Since its inception in 1922, the John Newbery Medal has been awarded to “the author of the most distinguished contribution to American literature for children published in the United States during the preceding year.” Selected by a committee of the Association for Library Service to Children, a division of the American Library Association, guidelines specify that the content of winning books is appropriate for “persons of ages up to and including fourteen,” with one target audience being children in their adolescent years.

Whether these books are read to children or by children, the Newbery’s principal audience is comprised primarily of readers in “pre-” and “early” adolescence, both important phases in emotional and social development. During these periods, “tweens,” as David Anderegg refers to them, are “trying on” roles for themselves as they form both cultural and personal identities. They emulate the behavior of others and begin to define their own role within their community. For this reason, research related to fictional characters and their portrayal is important. “Adolescents grapple with the question of who they will become as well as the question of who they are.” Due to this process of self discovery and role experimentation, role models encountered in the fictional world may become ones accepted or emulated in real life.

Several studies link the influence of positive gender portrayal to healthy development and self-esteem of both boys and girls. According to Judith Kinman and Darwin Henderson, “Children must see lifestyles like their own in the literature they read, since this is one way that they validate their own lifestyles.” Despite this finding, girls have historically been portrayed as possessing primarily stereotypical feminine traits: caring, weak, giving, sentimental, and so on. Such representations may raise questions in the minds of young readers of both genders as to how their identities compare with those of protagonists. Building on the earlier work of Myra Sadker and David Sadker, Janet Powell et al. noted that these portrayals may lead girls to think that they are “no more than spectators of action. . . . It isn’t enough for girls only to appear as main characters; they must also possess assertive and dynamic personality traits.”

This article examines the positive characteristics related to resiliency of female protagonists in Newbery Medal winning books between 1997 and 2008. This article also revisits Mara Houdyshell and Janice Kirkland’s 1998 article, Heroines in Newbery Medal Award Winners: Seventy-five Years of Change, which discussed gender representation in Newbery Medal winners from 1985 to 1996. Its reference within this article is to assist in the determination of the statistical change in the...
number of central female characters in Newbery winners in the twelve years following 1996.

Methodology

In order to evaluate the central female characters and their portrayal in Newbery winners in the years 1997 to 2008, and to compare them to the number of central female characters in the preceding twelve-year period, a two-step process was employed. First, titles with central female characters were identified, and second, three questions were posed addressing the portrayal of these lead characters.

Titles Identified

The four Newbery titles that fit the established criteria for discussion in this article are Out of the Dust by Karen Hesse (1998), Kira-Kira by Cynthia Kadohata (2001), A Year Down Yonder by Richard Peck (2005), and The Higher Power of Lucky by Susan Patron (2007).12

Questions Posed

1. Do the female protagonists possess positive characteristics related to resiliency?

2. Are the female characters assigned traditional or nontraditional roles?

3. Has the number of central female characters changed from the previous twelve years?

Table 1. Character Traits, Resources, and Portrayal of Newbery Female Protagonists, 1997 to 2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year of Award</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Individual Traits/ Resources</th>
<th>External Resources</th>
<th>Characteristics of Portrayal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Out of the Dust</td>
<td>Billie Jo</td>
<td>Courageousness, Fortitude, Intelligence</td>
<td>Academic Success, Talent</td>
<td>Traditional, Nurturing, Caring, Sensitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>A Year Down Yonder</td>
<td>Grandma Dowdel</td>
<td>Humor, Tenacity, Conviction</td>
<td>Family Cohesion, Support of Community</td>
<td>Nontraditional, Intelligent, Aggressive, Strong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Kira-Kira</td>
<td>Katie</td>
<td>Optimism, Self Reliance</td>
<td>Family Cohesion</td>
<td>Traditional, Selfless, Comforting, Sensitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>The Higher Power of Lucky</td>
<td>Lucky</td>
<td>Courageousness, Intelligence, Tenacity</td>
<td>Support of Community, Caring Adult</td>
<td>Nontraditional, Intelligent, Independent, Brave</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Research has shown that positive portrayal also is evidenced through realism in character and story. In their research, Zena Sutherland, Dianne Monson, and May Hill Arbuthnot noted that realistic female characters and story lines provide an opportunity for positive role modeling.19 Similarly, Kinman and Henderson found that when readers recognize and identify with the character’s feelings and situation they “can then accept that the character’s experiences are similar to their own.”20

Question two addresses traditional versus nontraditional presentation of the characters. According to Powell et al., “traditional female roles include those who . . . are seen as primary caretakers of children and homes.”21 Such characters are presented as being “sensitive, comforting,
dependent, passive, physically weak, selfless, happy, caring, nurturing, and helpless.” Conversely, nontraditional female roles present girls who are seen as being, “strong, brave, aggressive, independent, and intelligent and “actively involved in the story.”

