

The Newbery Medal: Books about Africa

Historical Overview

Undoubtedly, of all the awards associated with children's literature, the Newbery Medal is not only the oldest, but also one of the most prestigious. Proposed in 1921 by Frederic G. Mercher and approved by the American Library Association in 1922, the medal is awarded annually "to the author of the most distinguished contribution to American literature for children published in English in the United States during the preceding year" (ALA Newbery Terms & Criteria).¹ Since its inception, eighty-eight medals have been issued with hundreds of honor books announced. This award does not only add "prestige [to] children's literature," as noted by Anita Silvey (2002), but also prolongs the shelf life of a book (Kidd, 2007).²

The Newbery, however, has not existed without some controversy. First, it is said to have perpetuated what some refer to as "an institutionalized racism . . . [which in a way was] in keeping with social practices of segregation" (Kidd, 2007, 178). Second, other critics feel that there's "an anxious insistence on the universality of human experience" (Kidd, 2007, 179). These complaints continue to pose challenges to the Medal Committee, which in turn revises the award criteria so the terms are not only clear, but also maintain a semblance of objectivity. Therefore, while emphasizing the aesthetic merit of a book, other components that enhance the overall literary quality are accentuated. The criteria do not, however, overtly address the issue of cultural merit. "Why does this matter," some may ask? It matters because there are studies that have demonstrated that there exist some Newbery Medal books with cultural content that may be inac-

curate or might have been distorted (Kidd, 2007). For example, Kidd (2007) draws our attention to Elizabeth Yates's 1951 award-winning historical fiction novel, *Amos Fortune, Free Man*, "a compelling tale, which unfortunately downplays the horror of slavery" (179). Taxel (1986) raises similar concerns about two other historical fiction novels: Paula Fox's *The Slave Dancer* and Quida Sebestyen's *Words by Heart*.

The Newbery Award: Book Selection Criteria

Like many educators, I have oftentimes wondered how the selection process works. For one thing, if we are to recommend these books to our students and/or their parents, it becomes necessary to understand how excellence is defined by the Medal Committee. Once we figure this out, we must then examine the award-winning books in question to see how well they illustrate this excellence; this familiarity with the texts will give rise to different ways to present them to our students or to interact with them as readers. This can be quite demanding, if we do not know exactly what we are looking for.

In this paper, I will demonstrate how teachers can integrate Newbery award-winning or honor books about Africa in their classroom. I will begin by presenting the criteria for selecting books for this prestigious award. Then I will discuss the literary and cultural strength of each of three specific honor books and share sample activities that would enhance children's experiences with these books in a classroom setting. My hope is that as teachers expose children to literature about Africa, they will not only educate them about Africa's rain forests, but also help them

to think critically about who Africans are as a diverse group of people, and how they have contributed to our ever-evolving global civilization. In addition, these are activities that can be applied to other multicultural literature for children, especially literature set in other continents and in non-western countries.

As of summer 2008, the criteria for excellence are described as follows:

1. In identifying “Distinguished Writing” in a book for children,
 - a. Committee members need to consider the following:
 - Interpretation of the theme or concept
 - Presentation of information including accuracy, clarity, and organization
 - Development of a plot
 - Delineation of characters
 - Delineation of setting
 - Appropriateness of style

Note: Because the literary qualities to be considered will vary depending on content, the committee need not expect to find excellence in each of the named elements. The book should, however, have distinguished qualities in all of the elements pertinent to it.

- b. Committee members must consider excellence of presentation for a child audience.

2. Each book is to be considered as a contribution to literature. The committee is to make its decision primarily on the text. Other aspects of a book are to be considered only if they distract from the text. Such other aspects might include illustrations, overall design of the book, etc.

3. The book must be a self-contained entity, not dependent on other media (i.e., sound or film equipment) for its enjoyment.

Note: The committee should keep in mind that the award is for literary quality and quality presentation for children. The award is not for didactic intent or for popularity.

Adopted by the ALSC Board, January 1978. Revised, Midwinter 1987.

