



The Majesty and Magic of Children's Literature

Meet JONDA C. MCNAIR

Having a diverse collection can support all students in finding titles that they can read and connect with on some level while affirming their own cultural identities and hopefully developing important positive insights about others. We all need mirrors and windows in the books that we read.

—Jonda C. McNair



LITERACY CHAMPION: JONDA C. MCNAIR

Jonda C. McNair is the Charlotte S. Huck Endowed Professor of Children's Literature. She specializes in literature intended for youth with an emphasis on books written by and about African Americans. She is a past chair of the Coretta Scott King Book Awards Committee and was a member of the 2019 Randolph Caldecott Award Selection Committee. Dr. McNair is currently serving as chair of the 2021 John Newbery Award Selection

Committee. She is also serving as a coeditor of *Language Arts*, the journal of the Elementary Section of the National Council of Teachers of English. Her work has appeared in journals such as *Review of Educational Research*, *The Reading Teacher*, *Language Arts*, *Young Children*, *The Journal of Negro Education*, and *Children's Literature in Education*. She is an active member of numerous professional organizations including the National Council of Teachers of English, the American Library Association, and the International Literacy Association. Dr. McNair is a former elementary school teacher of students in grades K-2.

One to Know: Learning to Love Children's Literature

Editor's Note: As children's literature expert Charlotte Huck once famously penned: "All that people have ever thought, done, or dreamed lies waiting to be discovered in a book." What informs children's literature? Life itself. Thus to study children's literature is to embark on a literary exploration of the human experience in all its many and varied dimensions. And perhaps the most enticing dimension is the one that lies beyond what we perceive as reality—

the world of symbolic thought. Michael Joseph, of the [Children's Literature Association](#), offers this cogent explanation:

While dreams, movies and television relentlessly envelop children in imaginative realities, reading often represents a child's first opportunity to reflect in a focused way on the means by which symbols are created, how symbolic thought is culturally effectuated and directed. When we study children's literature, regardless of the discipline in which we are situated, we grasp the many complex avenues through which society reflects on the operations of symbolic thought, and thus perhaps on the origins of being human.

Jonda C. McNair embodies the study of children's literature. Her research and writing reflects both the magic and majesty of children's literature; the range of human experience children's books represent; the invitation into the lives of others who may not look or think like the reader. And additionally—like the best of children's literature—it suggests and shapes what it means to embrace a life of the mind and imagination.

What to Do: Learn About Children's Literature Awards

If you're not familiar with children's literature, one way to initiate your exploration is to familiarize yourself with the awards that honor outstanding children's literature. There are numerous awards, each one with its own unique focus. Here is a sampling:

Newbery

Perhaps the best known of the various awards given to children's literature, the [Newbery Medal](#) was named for eighteenth-century British bookseller John Newbery. It is awarded annually by the Association for Library Service to Children, a division of the American Library Association, to the author of the most distinguished contribution to American literature for children.



Caldecott Medal

The [Caldecott Medal](#) was named in honor of nineteenth-century English illustrator Randolph Caldecott. It is awarded annually by the Association for Library Service to Children to the artist of the most distinguished American picture book for children.



Coretta Scott King Book Awards

Designed to commemorate the life and works of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and to honor Mrs. Coretta Scott King for her courage and determination to continue the work for peace, the [Coretta Scott King Book Awards](#) annually recognize outstanding books for young adults and children by African American authors and illustrators that reflect the African American experience. Further, the Award encourages the artistic expression of the black experience via literature and the graphic arts in biographical, social, and historical treatments by African American authors and illustrators.



Pura Belpré

This award is named after Pura Belpré, the first Latina librarian at the New York Public Library. The [Pura Belpré Award](#), established in 1996, is presented annually to a Latinx writer and illustrator whose work best portrays, affirms, and celebrates the Latinx cultural experience in an outstanding work of literature for children and youth. It is co-sponsored by the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC) and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA), divisions of the American Library Association (ALA), and REFORMA, the National Association to Promote Library and Information Services to Latinos and the Spanish-Speaking, an ALA affiliate.



Asian/Pacific American Award for Literature

The goal of the [Asian/Pacific American Award for Literature](#) is to honor and recognize individual work about Asian/Pacific Americans and their heritage, based on literary and artistic merit. Each award is named and given the award seal during the annual APALA Literature Award Ceremony. The winner of each category receives a plaque and a press release is sent to various national publications.



Charlotte Huck Award for Outstanding Fiction for Children

The [NCTE Charlotte Huck Award® for Outstanding Fiction for Children](#) was established in 2014 to promote and recognize excellence in the writing of fiction for children. This award recognizes fiction that has the potential to transform children's lives by inviting compassion, imagination, and wonder.



Orbis Pictus Award for Outstanding Nonfiction for Children

Established in 1989, [Orbis Pictus](#) is the oldest children's book award for nonfiction. The name *Orbis Pictus* commemorates the work of Johannes Amos Comenius: *Orbis Pictus—The World in Pictures* (1657), considered to be the first book actually planned for children.



Award for Excellence in Poetry for Children

NCTE established the [Award for Excellence in Poetry for Children](#) in 1977 to honor a living American poet for their aggregate work for children ages 3-13. NCTE also recognizes and fosters excellence in children's poetry by encouraging its publication and by exploring ways to acquaint teachers and children with poetry through such means as publications, programs, and displays.



American Indian Youth Literature Award

Awarded biennially, the [American Indian Youth Literature Award](#) identifies and honors the very best writing and illustrations by Native Americans and Indigenous peoples of North America. Books selected to receive the award present Indigenous North American peoples in the fullness of their humanity. Winners and Honor Books were selected in the categories Best Picture Book, Best Middle Grade Book, and Best Young Adult Book.



More to Know and Do

Follow our current scholars of children’s literature such as Dr. Jonda C. McNair; read published interviews <https://www.collaborativeclassroom.org/blog/interview-with-dr-jonda-mcnair/> with her and watch for opportunities to hear her speak in person.

We’ve represented only a sampling of children’s book awards; on your own, considering exploring other existing awards such as the Feng Zikai Children’s Book Award.

Feng Zikai Chinese Children’s Picture Book Award

Bring Me a Book Hong Kong works in close collaboration with our sister organization, [Feng Zikai Chinese Children’s Picture Book Award](#), to encourage original and high-quality Chinese children’s picture books. The Biennial Award and Forum was established by The Chen Yet-Sen Family Foundation, with family members Daisy Chen and the founders of BMABHK—James and Su Chen. Together, we bring the power of our networks and expertise in literacy to promote quality children’s literature and parent-child reading, as well as establishing children’s libraries, to ensure the children of Hong Kong have the best start in life through a love of reading.



And More!

- [Ezra Jack Keats Award](#)
- [Jane Addams Award](#)
- [Rainbow Project Books](#)
- [Schnieder Family Book Award](#)
- [The Sydney Taylor Book Award](#)
- [Scott O'Dell Award](#)

See also

McNair, Jonda C. (2010). Classic African American Children’s Literature. *The Reading Teacher*, International Reading Association. 64(2), pp. 96–105

McNair, Jonda C. (2016). #WeNeedMirrorsAndWindows: Diverse Classroom Libraries for K–6 Students. *The Reading Teacher*. International Reading Association. Vol. 70 No. 3 November/December .

