2017 Charlotte Huck Award for Outstanding Fiction for Children

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This children’s literature review column showcases the winners of the 2017 NCTE Charlotte Huck Award for Outstanding Fiction for Children.

Charlotte S. Huck was a former elementary school teacher who joined the faculty of education at The Ohio State University in 1955. She established the first course in children’s literature at the university and went on to establish master’s and doctoral programs in children’s literature with a wide range of special topics. Many of her students became leaders in the field. In 1961, she published the first edition of Children’s Literature in the Elementary School with her colleague, Doris Kuhn. Now titled Charlotte Huck’s Children’s Literature, the book is in its 10th edition.

Over the course of her career, Huck received numerous awards and honors, including membership in the Reading Hall of Fame. She served as President of NCTE and developed an annual children’s literature conference at Ohio State. Huck believed that good literature should be at the heart and center of the elementary school curriculum. She was convinced that if children found joy in books, they would want to learn to read and then read avidly. One of her goals was that children become lifelong readers. The Charlotte Huck Award for Outstanding Fiction for Children was established to honor her contribution to children and teachers and to further the belief that literature has the potential to transform children’s lives.

Charlotte Huck Winner

Ghost
Written by Jason Reynolds

Castle Cranshaw, or “Ghost” as he has renamed himself, has been running from his past since the night his father took a gun to his mother and him. Unfortunately, his race is a case of one step forward and two steps back. In school, he’s “always being sent down to the principal’s office, or put in detention, or suspended for shutting people down for talking smack” (p. 29). He and his mother live in Glass Manor, the run-down housing district, and money is a problem. Ghost wears clothes that are two sizes two big and no-name high-tops, and his mother cuts his hair. On his way home from school, he goes in “slow motion” because he dreads getting home to an empty apartment. One day, he passes a group of kids at the track in the park and stops to watch. He is tempted to run a sprint alongside Lu, a boy in flash gear—a skin tight track suit and fresh Nike running shoes—even though Ghost is in his rolled up jeans and high-tops. The race is, according to Coach, too close to call, but Coach is impressed with Ghost’s ability and convinces Ghost’s mother to let him join the team, with the caveat that if he messes up in school, he’s off the
Honor Books

**Ms. Bixby's Last Day**  
Written by John David Anderson  

As teachers go, sixth-grade teacher Ms. Bixby is one of the “Good Ones” (p. 7). The kind who makes learning the transitive property fun, who shares the many quotes (“affirmations”) she has collected, who reads *The Hobbit* aloud, and who also happens to have pink hair. Best friends Topher, Brand, and Steve are united in their dismay when Ms. Bixby announces that she will be unable to finish the school year due to a cancer diagnosis. When she leaves earlier than expected, the boys skip school and head to the hospital, determined to give their beloved teacher a goodbye celebration. Despite a comic series of mishaps, the boys manage to arrive at the hospital with a picnic that somewhat resembles the last dinner Ms. Bixby had described in a class writing exercise (cheesecake, wine, French fries, music, and conversation). In first person narration, the chapters alternate the perspectives of these three very different boys, providing insight into their home lives and their special relationships with Ms. Bixby. Equally sad, sweet, and hilarious, this poignant novel celebrates the meaningful difference that can be made by a very special teacher. (ETD)

**The Girl Who Drank the Moon**  
Written by Kelly Barnhill  

The forest is cursed. Xan, an evil witch, demands a baby as ransom each year. The Elders are kind protectors of the people of the Cattail Kingdom. None of these things are true. Nothing is as it seems. Xan is a good witch who rescues the abandoned babies each year, feeds them starlight, and finds...
them happy homes with families on the far side of the forest. But one baby is just too special to give away. When Xan accidentally feeds her moonlight (powerful magic) instead of starlight, she names her Luna and keeps her in her own home. By the time she is 5 years old, Luna’s magical exuberance could put her in danger. Xan puts a protective spell on the child that suppresses her magic until she is 13 years old. Meanwhile, the baby’s mother, heartbroken and furious with the Elders for taking her baby, is locked away in the Tower and finds magical power of her own. Kelly Barnhill’s intricate tale explores the capacity of the human heart. In the event of seemingly unbearable sorrow, one has choices. Never underestimate the power of love! (JH)

