

# YES, THEY CAN AND THEY DID: Before They Were Famous

By Teri Lesesne, Karin Perry, and Donalyn Miller




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As avid readers, each of us is quick to share new books with one another and with our fellow book lovers. Review journals, columns, and other book media tout the latest and greatest offerings. However, there is a need to remember the past, our past as readers and as educators. And so we set out to pull together books from the past that link to the present. We wanted to remind participants that while there are wonderful new books, there are also older books, classics, that need to be shared with a new generation of readers.

#### Abstract

Everyone loves new books. However, it is easy to forget that we need to examine books historically as well. This article discusses the contributions made by various authors before they were the recipients of awards and honors. Additionally, the authors point out some important “firsts” in the industry as well as resources for locating books, award information, and historic texts.

*Keywords:* Reading, diversity, awards, authors, resources

Quick, name the motion picture that won the Oscar in 2012. What song won Song of the Year at the Grammys in 2009? It is an easy matter to forget the achievements of the past. But if we asked you to name artists who have received lifetime recognition from the Academy or the Oscars, we wager those names might be easier to recall.

When it comes to children’s and young adult literature (YA), there is often a much longer history. The authors and books we come to know and love do not simply materialize one year and then fade into the woodwork. They are a result of the time and the talent of gifted and dedicated artists. So when the theme for TCTELA’s 2016 conference was announced, we knew immediately what we wanted to make our focus. “Yes, they can and they DID” was a perfect way for us to highlight those books and authors from the past who continue to resonate with a new generation of readers.

As avid readers, each of us is quick to share new books with one another and with our fellow book lovers. Review journals,

columns, and other book media tout the latest and greatest offerings. However, there is a need to remember the past, our past as readers and as educators. And so we set out to pull together books from the past that link to the present. We wanted to remind participants that while there are wonderful new books, there are also older books, classics, that need to be shared with a new generation of readers. (You can access the presentation slides here: <http://www.slideshare.net/karinlibrarian> and <http://www.slideshare.net/professornana>.)

We wanted to focus on some authors of books for children, tweens, and teens who have a rather long history in publishing books. It is important to remember that a “generation” for a book intended for young readers could be as short as five years. Think of how quickly young readers move from picture books to easy readers to chapter books and on to novels. In the case of middle and high school readers, the span of a “generation” could be even shorter. So, when we highlight the work of authors, some of whom have been writing for decades, we are indeed going back several generations. Consider this: Most of us read the Harry Potter books as adults. We read them a book at a time as they were published. However, Teri’s youngest granddaughter read all seven of them back to back because they were all published by the time she had reached the stage where she wanted to read them (and as a side note, this same granddaughter rereads all seven volumes each year and has worn out so many copies with the repeated rereadings).

#### Blasts From the Past

One of the first authors included in our discussion was Richard Peck. Younger educators and their students might not know that Peck began his writing in the YA arena with books such as *Father Figure* (1978), *Are You in the House Alone?* (1967), and *Don’t Look and It Won’t Hurt* (1972) before winning a Newbery Medal for *A Long Way From Chicago* (2000). Peck has written for younger readers in *Secrets at Sea* (2011) and the Blossom Culp books. He has taken readers to different periods of time in history in *The Teacher’s Funeral* (2006), *On the Wings of Heroes* (2008), and *The River Between Us* (2005). Surely, Peck is one of those authors whose work, spanning almost half a century, deserves generation after generation of readers.

This is true for quite a few authors. Neal Shusterman won the National Book Award for Young People’s Literature in 2016 for *Challenger Deep* (2015). However, some of Shusterman’s earlier works were science fiction fantasy titles. Readers who fell in love with the dark complexity of *Challenger Deep* should be encouraged to go back and read *The Eyes of Kid Midas* (2009), *Unwind* (2009), and *The Dark Fusion* series (2009), which provide fresh takes on classic fairy tales such as “Little Red Riding Hood” and “The Ugly Duckling.” And we can connect readers who love Rick Riordan’s Percy Jackson books to Shusterman’s *Dreadlocks* (2005), his take on a contemporary Medusa story. John Green and Jacqueline Woodson have received multiple awards and honors for their books. We want to ensure that readers (and educators) have read as many of the titles by these talented folks as possible. Ditto for the work of Jon Klassen and Mo Willems.

Holly Black, the author of the 2014 Newbery Honor book *Doll Bones* and the young adult standalone fantasies *The Coldest Girl in Coldtown* (2013) and *The Darkest Part of the Forest* (2015), broke into the young adult world with the 2002 Simon & Schuster publication of *Tithe*, the first of the Modern Faerie Tales trilogy. These stories are raw, edgy, and gritty. Another lesser known work of Black's include her GRAPHIX graphic novel trilogy, *The Good Neighbors* (2008). These stories also revolve around faerie lore.

