. *Holes* (Sachar 1998), the 1999 Newbery winner, was on the January list, and *A Wrinkle in Time* (L'Engle 1962), the Newbery winner from 1962, was on the May list. Prize winners were not represented at all on the January and May lists of "children's illustrated bestsellers."

Table 1 presents the mean number of bestsellers and prize-winning books checked out from the six public library systems combined. The results from the January and May lists were nearly identical. Far more bestsellers were

checked out than prize winners. On the average, about two hundred copies of the bestsellers were taken out, but only about thirty-five copies of the average prize winner were checked out from all six library systems.

To determine the likelihood of a prize winner penetrating the bestseller book list, we calculated a 95 percent confidence interval for bestsellers checked out of 286.8 and 123.8 from the January list. This means that the odds that a bestseller falls between these two extremes is nineteen out of twenty, or 95 percent. (The confidence interval is computed by multiplying the standard error of the mean by 1.96 and adding and subtracting the result from the mean.) The mean prize winner falls well outside this interval. In fact, none of the prize-winning books were within the confidence interval.

If children are not particularly interested in award winners, what determines their interest? Why are some books more popular? The answer is clearly not readability. The mean prize winner readability, in fact, was slightly lower than the readability level of bestsellers (4.5 versus 6.6; prize winner mean based on thirteen books; three of the Caldecott winners did not contain enough text to allow calculation of readability). The mean readability for bestsellers on the May 27 list was identical to those on the January list, and the mean readability for the December list was an impressive 9.3, thanks to the presence of five books from the challenging *Series of Unfortunate Events* series.

We noted that many of the books on the bestseller lists were series books; in fact, eleven of the fifteen books on the January 9 bestseller list were part of a series or at least a trilogy (*Artemis Fowl*, *Harry Potter*, *Unfortunate Events*, *Captain Underpants*, *Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*, *Amulet of Samarkand*). This is not a peculiarity of the January 9 list. Inspection of the bestseller list from May 27, 2004, reveals that five of the fifteen listed are series books. The list for December 16, 2004, was dominated by *Lemony Snicket* and had only four nonseries books.

### Are Librarians Influenced by Bestseller Lists?

Nell (1988) presents evidence showing that librarians are often "guardians of good taste,"

ordering books for public libraries based not on borrowers' interests, but based on their own perceptions of literary quality. Worthy, Moorman, and Turner (1999) also reported that librarians tended not to stock what children really wanted to read: sixth graders uniformly preferred "scary stories and comic books," but these were in short supply in the libraries Worthy and her colleagues surveyed.

To determine if this was the case for children's literature in southern California, the total library inventory was examined for prize winners and bestsellers. If librarians are influenced by awards, we would expect to see more prize winners in inventory and a greater gap between what is available in the library and what has been taken out.

This was, however, not the case for this sample. Librarians, in fact, ordered fewer of the prize winners than of the bestsellers (table 2). For both lists of prize winners, the mean number

of books in the six libraries' inventory was about 140; for bestsellers, for the January and May lists, it was about 400. (Approximately half of the bestseller inventory for January bestsellers consisted of three *Harry Potter* books. Even without these three, however, the libraries still stocked more bestsellers, with a mean of 251.8.)

If librarians are ordering fewer prize winners, it may be the case that they are not ordering enough of them, that eager readers are unable to get copies of Newbery and Caldecott winners. To determine if this was the case, we divided the number taken out by the total inventory for each book (table 3). A high percentage means that nearly all the books in stock were taken out. About half of the bestsellers in stock were taken out, but only about 25 percent of the prize winners had been taken out. Librarians, as we have seen, are ordering fewer of the prize winners, but even the ones they order are not being read by many children. The most extreme

**Table 1**  
Mean Number of Books Checked Out

|                                | Total taken out | Mean  | Standard deviation |
|--------------------------------|-----------------|-------|--------------------|
| Bestsellers, Jan. 2004, n = 15 | 3,079           | 205.3 | 161.0              |
| Bestsellers, May 2004, n = 15  | 3,116           | 207.7 | 159.4              |
| Caldecott winners, n = 8       | 213             | 26.6  | 25.1               |
| Newbery winners, n = 8         | 327             | 40.9  | 31.3               |

**Table 2**  
Inventory of Bestsellers and Prize Winners

|                                | Total in stock | Mean  | Standard deviation |
|--------------------------------|----------------|-------|--------------------|
| Bestsellers, Jan. 2004, n = 15 | 6,010          | 400.7 | 367.5              |
| Bestsellers, May 2004, n = 15  | 6,056          | 403.7 | 359.9              |
| Caldecott winners, n = 8       | 1,143          | 142.9 | 35.4               |
| Newbery winners, n = 8         | 1,118          | 139.8 | 50.8               |

**Table 3**  
Percent of Inventory Taken Out of Libraries

|                                | Total taken out | Total in stock | % taken out |
|--------------------------------|-----------------|----------------|-------------|
| Bestsellers, Jan. 2004, n = 15 | 3,079           | 6,010          | 51.20       |
| Bestsellers, May 2004, n = 15  | 3,116           | 6,056          | 51.40       |
| Caldecott winners, n = 8       | 213             | 1,143          | 18.60       |
| Newbery winners, n = 8         | 327             | 1,118          | 29.20       |

case was the Los Angeles Public Library's inventory of fifty-seven copies of the 2003 Caldecott honor book *Hondo and Fabian* (McCarty 2002): only one was checked out.

## A Summary of Our Findings

- Prize winners are sparsely represented on bestseller lists.
- An analysis of books taken out of six public libraries in southern California showed that thirteen out of fifteen current prize-winning books are not even close to membership in any of the three lists of the top fifteen bestsellers we consulted.
- All bestseller lists contained a large percentage of series books. The most popular in January were books from the Harry Potter series. The most popular series books in December were from the Series of Unfortunate Events series.
- Bestsellers are not easier than prize winners; their average reading level is slightly higher than the prize winners. Children are not simply selecting easy books for their recreational reading.
- Librarians are also not overly influenced by Newbery and Caldecott awards. There

are fewer prize winners in libraries' inventories than bestsellers.

- About half of the bestseller books in stock were taken out; about 25 percent of the prize winners in stock were taken out.
- These results agree with those of Ujile and Krashen (2002), who reported that very few home run books—books that stimulated children to read more—were prize-winning books.
- A possible implication of these results is that children don't know what is best for them; another is that Newbery and Caldecott judges have different standards than the real audience of children's and adolescent literature. ●

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