While no single character discussed within this article is presented exclusively with all of the traditional or nontraditional traits noted, each can be assigned to either a traditional or nontraditional role. This determination is based upon their circumstances within each story as identified in the analytical summaries to follow, their predominant traits, and the characteristics of each portrayal as identified in table 1.

Examine the female protagonists using this approach will help determine how each protagonist is presented in the summaries and discussions. This format includes synopses and analytical summaries of each book.

Out of the Dust
Set in the Oklahoma Dust Bowl, Out of the Dust by Karen Hesse is a fictional autobiography that unfolds through the diary entries of fourteen-year-old Billie Jo. Stark and vivid, the story tells of Billie Jo’s struggles to understand her family relationships and to endure nature’s unrelenting oppression.

In Out of the Dust, circumstance places Billie Jo in a caregiver role; she demonstrates how a character can be both traditional and resilient (table 1). Her diary entries reveal how she is challenged by the environment and the emotionally wrenching loss of her mother. In the same house where Billie Jo’s mother taught her to play piano, the piano remains—a reminder of happier times and of her own scarred hands, burned in the same fire that injured her mother beyond recovery.

Despite the physical difficulty, Billie Jo struggles to regain her playing skills, courageously forcing herself to play through the pain. Her perseverance and determination allow Billie Jo to place third in a local talent show. As she describes it, “I dropped right inside the music and didn’t feel anything . . . the applause made me forget the pain.”

The circumstances of the accident also lead a sensitive Billie Jo to adopt the role of caregiver as she tends to her mother, and then becomes homemaker, following her mother’s death. The only female in the house, Billie Jo becomes responsible for most of the cooking and cleaning. I “took a good look at the steps and the porch and the windows. I saw them with Ma’s eyes . . . with Ma gone, if the mud’s to be busted the job falls to me.” Given her young age, Billie Jo has little ability to change her situation and is also challenged by her distant and withdrawn father.

Weary of the drought, unhappy with her father, and desiring more than a traditional life for herself, a conflicted Billie Jo runs away. It is an experience that is not altogether rewarding. “Getting away wasn’t any better. Just different. And lonely.” Ultimately, Billie Jo accepts, and becomes comfortable with who she is and returns home, writing, “And I know now that all the time I was trying to get out of the dust, the fact is, what I am, I am because of the dust. And what I am is good enough. Even for me.”

Billie Jo displays both sensitivity and intelligence to confront and eventually accept the role that she and her father played in her mother’s accidental death. Despite her difficulties and the need to substitute for her mother as homemaker, Billie Jo exemplifies the courageousness and tenacity needed to move through her hardships.

A Year Down Yonder
A sequel to Richard Peck’s A Long Way from Chicago, A Year Down Yonder chronicles fifteen-year-old Mary Alice’s lively stay with her Grandma Dowdel.

A nontraditional role model, entrepreneur Grandma Dowdel achieves her goals through conviction and humor. She is not above teaching a Halloween prankster a lesson, nor is she shy about doling out fairness where she sees that it is needed. Through her actions, she demonstrates how a character can be a resilient, nontraditional female (table 1).

Very much her own person, Grandma Dowdel’s “bull-by-the-horns” approach to life, makes her a formidable force to be reckoned with. She is intuitive about what is right and is not hesitant to act on her beliefs. An instance of this includes her teaching one of her granddaughter’s classmates—a class bully—a lesson by setting her horse free so that she is forced to walk home. This is one example of how she serves as a powerful role model for her impressionable granddaughter, Mary Alice.

Grandma Dowdel has an unconventional, larger-than-life personality, and her methods ultimately benefit everyone. One example of this is seen when she gathers pecans from a neighbor’s yard after intentionally “bumping” their pecan tree with a tractor to free the pecans from their branches. She later uses the pecans to make pies for the local Halloween party. The well-received pecan pies are supplemented with pumpkin ones, baked with pumpkins tenaciously foraged under the cover of darkness from the yard of a second neighbor.

Grandma Dowdel is not a thief without conscience, however. When Mary Alice initially questions the legality of purloining...
the pumpkins, Grandma Dowdel suggests the fairness of her actions by responding, “We’ll leave a pie on their porch.” This illustrates how a homemaker by circumstance can be portrayed in a nontraditional manner.