How many of you had students who loved (or maybe you yourself loved) the Animorphs series? Well, the author K. A. Applegate is none other than the Newbery Award-Winning author, Katherine Applegate (2013 for *The One and Only Ivan*). Her husband, author Michael Grant, known for the *Gone* series, was her co-author for this 54-book series.

Not all of today's popular authors have been award winners, though. There are many who have published books for years without the recognition of a medal of any kind. These authors have their humble starts and lesser-known works as well, just like the authors mentioned above. For instance, Maggie Stiefvater, author of the popular Raven Cycle series, published several books before the series made such a splash. In 2008, *Lament*, a Celtic faerie lore romance, was published by Flux, an imprint of Llewellyn Worldwide. The original cover wasn't attractive at all and you could tell it came from a smaller press. Eventually, the popularity increased and it received a cover update as well as a sequel, *Ballad*, released in 2009.

When you hear the name Suzanne Collins, what do you think? We bet most people would say *Hunger Games*. Yes, she is the author of the wildly popular trilogy that has made an amazing amount

of money at the box office with its four films, but Katniss isn't her only strong character. In 2003, Scholastic published the first of the five book Underland Chronicles series, *Gregor the Overlander*. These five books are geared to middle school readers, but any reader who enjoys adventure and fantasy will find something to like about these books.

One of Karin's favorite children's series is Margaret Peterson Haddix's Shadow Children series. This seven book series started in 1998 with *Among the Hidden* (1998). Another series that is extremely popular for this author is The Missing series. This series starts with *Found* (2008). However, she has many other excellent books that are overlooked. Be sure to track down *Running Out of Time* (1995), *Turnabout* (2000), *Don't You Dare Read This, Mrs. Dunphrey* (1996), and *Leaving Fishers* (1997).

Gordon Korman has been publishing books for a very long time. I mean it—he actually wrote his first book as an assignment for class when he was 12. He sent it to Scholastic and *This Can't Be Happening at Macdonald Hall* (1977) was published when he was 14. Before he graduated high school, Korman had published five books. It's not hard to miss some of his titles when he has written over 85 books over three decades. Books he's known for now include *No More Dead Dogs* (2000) and the Swindle series (2008), but titles you should definitely familiarize yourself with if you haven't already are *Schooled* (2007), *Son of the Mob* (2002), and *Born to Rock* (2006). Korman has also written many adventure series for Scholastic.

Take a look at Table 1 to find more “before they were famous” reading suggestions. Of course, there are going to be authors/titles we left out, but we had to stop somewhere. Add your own titles

Table 1  
Authors and Their Works

Author:	Known For:	Early Work:
Ricky Yancey	<i>The 5th Wave</i> (G.P. Putnam's Sons Books for Young Readers, 2013)	<i>Monstrumologist</i> (Simon & Schuster, 2009) and <i>The Extraordinary Adventures of Alfred Kropp</i> (Bloomsbury, 2005)
Jane Yolen	<i>Owl Moon</i> (Philomel Books, 1987) and <i>How Do Dinosaurs...?</i> Series (The Blue Sky Press, 2000)	The Pit Dragon series (Magic Carpet Harcourt, 1982), <i>The Devil's Arithmetic</i> (Philomel Book, 1988), <i>Briar Rose</i> (Tor Teen, 1988), and <i>Foiled</i> (First Second, 2010)
Scott Westerfeld	<i>Uglies</i> (Simon Pulse, 2005)	The Midnighter's Series (HarperTeen, 2004)
Steve Sheinkin	<i>Bomb</i> (Flash Point, 2012)	<i>The Notorious Benedict Arnold</i> (Flash Point, 2010) and <i>King George: What Was His Problem?</i> (Flash Point, 2005)
Laurie Halse Anderson	<i>Speak</i> (Puffin, 1999)	Vet Volunteers series (American Girl Publishing, 2000), <i>Fever 1793</i> (Aladdin, 2000), <i>Catalyst</i> (Viking, 2002), and <i>Twisted</i> (Viking, 2007)
Markus Zusack	<i>The Book Thief</i> (Knopf, 2005)	The Wolfe Brothers series (Ravensburger Buchverlag, 1999) and <i>I Am the Messenger</i> (Knopf, 2002)
Mary E. Pearson	The Remnant Chronicles (Henry Holt, 2014)	The Jenna Fox Chronicles (Henry Holt, 2008)
Meg Cabot	The Princess Diaries (HarperTeen, 2000)	The Mediator series (Simon Pulse, 2000) and 1-800-Where-Are-You series (Simon Pulse, 2001), both originally published under the name Jenny Carroll

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The old phrase, “So many books, so little time,” still holds true. We need to find ways to read as widely as we can, but also we need to read as wisely as we can. Considering awards, lists, social media can make us all wiser readers. Knowing the history of the field of literature for children, tweens, and teens makes us wiser too. Yes, YOU can!

and keep a running list to use during reader’s advisory when you have students asking for reading suggestions. Your librarian will thank you for breathing life into some of the books that haven’t received action for a while.

