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“How I Won Over A Hundred Dollars Worth of Books, Inspired an Independent Study  
and Became the Hero of My Homeroom”

By the fifth grade, I was already a voracious reader. Unlike other kids in my grade who loved to read, I loved to read, but I read at what one friend commonly referred to as “supersonic” speed. By the end of elementary school I was reading up to two good-sized chapter books every day. My mother, in an attempt to make sure I wasn’t only reading a ridiculously large amount of Babysitter’s Club books, decided to make a bet with me. If I could read all the Newberry award winning books over the course of a school year (from August to May) I could have any five books I wanted, at any price. To an ambitious fifth grader on a fixed budget, the deal was too good to pass up.

The Newberry Award is an award given every year to one book that is considered the best contribution to children’s literature. While not every one is familiar with the majority of the winners, I had already read the basics along with most book-obsessed children. This included books like Bridge to Terabithia (1968 winner) (one of my only memories of third grade is sobbing during silent reading while finishing it), Number the Stars (1990) (I was slightly obsessed with the Holocaust throughout the fourth grade) and From the Mixed Up Files of Mrs. Basil E Frankweiler (1978) (what kid isn’t fascinated by the thought of running away to a museum?) All in all, before this bet started I had read about fourteen of the books. The award started in 1922, which meant at the time, there

were eighty-eight books total. That left sixty-four remaining books that I had to finish by summer.

I started with the easiest ones first, and since these ones were also the most prevalent in the Scholastic book orders, I could easily convince my mom to buy them. This was the first time I actively started to collect the Newberries. It was in this way that I obtained books like Out of the Dust, (1998) The View from Saturday(1997) and Walk Two Moons (1995), some of the most recent winners.

In November of that year, a used book fair came to our school. Books started out at twenty-five cents for paperback, and topped out at fifty for a hardcover. I can still remember the pure joy I felt walking into the book-flooded cafeteria. I don't think I've ever seen anything quite as beautiful as those rows upon rows of boxes of books and knowing that I had a twenty-dollar bill in my pocket. The first two Newberries I bought with my own money were bought at this cafeteria. At the time, I wasn't completely aware of how reprinting works, so I felt as if I had found buried treasure when I spotted Smoky the Cowhorse (1927), and then Hitty, Her First Hundred Years (1930) in the piles. Clearly, I thought, these people had no idea the age or the value of the books they had donated. Over the course of the three day book sale I ended up finding quite a few Newberries, including ..And Now Miguel (1954) and The Wheel on the School (1955), and The Slave Dancer (1974) but none made me as happy as the first two books I had found.

After I had bought these couple at the sale, it seemed as if I couldn't stop buying Newberry books, especially the older and less well-known ones. There was always a sense of urgency in picking up these titles, even, if like the 1956 winner Carry on Mr.

Bowditch (1956), they could be found at the local Borders. Every time I picked one up I felt like I was buying something almost sacred, and that it would disappear if I waited too long to buy it. The older the book, the more special I felt it was.

As my book collection grew so did the number of books I read and as a result, my fame in homeroom. Most kids in the class knew I loved to read (I'd been caught reading while the teacher was talking too many times to be merely ambivalent), but it was the fact that I had a distinct end point of seventy-eight finished books that I made people excited. Kids alternated between complete astonishment that I had attempted such a feat, or straight-out disbelief that I could do it at all. As the end of the year began to approach, the tension and overall excitement level continued to grow. Especially since as fifth graders, we had no end of the year exams to think about, the outcome of the Newberry bet was all that was talked about.

I cut it pretty close but three days before school ended, I closed my last Newberry book, The Grey King (1976), in the middle of the playground during recess. In what now feels too far fetched to be a real memory, kids were crowded around me for the last thirty pages and immediately scattered when I finished to go spread the news that I was finally done. There was a general atmosphere of excitement the rest of the afternoon, and the next day my homeroom threw a party to celebrate. The memory of that reaction is still one of my happiest.

Collection wise, as a result of this bet, up until this year I had over half of the Newberry collection (roughly fifty books). Ten years after the original bet and as a college junior, I decided to revisit my fifth grade experiment for an independent study and read all the Newberry books again in a single semester, averaging to about a book a

day. I visited a couple used bookstores over winter break to buy more of the books and discovered that my fascination with the older titles has not changed. Finding a copy of Shen of the Sea (1926) still brought up all the feelings of delight I first experienced in my elementary school cafeteria. I even invested in some of the newer books, including the latest winner The Graveyard Book (2008). Overall, I'm now missing about twenty of the books and plan on continuing the collection till I have them all.

And the five books that I won in the bet? Much to my mother's chagrin, being a dutiful fan of Amazon.com (which at the time only sold books) I managed to find five books that totaled a little over one hundred and twenty dollars. The first four were Letters of the Century, Icons of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Women Who Win and Women in the Material World which as I devoured them jumpstarted my interests in global affairs and history, which I am now studying here at Washington University.

And the fifth? I thought it only fitting to buy the most prestigious book I could find- the oldest, most important book in my sphere of reference. This was of course, The Story of Mankind, the 1922 winner, the first ever, and in the eyes of a fifth grader destined to be enthralled by the spirit of the Newberry, the greatest book of all.

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