The Newbery Medal Committee, therefore, must examine each book closely following the stipulated criteria to determine which book among the numer-

ous submitted for consideration accurately exemplifies qualities deemed “excellent” to warrant a gold medal. Having served on three award committees, I know firsthand how tedious and challenging the process can be.³ This notwithstanding, the Committee must select the winning book and a few runner-ups as honor books in a timely and professional manner, although as Kidd (2007) rightly observes, “very few honor books are as widely known” (177).

The Newbery Medal and Books Set in Africa

Of the eighty-eight medals awarded between 1922 and 2009, none has gone to an author whose story is set in continental Africa. However, three honor books have African settings: Harold Courlander and George Herzog’s *The Cow-Tail Switch and Other West African Stories* (1947/74), Nancy Farmer’s *The Ear, the Eye, and the Arm* (1994), and *A Girl Named Disaster* (1996). The first of the three honor books is a collection of folktales, the second is a science fiction young adult novel, and the third is a realistic fiction novel. Courlander and Herzog’s collection won the honor in 1948, while Farmer’s novels won in 1995 and 1997 respectively. Because of how old the first title on the list is, some may argue that no one uses such texts in the classroom anymore, making any discussion of it irrelevant. I would disagree, because unfortunately, when Africa is the subject, most teachers’ choice of literature is folktales, some of which may be picture book versions of the stories found in Courlander and Herzog’s book. Thus, I believe it is still necessary to have this conversation in order to remind educators of the subtle cultural nuances embedded in the texts that may be problematic. It is important for us to understand that as simple and direct as folktales may seem to readers, they are

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I will provide a brief review of each title in this section before discussing possible ways teachers could integrate the books into their classrooms.

Honor Book #1: *The Cow-Tail Switch and Other West African Stories*

First published in 1947, this collection includes stories from five West African countries: Ghana, Liberia, Senegal/Gambia, & Togo.⁴ True to the folktale tradition, Courlander remarks in the introduction that the stories “tell about clever people, and stupid people, about good ones and bad ones, about how things and animals got to be how they are . . . Some of the stories make you think. Some make you laugh” (3). The stories also adhere to some basic folktale conventions,

sometimes with vague settings, clearly stated morals, flat characters, and, of course, virtue overcoming vice. The seventeen stories in this collection include some tales already familiar to many in the west—for example, the Ashanti folktale “Talk” and the Anansi tales. While all are quite entertaining, others can provoke thought and deep reflection, forcing readers to

ponder first the nature of the story—how it is told, the moral, and, finally, the culture of the people that generated such a story. The protagonists in all seventeen tales are males—be they human or otherwise—with a few female characters in supporting roles.

In one particular tale, titled “Ansigé Karamba, the Glutton” (119–127), the female character figures prominently as she exposes her husband for his greed and stupidity. In another tale, “Kassa, the Strange One,” a female character also plays a major part in the plot development. In the notes section of their collection, Courlander and Herzog (1947/74) acknowledge this element of an African woman’s ability to either outwit her husband or rescue him from a tight situa-

tion. They remark that “while the African man feels superior to the woman, yet in many ways he acknowledges her superiority as he does in the story of ‘Kassa, the Strong One,’ and more realistically here, where the foolish glutton is saved from punishment by his clever wife” (139).

The collection begins with an introduction, ends with a glossary of words from different West African languages, and includes a pronunciation guide. Including these sections, the book is 143 pages long; the longest stories, “Kaddo’s Wall” and “Anansi’s Fishing Expedition,” span 11 pages each; the shortest, “Don’t Shake Hands with Everybody,” covers three pages. All seventeen stories are illustrated in black and white and include images that may not seem flattering to the cultures in question; only the jacket cover has illustrations in color, and these are also stereotypical images of half-naked West Africans with spears.

In the title story, “Cow-Tail Switch,” readers explore the predicament of one family when the father dies. While the rest of the family simply accepts this as a fact of life, the youngest, who knows little about his dad, asks them where he is. This prompts a search, which leads to the return of their father. For gaining his life back, the father rewards his youngest son with a cow-tail switch, reinforcing the belief that “a man is not really dead until he is forgotten” (12). If the son had not inquired about his dad’s whereabouts, the family would have completely forgotten about him. A powerful tale on the need to remember our ancestors and loved ones regardless of whether they are dead or not, the story is as entertaining as it is educative.