**The Night Gardener**
Written and illustrated by Terry Fan and Eric Fan

“Something was happening on Grimloch Lane.” Someone was creating beautiful topiaries throughout the community. It began with an owl perched on a tree in front of the orphanage. Every morning, a new artistic representation appeared in the form of a cat, rabbit, parakeet, or elephant, with each topiary just as fabulous as the one before it. There was excitement in the air as these sculptures started to capture the imagination and hope of the community. William, a resident of the orphanage, was no exception. The Fan brothers bring William’s magical adventure with the Night Gardener to life through graphite illustrations colored digitally. The use of white space and color set the tone for each page of this story as readers learn more about the daily lives of the people who live on Grimloch Lane and share in the whimsical moments that brought them together. As the story unfolds, the reader learns how William has embraced a unique opportunity to keep the magic alive. (DPD)
**The Wild Robot**  
Written and illustrated by Peter Brown  

Have you ever wondered whether mankind would someday learn enough about physics and mechanics to build a robot that experienced “true” emotions? In his first novel for children, Peter Brown tells readers, “robots don’t really feel emotions. Not the way animals do” (p. 8). But, robots can certainly be programmed to develop deep connections, with feelings much like those of humans, and even the ability to understand all of the island’s inhabitants. When a ship loaded with worker robots goes down, only one box makes it to the island—the box carrying the robot Roz. Roz’s presence initially startles and disturbs the animals living on the island, and she struggles alone to learn how to survive. Eventually, she acclimates to her new life, finding ways to camouflage herself to match the natural habitat and communicating with all of the animals. When Roz adopts and forms a nurturing bond with a baby goose, questions about whether or not robots can really feel beg to be challenged. Readers are invited to live through Roz’s experience and to see her transformation from a stiff robot to a mother and community member. Brown’s increasingly dramatic grayscale illustrations perfectly complement the text. (DC)

**Worm Loves Worm**  
Written by J. J. Austrian  
Illustrated by Mike Curato  

What happens when two worms are in love and want to get married? J. J. Austrian’s *Worm Loves Worm* delights readers of all ages and invites them to experience lighthearted wedding obstacles with the lovesick worms as they plan for their wedding day. In this playful story, the Worms’ insect friends attempt to guide them as they approach the traditional events betrothed couples encounter. Confusion ensues when they confront the decisions they have to make along the way. Who will be the groom? Who will wear the dress? How will Worm and Worm wear their rings? How will they dance? Who will eat the cake? Austrian also provides readers a character who challenges the Worms’ willingness to be flexible in the name of love by saying, “That isn’t how it’s always been done!” This book is sure to encourage classroom discussion about how love and family take on many forms, dismantling the stereotypes of love. Themes

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of equality and inclusiveness are interwoven thoughtfully. Through Austrian’s developmentally appropriate, masterful story and Mike Curato’s colorful pencil and Photoshop illustrations, even the youngest reader can discover that all of the Worms’ hurdles are insignificant because Worm Loves Worm and Love Is Love. (SR)

Recommended Books

A Bandit’s Tale: The Muddled Misadventures of a Pickpocket
Written by Deborah Hopkinson

Deborah Hopkinson takes readers on a journey through the eyes of Rocco, a poor 11-year-old Italian boy whose family sells him to a greedy padrone in the late nineteenth century. Rocco is taken to New York City, where he becomes a street musician begging for pennies that the padrone steals from him. Finding it difficult to make money and avoid punishment, he falls in with a band of boys who teach him how to make a lot of money quickly by pickpocketing. Rocco begins to find himself, and his life takes a turn when he meets Meddlin’ Mary, a strong-willed girl and advocate for the horses of New York City. A “Note from the Author” section is full of photographs and facts about the time period. Readers will root for Rocco as he uses his wits in order to survive and find redemption. (SR)

Hoot and Peep
Written and illustrated by Lita Judge

“Listen to me, Peeps. I’m older. I know more.” Hoot is an owl, and he is also a big brother. His little sister Peep is finally old enough to join him on the rooftops, so Hoot is excited to share all of his “owly wisdom” with her. But Peep has her own way of looking at the world and likes doing things her own way. When the siblings become frustrated with each other and decide to go off on their own, they start to miss each other. Both Hoot and Peep discover that if they listen, they have a lot to learn from each other, and that together they can sing a perfect song. The blue night skies of Paris contrast against the bright yellow-orange of the owls, lending a sense of energy to the story. Readers will enjoy Hoot and Peep’s journey and the way that they each begin to see the world in new ways. (FS)
The Inquisitor’s Tale: Or, The Three Magical Children and Their Holy Dog
Written by Adam Gidwitz
Illustrated by Hatem Aly