### Important Firsts

Part of knowing the history of publishing for children, tweens, and teens is being aware of those landmark events, awards, and books. When Matt de la Peña won the Newbery Award for his picture book *Last Stop on Market Street* (2015), there were many surprised reactions. Was it even possible for a picture book to win a Newbery (yes, the criteria does include books for readers; see <http://www.ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/bookmedia/newberymedal/newberyterms/newberyterms>). Has the award ever gone to a picture book before? Not really. There have been several honor medals for picture books in the past, but this was the first time the Newbery Medal in all of its gold goodness had been awarded to a picture book. Word ran quickly that de la Peña was the first Hispanic to win this award. That is not true, though few were aware that Paula Fox, who won the Newbery Medal for *The Slave Dancer* in 1974 was the daughter of a Cuban mother (and a little inside secret about Fox—she is the grandmother of Courtney Love). The first Hispanic to win the Caldecott Medal was David Diaz, in 1995, for his illustrations for Eve Bunting’s (1994) *Smoky Night*. There are other firsts. The first person to win a Printz and a Morris Award from YALSA was John Corey Whaley for *When Things Come Back* (2011). In essence, this means Whaley won for best debut novel and for most distinguished literature for young adults. Whaley’s second novel, *Noggin* (2014), was a finalist for the National Book Award later. Perhaps this is an author to watch?

Other firsts of note (while we have you): Virginia Hamilton was the first African American to win a Newbery Award. *American Born Chinese* (Yang, 2006) was the first graphic novel to win the Printz Medal. And Joan Bauer won the Delacorte Press Prize for her first novel, *Squashed* (2005). She later won a Newbery Honor Medal for *Hope Was Here* (2005).

### Finding New Talent

So, how does an educator winnow books to read from the more than 6,000 books published annually for young readers? We all—Teri, Karin, and Donalyn—read hundreds of books each year, but we realize we are barely scraping from the tip of the iceberg, let alone getting down to the depths. We rely on some important resources. Awards and lists are our top go-to resources. Additionally, we consult with colleagues through social media. What we want to highlight here, though, are not the standard awards. We believe many are familiar with the Newbery, Caldecott, Printz, and King. However, there are some awards, perhaps lesser known, and some that are relatively new and, therefore, unknown. Although the Pura Belpre Award is not the most recent award, it is one we find many do not know. The Belpre Award (see <http://www.ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/bookmedia/belpremedal>) honors the work of Hispanic authors and illustrators of books for children, tweens, and teens. It is administered by Association for Library Services to Children (ALSC), the division of ALA dedicated to services or children and REFORMA, an ALA affiliate dedicated to services for Spanish speaking library patrons. The Belpre Award can be key as educators strive to add diverse titles to their collections.

Ezra Jack Keats demonstrated his commitment to diversity in children’s books decades ago with the publication of books such as *The Snowy Day* (1962) and *Peter’s Chair* (1967/1998). The Keats Foundation (see [www.ezra-jack-keats.org/section/about-us/](http://www.ezra-jack-keats.org/section/about-us/)) administers the Ezra Jack Keats Award and recognizes new talent in the field of literature for children. Locating authors and illustrators whose early work is distinguished brings new voices to the book collection. Another brand new award (2017 is the first year it will be awarded) is the Walter Award (see <http://weneeddiversebooks.org/walter-award-faq/>). Named to honor the work of Walter Dean Myers, this award recognizes a diverse YA author writing about diversity. Both of these awards can assist educators in identifying a handful of books out of those more than 6,000 that should be shared with readers.

In addition to awards, lists offer another good resource for educators wanting to keep abreast of quality new books to share with students. In addition to the lists from the American Library Association, those award lists announced in January (see [www.ala.org/alsc/2016-alsc-book-media-award-winners](http://www.ala.org/alsc/2016-alsc-book-media-award-winners)), other professional organizations develop and publish lists. The Children’s Book Council (see <http://www.cbcbooks.org>) offers a variety of lists including Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People, Outstanding Science Trade Books, and Mathical. These content area lists are created with the work of the National Council for the Social Studies, the National Science Teachers Association, and the Mathematical Sciences Research Institute. Other lists are available through the Children’s Book Council: Diverse Kids and YA Lit, Children’s Choices, and Hot off the Press Showcase of new books.

