

## **Picturing the Newberry: The Multimodal Grammar of the Newbery Medal**

In 1921, Hendrik Van Loon borrowed from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and opened his children's history book, *The Story of Mankind*, with this epigraph: "'What is the use of a book without pictures?' said Alice." Van Loon's history lives up to its epigraph, with an illustration occurring on nearly every page. In 1922, Van Loon went on to make history himself, becoming the first recipient of the newly established Newbery Medal. Subsequent decades have rendered the choice of Van Loon's extra-illustrated history ironic on a number of levels: the award is now known for favoring fiction and eschewing any consideration of illustration in selecting winners.

As Kenneth Kidd has argued, prizing performs important cultural work in defining conceptions of canonicity and aesthetic value in children's literature. Previous critics have noted that the Newbery Medal plays a crucial role in educating young readers in social, cultural, political, and socioeconomic realities. All of these critics point to the larger cultural work accomplished by the Newbery Medal and the generic implications that this work has for contemporary American children's literature, despite the Newbery committee's intention to reward and foster literary merit alone.

Working through the framework of visual semiotics and in conversation with theories of prizing, this paper will examine the role played by illustration in contributing to and constructing the generic conventions associated with the Newbery Medal. Following existing critical frames for analyzing illustrations in children's books, I will explore the following elements across a range of illustrated Newbery winners: presence and placement of illustrations; type of illustrations; content of illustrations and the relationship between illustrative and textual content; typographic elements used as illustration; choice of colors; and iconographic elements.

The illustrations in Newbery Medal winning texts are not, I argue, incidental or coincidental. Rather, they constitute a significant component of meaning that has been silenced by the Medal's insistence on the inconsequential nature of illustration in the award. The paper seeks to deconstruct the narrative silences around illustrations in Newbery Medal winning texts and to consider how this silence contributes to disciplining readers to privilege the linguistic mode.