All the stories carry on in this vein as some characters make wise or unwise decisions and must deal with the consequences, while others manifest ignorance and greed in their understanding of how their world functions. Meena Khorana (1994) notes that, “The contemplative tone of these folktales offers an opportunity for discussion and philosophic enquiry” (73). However, what I find troubling in the 1974 version is the authors’ and/or publisher’s retention of pre-fifties language in two sections. For example, Courlander and Herzog (1974) write in the introduction, “The peoples of Africa are many things too. They speak many different languages, so that those on the Gulf of Guinea don’t understand the speech of those who live in the Nile Valley and the *Kaffirs* of the south

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don't understand the people of the North" (emphasis in italics is mine; 2).⁵

Another point I take issue with are the stereotypical illustrations. Therefore, even though the Newbery criteria stipulate clearly that attention should not be paid to illustrations and that decisions should be based solely on literary quality, I believe that these features are important to readers. Stereotypes, as we all have come to know, can affect our enjoyment of books and/or affect our sense of selves (Rudine Sims, 1982; Vivian Yenika-Agbaw, 2008).

Overall, the collection is enjoyable. With critical thinking activities, teachers can guide readers so they are able to have a transformative experience as they embark on research projects—comparing life in Africa then and now, comparing life on other continents then and now—paying particular attention to countries with parallel circumstances across the globe. In addition, they can focus on particular characters and how these characters resolve problems in pre-colonial settings vis-à-vis how we resolve problems in contemporary society. Understanding how the characters relate and interact with each other in the tales (for example, how the men interact with the women, husbands with wives, and parents with their children) is important above all because it gives readers an insight into the internal dynamics of this fictional world that was not as materially sophisticated as ours today. It reminds us of our own struggles as we deal with spouses and children and function as a family unit. Therefore, engaging children in specific transformative activities will provide them with a deeper understanding of the indigenous African cultures whose experiences are captured. And as Yenika-Agbaw (1997) and Cai (2008) note, balancing transactional and critical approaches to reading literature will further enhance the reading experience. This way, readers are not only enjoying the literary experience, they are able to analyze the events in the tales from a critical stance that may inadvertently shape their understanding of the culture being depicted.

Honor Book #2: *The Ear, the Eye, and the Arm*

It took forty-six years for a Medal Committee to recognize another author whose children's book is set in Africa for its "distinguished contribution to American literature"; this time, it was Nancy Farmer's science fiction novel, *The Ear, the Eye, and the Arm*,

published in 1994. Farmer's young adult novel, even though on the *New York Times* bestseller list at some point, was not good enough to capture the gold medal in 1995. Set in the year 2194, Farmer tells the story of three siblings who are kidnapped and put to work at a mine. Their father, General Amadeus Matsika, the chief of security in this fictional Zimbabwe setting, then hires three detectives with "special abilities" to search for the children

(51). The Eye, who is brown, can see very far with his super vision. By the same token, the Ear, who is white, can hear sound from afar, while the Arm, who is black, cannot only read people's minds but can sense their emotions. Unfortunately, this multicultural team of detectives must deal with the likes of Knife and Fist, the kidnappers, who work for a disgruntled woman called She Elephant—the person in charge of the legendary Dead Man's

Vlei, where all human beings follow her commands. The story is fast-paced as it engages the reader and induces a thoughtful examination of the events, settings, and characters. General Matsika's children, having been sheltered all their lives from the reality of life in Zimbabwe, cannot make sense of the chaos that surrounds them in their new and hostile environment. Thirteen-year-old Tendai, the male protagonist, and his younger siblings, Rita and Kuda, must quickly adapt in order to survive. The adventure is non-stop, with readers participating in the fun, experiencing the danger and fear, and contemplating the skepticism some of the African characters hold about the effects of modernism on their people and culture.

