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## Prizing Children's Literature: The Case of Newbery Gold

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### Abstract

Using the John Newbery Medal as a case study, this essay examines the prizing of children's literature and its cultural discontents, focusing on the rise of "edubrow" culture and on the gradual shift away from traditional rhetorics of distinction and toward more pluralistic understandings of literary and cultural merit.

## *Prizing Children's Literature: The Case of Newbery Gold*

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Despite repeated criticisms of their efficacy—they “have a predictability for literature on about the level of crystal gazing or astrology,” complains Fred B. Millett in 1935<sup>1</sup>—literary prizes have mushroomed since the establishment of the Nobel Prizes in 1901 and especially since the 1960s. Literary prizing has been a remarkably effective mechanism for publicity, sales, and scandal, if not always for the production of Literature. Prizing, moreover, has middlebrow as well as highbrow features and effects; it encourages both the making and unmaking of canons, underwrites but also undercuts faith in popularity. So ubiquitous is cultural prizing more broadly that James English, in his recent study *The Economy of Prestige*, argues that the prize

is cultural practice in its quintessential contemporary form. The primary function it can be seen to serve—that of facilitating cultural “market transactions,” enabling the various individual and institutional agents of culture, with their different assets and interests and dispositions, to engage one another in a collective project of value production—is the project of cultural practice as such.<sup>2</sup> (26)

Prizes, English points out, are neither purely economic nor aesthetic, neither simply sacred nor profane. Moreover, prizing does not tend toward cultural saturation; rather, it generates what he calls a “logic of proliferation” within the relational field of culture. Each new prize makes possible yet another.<sup>3</sup>

While English's work is instructive, children's literature doesn't figure prominently in the analysis. In a discussion of pornography awards, English remarks that “[t]here are few fields of cultural consumption (children's literature is one) in which prizes have a more direct and powerful effect on sales” (97), and in a footnote points to the John Newbery Medal, the world's oldest prize for children's literature (1921) and the second major American literary prize to be established, just after the Pulitzers (1917).<sup>4</sup> This is a slight improvement upon Pierre Bourdieu, who begins his chapter on “cultural goodwill” in *Distinction* with a discussion of literary prizes but excludes children's books from



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