Grandma Dowdel uses her spunk and intelligence at every opportunity, whether aggressively outwitting a privy-tipping prankster or demonstrating her more charitable side. This includes her creative way of raising funds at a community event. By establishing herself as cashier at the head of the food line, she yields extra money for the fundraiser’s recipient, a severely disabled war veteran. To accomplish this, she charges well-to-do attendees meal prices appropriate to their income. It is through this take-charge action that she garners respect within her community.

Kira-Kira

*Kira-Kira* by Cynthia Kadohata is the first person narrative of Katie, a Japanese American girl growing up in Georgia. Accustomed to the protective guidance of her older sister, Lynn, Katie finds their roles reversed when Lynn becomes seriously ill.

The racially charged South of the 1950s is not an environment easily navigated, yet young Katie, Takeshima’s attitude, self reliance, and optimism ultimately allow her to succeed. Through her actions, she demonstrates how a character can be simultaneously traditional (“Everyday I sat by her bed and fed her”) and resilient (“When we first walked up to the Pacific Ocean, the tears welled up in my eyes. . . . But the water began to make me feel happy again. . . . I could hear my sister’s voice in the waves: ‘Kira-kira! Kira-kira!’”).

In *Kira-Kira*, both of Katie’s parents work long, hard hours. It is a situation that forces them to leave their children to care for themselves. While initially Katie’s older sister, Lynn, acts as their caregiver, it is a responsibility that will later fall to Katie.

Serving as a role model, Lynn teaches Katie to appreciate the kira-kira, “glittering,” in life, “I used kira-kira to describe everything I liked: the beautiful sky, puppies, kittens, butterflies.” The word also illustrates the special bond between Lynn and Katie. Over the course of the story, Lynn’s protection and guidance set an example for Katie, who has always been the unassuming student of her older sister.

The shift in Katie’s role and responsibilities begins when Lynn becomes ill. While she doubts her abilities, she knows that the welfare of Lynn, and their younger brother, Sammy, is hers to ensure. An example of this is seen when the three children play in a field and Sammy catches his foot in an animal trap.

Although Katie fears that she lacks the physical and emotional strength to take charge, she frees her brother’s foot and runs to find help. This is an instance that requires a traditional, selfless Katie to draw upon her resilient traits in acting as decision-maker.

By the story’s conclusion, Katie provides the kira-kira for the family and for her own future. She takes Lynn’s advice to heart, “You have to try and get better grades. . . . You should go to college. . . . Take care of Mom and Dad and Sammy.” It is a challenging request for someone who does not put her own interests first, but one that Katie works to fulfill.

The Higher Power of Lucky

*The Higher Power of Lucky* by Susan Patron tells the story of ten-and-a-half-year-old Lucky Trimble and her struggle to trust following her mother’s accidental death. Living in a small desert community, Lucky searches for her “Higher Power,” an inner knowledge that will enable her to have control over her life.

Lucky Trimble is a decidedly nontraditional female character, with a goal to “become a world-famous scientist like Charles Darwin.” She is inquisitive and insightful, qualities that allow her to cope with the unique challenges of her young life. Her parents divorce before she is born, her mother dies in a freak weather-related accident, and her father subsequently places her in the care of a guardian, Brigitte, who just happens to be his first ex-wife.

While coping with the death of a parent might, in itself, be overwhelming, Lucky displays great resilience and personal strength in her ability to adapt to her current circumstance. She also prepares for the unknowns of the future. This includes assembling a survival backpack that allows her to be self-reliant and prepared for anything, from a personal emergency to guardian abandonment while searching for her Higher Power.

Lucky learns of the usefulness of having a Higher Power through eavesdropping on her town’s Twelve Step meetings. Her analytical instincts tell her that if she can discover her own Higher Power, it will enable her to gain control over her life. Her active, not passive, pursuit of such independence demonstrates the strength of Lucky’s determination to overcome her past.

Lucky’s traits also include intelligence, which is visible in her aspiration to emulate Charles Darwin. Her fascination with insects and snakes sets her apart from more traditional gender-driven depictions of young girls.

To her benefit, Lucky’s early misfortunes are countered by the presence of a caring and supportive adult in her life, Brigitte,
and by the fact that she lives in a very tight-knit community.

Lucky’s quest to find her Higher Power leads her to believe that showing courage is key to its discovery. As a result, she determines that running away is the best way to demonstrate such bravery. Indirectly, it is this decision, and her struggle through a severe desert sandstorm, that gives Lucky time to sort out the details of her life. Through keen self awareness, she comes to understand and appreciate the stability she has, stability made clear when the entire town of Hard Pan, including Brigitte, braces the sandstorm in search of her. Brigitte reassures Lucky that she has no intention of leaving her and even plans to adopt Lucky.