The 1994 edition has 311 pages, including the glossary of unfamiliar words and an appendix. The colorful book jacket tickles readers' curiosity and encourages us to turn the page and read on. Overall, there are forty chapters and an epilogue in the novel. Farmer has a unique style of interspersing poetry and other stories *within* the story, using italics to draw

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readers' attention to subplots. This coming-of-age story raises all kinds of questions about modernization and the people of Zimbabwe, modernization and African communities, and modernization and our global community. Thus, readers are forced to ponder the role that modernization plays in unsettling traditional practices of the past, thereby further widening the gap between classes and alienating the disenfranchised within this fictional society. Mhondoro, the guiding lion spirit, raises Tendai's awareness to the complexity of the situation, reminding him that regardless of the evil things that people may do, like Tendai, they were all Mhondoro's children. Only then can Tendai understand that She Elephant, who now torments them, was once "a fat, unwanted child," rejected by family and society. He is now able to put things into perspective.

With a multicultural team of detectives and myriad questions about the human condition in this novel, we need to probe further to understand how

events in this fictional society mirror what is happening in our own world. In doing so, our students are able to not only make personal connections with the book, as recommended by Rosenblatt (1978) and Probst (2002), but also cultural connections as they examine the universality of the experience depicted as well as experiences of individual characters and groups that populate the book.⁶ However, one needs to be wary about fostering the kind of reading Cai (2008) refers to as "egocentric"—a reading

that he claims simply assures mainstream readers that "people from different cultures are all like them and judge people of other cultures based on the standards of the mainstream culture" (212, as cited by Dressel, 2003). As pointed out earlier, transactional theory also remains limited unless it is balanced with critical reading (Yenika-Agbaw, 1997).

One thing that caught my attention in this novel

is Farmer's distribution of gender roles. The three detectives, though from different racial backgrounds and possessing different special powers, are all males. This raises issues of gender stereotypes in the novel and makes one wonder how the story would have been different with at least one of the characters being female. General Matsika, who wages a war against crime, and Tendai, who does not like violence but never loses his cool under pressure, are both males. Conversely, the females here are either too emotional or vindictive. Eleven-year-old Rita Matsika is emotional throughout, whereas She Elephant, as powerful as she is, uses her talent to perpetuate violence.

The role of the Praise Singer in this community is another issue that needs further investigation as readers pose questions about the cultural experience being depicted here. What does it mean that the great general who is highly revered in this community has a Praise Singer who is a man from "the English tribe" (19). This insinuates a certain kind of colonial relationship that exists between this former European colony and the west; it is the type that Martin Japtok (2003) believes is based on power struggles, with the Praise Singer and the General consciously or unconsciously switching roles as the person in charge of the other. However, unless students are encouraged to examine this relationship critically, they may simply gloss over it, thinking there is nothing significant about a leader having a Praise Singer. Is it necessary to have a Praise Singer in one's life? If so, what does this mean and why?

These are a few basic questions readers could explore. We need to develop activities that help students probe more deeply into this kind of relationship and this kind of context, thus enabling them to further understand the role that the west plays in our global community. The activity could also help them to understand how the west inadvertently influences the behavior of African leaders, especially those from countries whose colonial histories intersect with specific countries in the west.

Honor Book #3: *A Girl Named Disaster*

Nancy Farmer's second novel set in Africa, *A Girl Named Disaster* (1996), was also recognized for its "distinguished contribution" to American literature in 1997 as a runner-up. Told from a third-person point of view, the gripping coming-of-age story hooks the

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reader from the beginning and sustains interest until the end. The protagonist, an eleven-year-old Shona girl, is fiercely independent, regardless of the circumstance. Having lost her mother early and been abandoned by her father, Nhamo must put up with an envious aunt and an impossible workload to keep the family comfortable and going. Even then, Aunt Chipipo is not content with her being around and will stop at nothing to see that Nhamo is married off to an undesirable suitor with three wives already; however, Nhamo will not be married off that easily. Instead, she runs away from the village in Mozambique that has been her home all her life and sails to Zimbabwe, a foreign country, to search for her father. It is not an easy journey, for it takes not only physical and emotional strength to survive, but also a lot of ingenuity on Nhamo's part.

