INTRODUCTION

Linking children to quality literature requires insight and information. Adults often serve as a conduit between children and their literary choices. To help children select wisely, early childhood professionals need a strong sense of the interests, experiences, and developmental characteristics of individuals and groups of children (Glazer, 1997). Additionally, they must possess insight into the overall criteria that distinguish a children's book as an outstanding and enduring example of children's literature. One of the most effective ways to discern such criteria is through the review of children's literature awards (Allen, 1998).

On first inspection, learning about the myriad awards, lists, and honors related to the best in children's literature may appear daunting. (See Appendix.) There are currently over several hundred awards recognized in the field of children's literature in the United States; many more are designated throughout the world (Allen, 1998; Jones, 1994; Mahmound, 1996; Raines & Isbell, 1994). These awards are presented to authors and illustrators who demonstrate excellence in their art and wisdom about what makes a book a valuable part of a young child's life.

OH SAY CAN YOU SEE...AND READ!

One of the most fruitful sources of information about award-winning children's literature in the United States may be found through the American Library Association (ALA). The ALA is the oldest, largest, and one of the most influential library associations in the world. In addition to the identification of Notable Books for Children, the ALA sponsors several prestigious awards in the field of children's literature. The most renowned of these are the Newbery Medal and Honor Book Awards and the Caldecott Medal and Honor Book Awards. The ALA also sponsors (among others) the Mildred L. Batchelder Award and the Laura Ingalls Wilder Medal Award.

The Newbery Medal Award. Created in 1922, the Newbery Medal Award was the first children's book award in the world. It was established at the urging of Frederic G. Melcher who proposed to the ALA meeting of the Children's Librarians' Section (later designated as the Association for Library Services to Children [ALSC] division) that a medal be given for the most outstanding children's literature. Thus, the Newbery Award was instituted by ALA to recognize the most distinguished American children's book published the previous year (Glazer, 1997; Sawyer & Comer, 1996). Criteria for the award specify that selections are made primarily on the text of a book. Interpretation of the themes or concept; accuracy, clarity, and organization of presentation of information; development of plot; delineation of characters and setting, and appropriateness of style are considered as these relate to a young reader audience (Allen, 1998). Finalists for this award are called Newbery Honor Books. Typically Newbery Award Books are more appropriate for older children. These may, however, be useful as read-aloud treasures when matched to a specific teaching goal and the developmental and interest levels of young listeners.

The Caldecott Medal Award. Not long after instituting an award for children's literature, members of the ALSC convinced the Newbery Committee of the need for a second literary award dedicated to excellence in children's picture books. Since 1937, the Caldecott Medal Award has been bestowed upon the most distinguished picture book published in the United States during the preceding year (Allen, 1998). To be recognized as a Caldecott Medal or Honor Book, the selection criteria require excellence in artistic technique and pictorial interpretation; appropriateness of illustrations; and high caliber delineation of plot, theme, setting, mood, or information (ALA). Award-winning selections provide children with a rich, visual experience that taps their understanding and aesthetic appreciation.

The Laura Ingalls Wilder Award. The ALA, through the Association for Library Services to Children (ALSC),
also honors an author or illustrator whose works are published in the United States and have made a substantial and lasting contribution to literature for children. The award was initially conferred every 5 years between 1960 and 1980; it is now given every 3 years (Mahmound, 1996). Russell Freedman, Virginia Hamilton, and Marcia Brown are the last three recipients of this tribute. Their names are found on the lists of many awards and they, like all the Laura Ingalls Wilder honorees, contribute to a collectively rich history of excellence in the field of children’s literature in the United States. A detailed history of the ALA awards and recipients may be found on the ALA Home Page (http://www.ala.org/).

The Boston Globe–Horn Book Awards. Since 1967, the Boston Globe and The Horn Book, Inc., have cosponsored an award to recognize superior examples of literature for children and young adults in three categories: Picture Books, Fiction, and Nonfiction. Eligible books must be published in the United States, although they may be written or illustrated by citizens of any country (Mahmound, 1996). The Horn Book Magazine has a colorful history, including the establishment and support of one of the first “book caravans” in the country. Today it provides short, critical annotations of all hardcover children’s trade books published each year through its Horn Book Guide. Chronicles of the history of The Horn Book may be found through its Home Page (http://www.hbook.com); details about current and past Boston Globe–Horn Book Award winners and honor books are also available through that Web site.

The Josette Frank Award (from 1943–1997, called The Children’s Book Award). Around the same time that Frances Darling began taking her “book caravan” to the streets of Boston, the Child Study Children’s Book Committee at Bank Street College was founded in New York to guide librarians, educators and parents to the best books for children published each year. The committee is responsible for granting annually The Josette Frank Award to honor a book of fiction for children or young people that deals realistically and positively with contemporary problems (Mahmound, 1996). The Children’s Book Committee also publishes an annotated list of the best children’s books and paperbacks published each year. Some books may be more suited for older primary or elementary school readers. Many may be read to younger children by an interesting and engaging adult. More information about publications, the committee, and the award may be obtained from the Bank Street College Web site (http://www.bnkst.edu/book committee/booklist.html).

The Aesop Prize and Accolade Books. Each year a selection committee of the Children’s Folklore Section of the American Folklore Society (AFS) announces recipients of the Aesop Award and Aesop Accolades for outstanding illustrated children’s publications that utilize folkloric themes. Founded in 1988, the Society exists to increase respect to diverse cultures and their traditions through the discipline of folklore studies (Mahmound, 1996). Books receiving this award are typically best matched to older children, but the richness of prose and illustrations serves as a wonderful resource for sharing in meaningful ways about different people, different approaches to life, and different times. Information about the AFS and its extensive award program is available through its Web page (http://afsnet.org/index.html).

The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Award for Excellence in Poetry for Children. The NCTE is the world’s largest subject-matter educational association. As such, it is dedicated to improving the teaching of English and language arts at all levels of education. One way this is accomplished includes its award programs. NCTE established its Award for Excellence in Poetry for Children in 1977 to recognize and honor a living American poet for his or her aggregate work (Glazer, 1997). The award was given annually until 1982, at which time it was changed to a 3-year cycle. Since this time, a notable assembly of poets have entered the rank of award winners. They include Eloise Greenfield, Barbara Juster Ebensen, Valerie Worth, Lillian Moore, and John Ciardi (Mahmound, 1996). Details about NCTE and its award program are available through a Web site that also includes a profile and acceptance speech experts from the current award recipient (http://www.ncte.org/about/).

ACROSS AND AMONG BORDERS

Excellence in children’s literature reaches far beyond the boundaries of the United States. Counterparts to the Newbery and Caldecott Awards are prevalent in many other countries (Allen, 1998; Mahmound, 1996; Sawyer & Comer, 1996). The Children’s Literature Web Guide (CLWG) is published by Canadian David Brown who is the director of the Doucette Library of Teaching Resources in the Faculty of Education at the University of Calgary. This site provides the most comprehensive, current resources dealing with children’s international literature awards available on the Web (http://www.acs.ucalgary.ca/~dkbrown/). The Children’s Book Council also provides details about children’s literature awards in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom in its publication entitled Children’s