Discussion

The traits and external resources that influence resiliency and the success of characters can be identified in table 1. All female Newbery protagonists between 1997 and 2008 exhibit individual traits such as couragousness, intelligence, tenacity, fortitude, conviction, optimism, and a sense of humor.34 While many of these traits can be found in each character, some were more dominant than others. Both Billie Jo’s and Lucky’s abilities to deal with the loss of their mother, for example, demonstrate couragousness and intelligence, particularly because they lack a traditional support structure within their immediate families.

Billie Jo has an emotionally distant father; Lucky, an absent one. Although the two handled their situations very differently, Billie Jo looking within herself to understand, and Lucky looking to her environment to make sense out of life, each possesses the fortitude to move forward. Grandma Dowdel uses her sense of humor to disarm her many detractors and the tenacity she demonstrates when caring for her family and community members cannot be overstated. Finally, Katie’s growing optimism throughout Kira-Kira allows her to see the promise of the future.

External resources noted in table 1 reflect several, additional support structures available to the four protagonists. These structures indicate the potential for personal success and demonstrate that individuals with these resources are better able to cope with adversity.35 Billie Jo’s talent playing piano provides her with solace and a possible way to earn money. Lucky’s caring adult, Brigitte, provides her with support to better deal with her hardships. While Katie possesses a cohesive family structure, a consistent caring adult and supportive community are absent. The social environments for Grandma Dowdel and Lucky, along with academic success for Billie Jo, contribute to their positive portrayals and optimistic outlooks.

In addition to individual traits and external resources, realistic characters in these stories help craft a positive image. In discussing the work of Albert Bandura and Richard Walters, Sutherland et al. assert that “children learn vicariously—that is, by observing the behavior of social models [and] learning may occur when a child observes the behavior of others.”36

When readers identify with Lucky’s fear of abandonment or Katie’s loss of her sibling, they connect to the story and make comparisons to their own lives. It is through such synthesis that literature can impact the reader in meaningful ways.

Traditional Versus Nontraditional Portrayal

The lead female characters under discussion here are assigned to either a traditional or nontraditional role based upon the following: their circumstances in the story, their predominant traits, and the characteristics of each portrayal. All four—Billie Jo, Grandma Dowdel, Katie, and Lucky—uniquely utilize their resources in ways that fulfill their situational needs. They demonstrate how female characters can be presented in traditional and nontraditional roles and also possess traits and resources that portray them resiliently.

In Kira-Kira and Out of the Dust, Katie and Billie Jo are portrayed traditionally. Both characters look after and care for family members as well as their households. Billie Jo substitutes for her mother, as evidenced through her constant cleaning and concern for her father’s happiness despite the fact she desires more for her life. Katie acts as a parent and serves as caretaker to her terminally ill sister, Lynn, and much younger brother, Sammy. At times, Katie and Billie Jo demonstrate nontraditional traits for female protagonists, such as bravery and intelligence. But, due to their household circumstances and caring ways, Katie and Billie Jo are assigned traditional roles and can be viewed as nurturing individuals for much of their stories.

Table 2. Newbery Winners by Gender of Central Character, 1985 to 1996

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>The Hero and the Crown</td>
<td>Robin McKinley</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>Sarah, Plain and Tall</td>
<td>Patricia MacLachlan</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>The Whipping Boy</td>
<td>Sid Fleischman</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>Lincoln: A Photobiography</td>
<td>Russell Freedman</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>Joyful Noise: Poems for Two Voices</td>
<td>Paul Fleischman</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>Number the Stars</td>
<td>Lois Lowry</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>Maniac Magee</td>
<td>Jerry Spinelli</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>Shiloh</td>
<td>Phyllis Reynolds Naylor</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>Missing May</td>
<td>Cynthia Rylant</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>The Giver</td>
<td>Lois Lowry</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Walk Two Moons</td>
<td>Sharon Creech</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>The Midwife’s Apprentice</td>
<td>Karen Cushman</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: F = Female, M = Male, O = Other (includes books with animals as central characters, biographical works, or poems).
In *A Year Down Yonder* and *The Higher Power of Lucky*, Grandma Dowdel and Lucky exemplify nontraditional roles. Even though Grandma Dowdel is a homemaker, she is a business woman at heart, making money for herself and charities whenever the opportunity arises. Lucky is a discoverer and a scientist in search of what the world has to offer. Both protagonists at times are depicted as caring, a trait associated with a traditional female character. However, overall, due to Grandma’s entrepreneurial ways and Lucky’s free-spirited ones, they are both assigned nontraditional roles and are portrayed as independent thinkers for much of their stories.