By the end of the journey, she has not only grown physically into a young woman, she has also matured psychologically and is ready to navigate the modern society she encounters in Zimbabwe. Michelle H. Martin (1999) describes her as a "Cinderella Character" because "Nhamo does the majority of the housework, wood-gathering, and water-fetching for the family under the watchful eyes of her antagonistic Aunt Chipipo, while her kind, beautiful cousin, Masvita, Chipipo's daughter, performs the lighter chores" (399). Nhamo is aware of her marginalized position in their family compound, but cannot understand why until her dying grandmother tells her the entire story and advises her to leave.

The novel spans 309 pages, including the glossary; notes on Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and Shona culture; and a bibliography of works consulted. While reading this novel, I was enthralled with Nhamo's character throughout the journey. First, I watched how she negotiated space among family members in the village, quietly interrogating aspects of the Shona culture that puzzled her. I was also mesmerized by how she survived in the wilderness, observing how she learned to co-exist with the wild animals—her new neighbors—who understood the rules of the jungle better than she. In addition, I marveled at her tenacity when dealing with the new relatives in Zimbabwe who accept her with ambivalence. Although the transition from life in the village to life in a modern, foreign town is bumpy, Nhamo, in her typical steadfast manner, gradually adjusts to it.

In typical Farmer style, this captivating story—also a semifinalist for the National Book Award—raises questions about family life, modernization, and African village customs. Acutely aware of the fact that most authors who set their stories in Africa tend to focus mostly on the jungle, I was pleasantly surprised with the way Farmer balanced her narrative to capture the complexity of the African reality. The novel clearly demonstrates that there are competing forces within different regions in Africa that contribute to the overall well-being of the inhabitants of the continent. Thus, while modernization has its strong points, it becomes necessary to ponder why the village customs that have sustained African communities for centuries should be discarded. Like in *The Ear, the Eye, and the Arm* (1994), Farmer insinuates that Africa is a complex place, and Zimbabwe and Mozambique are small representations of this complexity. Her writing style is engaging as she intersperses victory verses and other stories to drive home the need to remember and to connect with one's past. Teachers can explore all these aspects further in the classroom, guiding students not only to enjoy the novel as a literary piece, but also to be able to make connections with it as a cultural artifact that offers them a sneak peek at a segment of Shona culture and the people from that part of Africa. We hope to teach them the ability to question certain practices within the cultural space and to examine how the author decided to share this experience.

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Reflecting on Possibilities

Inasmuch as it is promising that I could find three Newbery honor books about Africa, it would have been exhilarating to find even more, especially some that had actually won the Medal. All three books are written by white authors who have lived or traveled extensively in the African countries whose stories they write about, although we may not know what motivated them to focus on Africa or to tell these particular stories. As we educators share these books

with students and/or recommend them to parents, it is important to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of each text in the context of their literary and cultural merits. Regarding cultural merit, we need to ask and encourage others to ask specific questions that will enable us to further understand the dynamics at play in the different books. For example, how accurately do Courlander and Herzog's folktales reflect the cultures of the villages to which the authors have ascribed each tale? How accurately has Farmer depicted the Shona village customs and the relationships between Southern Africans and the west? By paying attention to specific cultural markers in the texts—such as the tools farmers use, the male/female relationships, the leadership styles of the heads of clans or nations in these stories, and the response of the people to this leadership—we will be helping readers to become socially responsible global citizens. Thus, as they interrogate these images and seek answers to specific questions, perhaps they may be able to revise their preconceptions of the African countries in question and even their attitudes toward the people from that region.

The goal then is to help these “world citizens” develop the necessary skills and strategies to interrogate events in these books like they would in all literary texts—in a systematic manner, negotiating personal meanings and making connections with specific cultural experiences depicted in the texts. Cultural authenticity of literary texts remains a concern among educators (Fox and Short, 2003), especially in regards to books that have won awards, primarily because this becomes a sort of testament to their merit and inadvertently an endorsement from the organization that offers these awards.

Before sharing the following sample activities that may work well with the Newbery honor books discussed in this paper, review Table 1, which highlights some of the key characteristics of each book.

