1997 Contenders/Winners: Children’s Book Awards in Five English-Speaking Countries: A Reaction and a Retrospective Appreciation for a Body of Work

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Nearly two decades ago, Aaron and Hutchinson began to bring high quality children’s literature published in other English-speaking countries to our attention. Their collaboration began before technologies for quick retrieval of information and web sites were available world-wide; it began before many children’s books published in other countries reached our American shores. Hutchinson and Aaron have traveled, selected, and purchased hundreds of books. They have evaluated and, most importantly, have shared a gold mine of information with many of us. In turn, we have followed their conference presentations and read their articles which appeared in a number of publications. We have been inspired to read quality literature that reflects cultural diversity and, as a result, have a greater understanding of other people and their rich heritage.

What is remarkable about the many presentations made by Aaron and Hutchinson—and this year’s presentation at the meeting of the American Reading Forum was no exception—is that we never tire of listening and learning. We look forward, in fact, to their sessions—a blend of incisive commentary precisely organized and the good humor and delightful side stories which characterize their collaborations.

For this year’s presentation, “1997 Contenders/winners: Children’s book awards in five English-speaking countries,” Aaron and Hutchinson once again discussed outstanding current literature, presented historical trends in awards within and across countries, reported on availability in the United States of titles from Australia, Canada, Great Britain, and New Zealand, and provided participants with a carefully annotated bibliography. This bibliography is a must-have handout for those of us involved in the process of ordering books for our universities and school libraries and for those seeking to balance their library collections with quality literature that reflects a variety of cultures.

When I asked Sylvia Hutchinson and Ira Aaron about their first attempts at collecting and reviewing award-winning books published in English-speaking countries other than the United States, they seemed somewhat surprised. Their casual response indicated that they had not directed much of their thinking to the number of years and the amount of work they had devoted to securing and reading children’s books. On the contrary, the reading of quality literature and the contact with individuals who recommended books or helped them add titles to their collections were the focus of their comments. Ira Aaron, in fact, had to check old calendars and income tax forms to he could give me accurate dates of travel to New Zealand and Australia; Sylvia Hutchinson described the rooms filled with bookshelves from floor to ceiling where perhaps the most extensive collection of
quality books for children published in English outside the United States is housed. Their stories told of funny and not so funny encounters with the postal service; the excitement of receiving and reading books clearly marked their comments and experiences.

Who has benefited from so much knowledge and systematic study of children’s literature? All of us in the American Reading Forum and many people across the world.


In the United States, participants at IRA state and local council meetings in Georgia, South Carolina, Ohio, and Louisiana have learned from Hutchinson and Aaron’s research and careful analysis of the literature. Articles and book chapters reflecting their research and highlighting books which are culturally appropriate and representative of life in different countries of the English-speaking world have been included in issues of The Reading Teacher (Aaron & Hutchinson, 1993), The Yearbook of the American Reading Forum (Aaron & Hutchinson, 1991, 1996), and Invitation to read: More children’s literature in the reading program (Hutchinson & Aaron, 1992).

Love for children’s books first brought Aaron and Hutchinson’s long-standing project into focus. Their enduring appreciation and respect for cultural differences have called attention to a bigger issue—the need to be familiar with books likely to extend understanding of cultures different from our own. Teachers and teacher educators who know literature from various cultures will include representative selections in their classroom collections. The books included in these collections will help their students experience the world in a more realistic way.

For years of sharing different cultures and outstanding writings and for opening doors that stood to remain closed for a long time, we thank you, Ira E. Aaron and Sylvia M. Hutchinson.

References