**Female Central Characters: A Look at the Numbers**

A change in the number of Newbery female protagonists did occur between the years 1985 and 1996 and between 1997 and 2008. As shown in table 2, Houdyshell and Kirkland identified six lead female characters between 1985 and 1996. This compares with four in the subsequent twelve-year period, 1997 to 2008 (table 3). This represents a decrease of two female protagonists, a drop of 33 percent. Analysis of the data (table 3) shows that the decrease in the number of female protagonists was not countered by an increase in the number of lead male characters for this same period. Instead, books featuring ensemble casts—including *A View from Saturday, Criss Cross,* and *Good Masters! Sweet Ladies! Voices from a Medieval Village*—increased, accounting for the remainder of award recipients. By contrast, no books featured an ensemble cast of characters for the preceding twelve years (1985 to 1996). This increase of Newbery winners with ensemble casts from 1997 to 2008 is perhaps a reflection of changes in cultural trends and warrants further study.

**Conclusion**

The children’s publishing industry has vastly grown since the first Newbery Medal in 1922. The notoriety and expectations that accompany its recipients have also increased. While research findings indicate the number of female protagonists has grown since the Newbery’s inception, a decrease occurred during 1997 to 2008 as compared to 1985 to 1996. This 33 percent decrease in these high profile books represents a dramatic change in the number of fictional female role models accessible to young readers. This decrease is significant as it limits the number of positive female protagonists whom children may choose to emulate in real life.

As previously noted, research indicates that girls need to appear as main characters and possess assertive and dynamic personalities in the literature they read as they explore the question of who they are and who they will become. This serves as a reminder that children “must be taught to appreciate all that they can accomplish . . . Be it good or bad what we read affects who we are.”

**Further Reading**

While the Newbery Medal is a significant indication of excellence in children’s literature, there are many other awards that acknowledge outstanding contributions to literary works for children. Quality children’s literature that may include lead female characters can also be found through other organizations that grant children’s book awards, such as the International Reading Association, California Library Association, and other state associations, as well as through ALSC’s other book awards. Readers will be able to identify additional lead female characters whom children may be encouraged to emulate in real life.

**Table 3. Newbery Winners by Gender of Central Character, 1997 to 2008**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td><em>The View from Saturday</em></td>
<td>E. L. Konigsburg</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td><em>Out of the Dust</em></td>
<td>Karen Hesse</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td><em>Holes</em></td>
<td>Louis Sachar</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td><em>Bud, Not Buddy</em></td>
<td>Christopher Paul Curtis</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td><em>A Year Down Yonder</em></td>
<td>Richard Peck</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td><em>A Single Shard</em></td>
<td>Linda Sue Park</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td><em>Crispin: The Cross of Lead</em></td>
<td>Avi</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td><em>The Tale of Despereaux: Being the Story of a Mouse, a Princess, Some Soup, and a Spool of Thread</em></td>
<td>Kate DiCamillo</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td><em>Kira-Kira</em></td>
<td>Cynthia Kadohata</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td><em>Criss Cross</em></td>
<td>Lynne Rae Perkins</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td><em>The Higher Power of Lucky</em></td>
<td>Susan Patron</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td><em>Good Masters! Sweet Ladies! Voices from a Medieval Village</em></td>
<td>Laura Amy Schlitz</td>
<td>E, O</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: F = Female, M = Male, O = Other (includes books with animals as central characters or poems), E = Ensemble cast.

**References**

2. Ibid.
You Go, Girl!

Anderegg, *Nerds.*


Lathey, “Challenges Then and Now.”


Lathey, “Challenges Then and Now.”


Ibid.


The Children’s Services Section of the New Jersey Library Association has announced the following recipients of the 2010 Garden State Children’s Book Award. Winners are chosen by popularity with readers in elementary grades. A three-year lapse from the original publication date is allowed to determine popularity.

**Easy-to-Read Book:** *Today I Will Fly* by Mo Willems

**Easy-to-Read Series Book:** *There Was an Old Lady Who Swallowed Fly Guy* by Tedd Arnold

**Fiction, Grades 2–5:** *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* by Jeff Kinney

**Non-Fiction, Grades 2–5:** *Owen and Mzee: The Language of Friendship* by Craig Hatkoff, Isabella Hatkoff, and Dr. Paula Kahumbu, photographs by Peter Greste