Ideas for Classroom Activities

I begin this section by suggesting a few reading comprehension activities to enable students to understand some basic information about Africa in general and specific countries (or cities, towns, and villages) in Africa. I will also offer some sample critical reading activities that can help students to interrogate the images of Africa prevalent in the books and issues raised by the authors about the human condition. The activities target students in the middle grades and up, with necessary adjustments as teachers see fit. I do not necessarily condone censorship of books, so it is important that we develop relevant critical thinking activities that enable students to transcend obvious stereotypes. By challenging stereotypes, such as those that dominate Courlander and Herzog's collection of folktales, students seek to understand who Africans are, how complex their cultures are, and what they have contributed to our global civilization. The activities presented here are based both on research and on what I have used with preservice teachers in my children's and young adult literature courses at the college level.

Efferent Reading

Rosenblatt (1978) describes efferent reading as a reading stance that privileges information over pleasure. This stance represents a functional purpose for reading as readers read with a keen eye to specific information about the subject they wish to explore. Within

Table 1. Significant characteristics of three Newbery honor books

Book	Genre	Award	Protagonist	Setting	Grade
Cow-tail	Folktale	Honor/1948	Males	5 West African Countries	4 and up
Ear	Science Fiction	Honor/1995	Male	Zimbabwe	7 and up
Disaster	Realistic Fiction	Honor/1997	Female	Mozambique/ Zimbabwe	6 and up

classrooms, however, for this strategy to be effective, teachers may need to develop activities that require active participation from the students. I have attempted to provide four examples of possible activities.

Activity #1: Gaining Entry & Generating Interest

To introduce a unit on literature about Africa to students in grades 6 and up, have students complete the first two columns of a KWLR chart (see Table 2) and later watch a short [15–25 minutes] documentary of pre-colonial Africa. These two pre-reading activities may help to prepare them for the rest of the unit. Collect these half-completed charts and save in a folder for future reference.

Table 2. A KWLR chart about Africa

	K	W	L	R
What I know about Africa				
What I want to learn about Africa				
What I learned about Africa				
What I think of Africa <i>now</i> [my reflections]				

* Adapted from Kelly Callagher's: *Deep Reading* (2004)

Activity #2: Map Quest

Have the entire class read at least two of the books, making sure all three books are read within the class. Now break students into groups of four (e.g., 24 students = 6 groups). Have two groups focus on one honor book. Every member of the group must read the group's selection. Have students keep individual logs identifying important information from the literary texts (e.g., names of countries, towns/villages, and/or ethnic groups) mentioned in the particular story (see Table 3 for template). Do these villages and/or towns/cities exist today? Do they go by their original names? For example, if the countries or cities no longer use the names that appear in a story, what might account for this change? Follow up this activity with a library or Internet research on key questions about Africa revealed by the authors in their books. As students conduct research, they should also confirm and/or revise previously recorded information about Africa retrieved from the group's text. Have them do a MapQuest to find the location of key settings.

Table 3. Learning Log about Africa [Honor Books 1, 2, 3]

Settings of Story	Region in Africa	Economic Activities	My Reactions
Ghana	West	Hunting	People have expectations. Some work really hard.
		Fishing	
		Trading	
Mende	West		

Activity #3: Map Drawing

Have each group draw a map of Africa with complete information about the countries that appear in the text, and other information they retrieved about the countries from research. Then have them draw a map of the dominant setting in the story. For example, in Courlander's collection, it would be Ghana; in Farmer's first honor book, it would be Zimbabwe. In her second honor book, it should be Mozambique. On this map, have them place the villages and towns mentioned.

Activity #4: Paired-Book Comparison Chart

Have each group select one of the following pairs and reflect on their similarities and differences (themes, style, characters, and settings). Which of the two books do they prefer and why?