The Inquisitor’s Tale is a captivating story about three extraordinary children on a mission for justice. Fate unites Jeanne, William, and Jacob in the French countryside under the most unusual of circumstances during the Middle Ages. An unlikely cast of patrons share the harrowing tales of these children as they gather at an inn for ale, food, and conversation. Gidwitz’s well-written story shows us what bravery, faith, loyalty, and honesty look like in bleak times and how friendship can provide a safe haven from bigotry, classism, and discrimination. Hatem Aly’s illustrations, in the manner of illuminated manuscripts, add delightful authenticity to the tale. (DPD)

Luis Paints the World
Written by Terry Farish
Illustrated by Oliver Dominguez

Luis’s brother, Nico, announces that he is leaving home to serve in the army. Like many young men who have grown up in working class, immigrant communities, Nico sees the military as a way out. But Luis, worried that his brother will never return, wonders why his brother can’t just “see the world from here.” Luis sets about trying to show Nico that there is beauty in their own backyard. In this thoughtfully written and illustrated book, Farish and Dominguez depict the fear, confusion, joy, and pride felt by military families during deployments. Luis turns to art in order to grapple with his feelings. He paints striking images in the alley behind the family’s house depicting memories of experiences he and his brother have shared. As the seasons change, so does the color pallette, and Luis’s artistic skill is displayed in exuberant paintings inspired by text messages Nico sends and by his safe return. (DC)

One Half from the East
Written by Nadia Hashimi

The setting for One Half from the East is modern Afghanistan, as seen through the eyes of 10-year-old Obayda. When her family’s way of life in Kabul is shattered by a bombing that takes her father’s leg, the family is forced to move to her father’s village to be looked after by Obayda’s
paternal uncle. There is money for only the most basic necessities. The solution that Obayda’s aunt proposes is the tradition of bacha posh. This allows a family with no sons to dress one of the daughters as a boy who can contribute to the family’s well-being. As the youngest daughter, Obayda becomes Obayd. She will remain in that role until she reaches puberty. The story is a profound exploration of gender roles in a culture that is so restrictive of women’s rights. But it is also a wonderful family story that should be shared with both boys and girls from all cultures. (BK)

enemy. When Jaguar Claw knew that he was nearly defeated, he sent a messenger to tell Izta that Popoca had been killed in battle and that a special potion would ease her grief. Izta drank the substance and fell into a deep sleep. When Popoca returned, victorious, he found Izta lifeless. He took her up the mountain to try to revive her with fresh air. Popoca kept his promise never to leave Izta, and they are still there today. Visitors to Mexico City can see them now as two nearby volcanoes. This Aztec legend is beautifully illustrated with hand drawings, filled in digitally. In the Mixtec tradition that Tonatiuh borrows from, both people and animals are presented in profile. This adds authenticity to the tale. (JH)

The Seventh Wish
Written by Kate Messner

So much is changing in Charlie’s life. Not only is her sister, Abby, leaving for college, Charlie has school projects and an upcoming Irish Dance competition to worry about. And lately, her mom has been preoccupied. When Charlie discovers a magical fish that will grant all of her wishes, she thinks she has found a solution to all of her problems. But sometimes wishes don’t turn out how you plan, and sometimes problems are bigger than a wish can fix. When Charlie’s family discovers Abby’s heroin addiction, the family must support Abby and each other. Messner tackles the important issue of addiction in a way that is accessible and appropriate for middle grade readers. (FS)
Wolf Hollow
Written by Lauren Wolk

Life changes for soon-to-be 12-year-old Anabelle when a city girl, Betty Glengarry, moves to her rural Pennsylvania town. It’s 1943, and as World War II rages overseas, Betty conducts a war of her own, targeting Anabelle. Witness to Betty’s bullying is Toby, a homeless World War I veteran who roams the woods beyond Annabelle’s family farm. What begins as extortion quickly escalates to violence. When Anabelle’s friend is seriously injured, Betty places the blame on Toby. Betty consequently goes missing, and the manhunt for Toby is on. Confident in Toby’s innocence, Anabelle becomes drawn into the controversy, sheltering Toby in her family’s barn. Told in memoir format, this work of historical fiction is searing and deeply thought provoking. Anabelle’s voice and actions are powerful, and the novel’s tragic conclusion invokes deep consideration of justice and morality. Readers will be deeply affected by the events of this complex story. (ETD)