The National Council of Teachers of English also honors books with awards and selection lists (see [www.ncte.org/awards](http://www.ncte.org/awards)). The Orbis Pictus Award recognizes excellence in nonfiction for young readers. Given the increased importance of nonfiction in

Table 2  
Twitter Starter Pack

Name	Twitter Name (use @)
Gretchen Colderup	librarified
Buffy Hamilton	buffyjhamilton
Jennifer Lagarde	jenniferlagarde
Karyn Silverman	infowitch
Jennifer Hubert-Swan	readingrants
Beth Saxton	bethreads
Sarah Couri	scouri
Erin Downey Howerton	hybridlib
Liz Burns	lizb
Melissa Rabey	mrabey
Kathy Ishikuza	kishikuza
Teri Lesesne	professornana
Sophie Brookover	sophiebiblio
Linda Braun	lbraun2000
Joyce Valenza	joycevalenza
Monica Edinger	medinger
Angie Manfredi	misskubelik
Justin Hoenke	justinlibrarian
Patrick Ness	Patrick_Ness
YALSA	yalsa
Beth Frieze	librarybeth
Neil Gaiman	neilhimself
Kirkus	kirkusreviews
ALAN	ALANorg
Pew Research	pewresearch
Kelly Milner Halls	KellyMilnerH
Anita Silvey	anitasilvey
School Library Journal	sljournal
Jen Rogers Bigheart	jenbigheart
Tammy Blackwell	Miss_Tammy
John Green	realjohngreen
Roger Sutton	rogerreads
The Horn Book	hbook
Betsy Bird	fusenumber8
Diane Ravitch	dianeravitch
Brian Selznick	brianselznick
Books on Tape/Listening Library	BOTLibrary
Amy Alessio	amyalesio
Joanna Axelrod	textinglibrarian
Karin Perry	kperry
Donalyn Miller	donalynbooks
Paul Hankins	paulwhankins
John Shoemaker	mrschureads
Colby Sharp	colbysharp
Ebony Elizabeth	Ebonyteach
Debbie Reese	debreese
MacMillan publishers	MacKidsBooks
Penguin Random House	penguinrandom
Scholastic	scholastic
Travis Jonkers	100scopenotes
Kylene Beers	kylenebeers
Katherine Sokolowski	katsok

curriculum, this list of winners and honor books is one that could well help guide acquisition of new books to add to our collections. The Charlotte Huck Award focuses on fictional books. The award recognizing poetry honors the lifetime work of individual poets writing for children. Finally, the Notable Children's Trade Books in the Language Arts offers selections that will enrich the reading lives of our students.

The International Literacy Association (ILA; formerly the International Reading Association: see [www.literacyworldwide.org](http://www.literacyworldwide.org)) coordinates the annual choices lists. The Children's Choices List, co-sponsored by the Children's Book Council, identifies outstanding books for beginning, young, and advanced readers and spans pre-kindergarten to grade 8. The Young Adult Choices list targets teen reading. In both cases, the books on the final lists are ones that children and teens have voted for nationwide. The third list from ILA is Teachers' Choices, a list of books acknowledged by educators as having value within the curriculum. Current and past lists are all available at the ILA website.

In addition to awards and selection lists, social media plays a significant role in identifying books to add to our TBR (to be read) stacks. Donalyn is one of the founding members of the Nerdy Book Club (see <https://nerdybookclub.wordpress.com>). Each day, blog posts at Nerdy Book Club discuss books and reading and kids. New books, books on a theme, instructional strategies, and more can be found there. Twitter offers opportunities to connect to books. Hashtags such as #bookaday, #IMWAYR (it's Monday what are you reading?) and chats like #titledtalk on the final Sunday of each month at 7 PM CST present titles that might help winnow down what to read next. Once educators have been part of Twitter for a while, they will begin to identify people they should follow for book recommendations too. A few years ago, Sophie Brookover and Teri created a Twitter Starter Pack to help (see Table 2). Facebook has many people to follow as well. Educators could begin by following some of the people from Table 1, as many are also on Facebook. We often extend the people we follow by looking at comments made on the posts of people we already know. Social media extends beyond these platforms, of course, to include blogs, websites (Goodreads, Library Thing, and Shelfari come immediately to mind), and podcasts. Recently, Karin and Teri began a new venture with their own YouTube channel: Professors Providing Professional Development (see [www.youtube.com/channel/UCSaYxexQmxa8ECTkGO7TfOg](http://www.youtube.com/channel/UCSaYxexQmxa8ECTkGO7TfOg)). We post videos each week. Some of the videos are booktalks on recent books for children, tweens, and teens.

### Finally

The old phrase "So many books, so little time" still holds true. We need to find ways to read as widely as we can, but also we need to read as wisely as we can. Considering awards, lists, social media can make us all wiser readers. Knowing the history of the field of literature for children, tweens, and teens makes us wiser too. Yes, YOU can!

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