- a. Folktale Comparison
 - Cow-Tail Switch and Other West African Stories* and Julius Lester's (1987) *The Tales of Uncle Remus: The Adventures of Brer Rabbit*
 - Cow-Tail Switch and Other West African Stories* and William J. Faulkner's (1977) *The Days When the Animals Talked: Black Folk Tales and How They Came to Be*
- b. Science Fiction Comparison
 - The Ear, the Eye, and the Arm* and *The Giver*
 - The Ear, the Eye, and the Arm* and *A Wrinkle in Time*
- c. Realistic Fiction Comparison
 - A Girl Named Disaster* and *Island of the Blue Dolphins*
 - A Girl Named Disaster* and *Hatchet*

Aesthetic and Critical Reading

Rosenblatt (1978) defines the aesthetic reading stance as one whereby the reader attends to the beauty of the text and other personal meanings. Readers using this stance set their own purpose for reading and negotiate

meanings that will serve their purposes. While this kind of reading helps students to claim ownership of the story text, critical reading enables students to pay attention not only to ways that authors use language to manipulate readers, but also to the different ideology embedded in texts (Yenika-Agbaw, 1997, 1998). Both reading stances serve different purposes in that they enable students to enjoy the reading experience as they also think critically about the issues explored in the texts and the way they are presented

by the author. I have provided three possible activities that teachers may use to initiate some kind of dialogue with the honor books discussed here.

Activity #1: Revising Stories

Have pairs of students within groups rewrite the folktale “Younde Goes to Town” in a comic strip, setting the story in their state of choice in the United States. Or they could opt to rewrite the ending of one

of Farmer’s novels. In addition, after each pair shares their story, they should explain what they did to make it new, and why they made those specific changes. For more information on comic strips, teachers can check out the following website: www.teachingcomics.org.

Activity #2: Cultural Connections

Have students individually identify one item or experience with which they are familiar in the story, one they find unusual, and one they find interesting (see an example in Table 4). Encourage them to also explain what about the experience makes it familiar, interesting, or unusual. In pairs, they should compare items on their lists as well as their reasons. Then as a class, students should be encouraged to share their notes from their discussion as the teacher prompts them to further reflect on their responses.

Activity 3: Personal Connections and Reflections

Return KWLR charts and have students complete the remaining columns: What I learned about Africa; what I think of Africa *now*. Collect these and consider using as extra credit. Exit the unit by showing a short documentary on Africa in the Twenty-first Century while focusing on one of the three countries that served as a setting in the honor books: Ghana, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique.

These are some effective strategies and activities that teachers can use to engage children with award-winning books or quality literature about Africa in the classroom. The three reading stances: Efferent, Aesthetic, and Critical are broad enough to address a variety of reading purposes, and yet specific enough to target a variety of strategies that enable children to enjoy literature about Africa, learn more about Africa, and reflect about the representations of Africa prevalent in books.

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Table 4. Cultural Connections: Characterization, Setting, Issues, Life Style

Title: *Cow-Tail Switch and Other West African Stories*

What is familiar?	Interesting	Unusual	Reasons
a.			
b.			
c.			
d.			

Endnotes

- ¹ In another site, it is stated that “The Newbery Medal is awarded annually by the American Library Association for the most distinguished American children’s book published the previous year.”
- ² John Gillespie and Corinne Naden (2006) remark in the preface of their book that “parents often purchase copies or borrow copies from libraries for their children; teachers frequently make assignments involving these titles; and librarians scramble for copies as soon as the award winners are announced in January of each year.”
- ³ I have served on the selection committee for the Children’s Book Africana Award (housed by African Studies Association) since 2003; I am currently serving on selection committees for the Notable Book for a Global Society (housed by the International Reading Association) and the Phoenix award (housed by Children’s Literature Association). My term on both committees will be over in 2010.
- ⁴ In the notes at the end of the collection, the authors repeatedly refer to Senegal and Gambia in connection. I have maintained this two-country combination in my paper as Senegal/Gambia, even though they are clearly two separate countries in West Africa.
- ⁵ The word “Kaffir,” although used in its historical context in this collection to describe Blacks in South Africa, can have a derogatory connotation. According to Wikipedia, it was a general term used in the past; however, “[d]uring the twentieth century the word gradually took on negative connotations.”
- ⁶ See Rosenblatt’s transactional theory and her statement on aesthetic and efferent readings of texts.

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