

The People Behind the Medal

John Newbery, Frederic G. Melcher, and Clara Whitehill Hunt

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In 1918, an idealistic forty-year-old bookseller from New England named Frederic G. Melcher arrived in New York to begin a new phase of his career as managing editor of *The Publishers' Weekly* (*PW*), the publishing trade journal of record.

Melcher was not just a genial and dedicated bookman but also a tenacious industry advocate and an institution-builder of wide-ranging vision. Melcher always seemed to have energy to burn. During his early years at the magazine, he also served as secretary of the American Booksellers Association (1918-1920), co-founded Children's Book Week (1919), and in 1920 helped lay plans for the National Association of Book Publishers, where he acted as that organization's first executive secretary (1920-1924).

Over the course of a densely packed four-decades-long tenure at *PW*, Melcher vigorously opposed censorship, championed copyright reform, consulted on the post-war revival of the Japanese publishing industry, advised the White House library, helped to formulate an array of American publishing best practices, and more. No cause, however, was closer to his heart than the promotion of children's books and the work of the people behind them. It was not only that Melcher

happened to love the genre and be a student of its history. (He collected Randolph Caldecott first editions and, for fun, printed facsimile editions of early American children's chapbooks.) He believed that a democracy required a literate citizenry and that ready access to books for young people was one of the keys to building a nation of readers.

In his *PW* editorials and countless articles and speeches, he drove home the point that far from being a quaint or second-rung cultural activity, children's librarianship and publishing were worthy callings that directly advanced the national interest.

Melcher appeared on the scene just as an unprecedented new structure for creating and disseminating high-quality books for young readers was taking shape on a national scale. First had come the advent of children's librarianship as a profession and the introduction of children's reading rooms in Carnegie libraries across America.

Then, in response to these developments, publishers established the world's first editorial departments dedicated to the genre. Children's Book Week further elaborated the structure



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by opening the circle of stakeholders to parents and community leaders as well as librarians and publishers.

In June 1921, Melcher traveled to Swampscott, MA, to attend his first American Library Association (ALA) summer conference, and in prepared remarks for members of the Children's Librarians' Section shared his enthusiasm for the young venture he proudly called "Children's Book Week—A National Movement." He ticked off an impressive list of groups committed to rallying around the Book Week flag—women's clubs, the Boy Scouts, church leaders, state library commissions, magazine publishers, movie theater managers, state and county fair organizers, and more.¹

To ensure that all these grassroots contributors' efforts had the desired impact, he added that librarians and other professionals should take the lead in making sure that only books that met the highest critical standards be highlighted.

The next speaker on the program, Brooklyn Public Library's Clara Whitehill Hunt, picked up on Melcher's theme, urging her colleagues to hone their critical skills and embrace Book Week as a windfall chance to educate the public. She admonished her listeners not to take their responsibilities lightly. "It may seem curious," she said, "to reiterate, in this audience, that a child's books have a powerful influence upon him and that we should be tremendously careful upon what books we put the stamp of our approval."²

Hunt speculated that the torrent of publicity being generated around Book Week—the sheer volume of which had greatly surprised her at first—held the potential to permanently alter the librarians' status, either for good or ill. "We children's librarians hitherto have doubtless been looked upon, outside of our profession at any rate, as too weak and unimportant a body to be noticed. Probably if the book-trade has thought about us at all it has thought with some contempt of our large aspirations and our feeble accomplishments."³

What, though, if the glare of unaccustomed public attention attracted unwelcome pressure from publishers for librarians to purchase the most popular books rather than the truly



This 1926 photo pictures, from left, Fenton J. Newbery, Arthur Bowie Chrisman, Newbery chair Nina Brotherton, and Frederic G. Melcher. (Fenton was the great-great grandson of John Newbery)



Carl Cannon (left), president of the New York State Library Association, Frederic G. Melcher (right), and Charles J. Finger, winner of the 1924 Newbery Medal for *Courageous Companions*, a story based on Magellan's voyage around the world. The photograph was taken in the Circulating Room of the New York Public Library.

excellent ones? Were librarians up to the task of defending their standards and holding their ground? If not, said Hunt, woe to their profession!

But if on the other hand the answer was yes, Hunt foresaw a bright future indeed in which, powered by the mighty

Book Week publicity juggernaut, every children's librarian in America might one day act as a "force for good . . . felt to the remotest corner of her community."⁴

Hunt's words electrified the audience, and the next day Melcher asked to address section members again to present a bold idea for strengthening the librarians' hand that had occurred to him overnight. What better way for children's librarians to make their standards known than by conferring an annual award for literary excellence, a kind of Pulitzer Prize for children's literature? Melcher had already picked out a name for it—the John Newbery Medal, in honor of the eighteenth-century Londoner widely thought to be "the first publisher or bookseller to give specific attention to the reading interests of children."⁵ He set the ambitious goal of awarding the first Newbery Medal at the next year's summer conference in Detroit. The audience roared its approval.

Every award has its own dynamics, and Melcher immediately saw that the Newbery would need to be kept free of any hint of commercial bias if it was to establish its credibility. That ruled him out—a high-profile publishing executive and former bookseller—as the public face of the award, and he was quite content from that point onward to hover in the background as an adviser on perpetual call. On June 24, Clara Hunt won election as in-coming chair of the Children's Librarians' Section, a post she had previously held in 1904 and 1905, and thereby acceded to the leadership role in the Newbery planning effort.⁶

Hunt by then had been the superintendent of the Brooklyn Public Library's children's department for nearly two decades, having joined the library as department head at its founding in 1903. She was respected for her strong management skills and as the innovator who in 1914 had taken a personal hand in the design of the world's first free-standing, children's-only library, the oasis-like Brownsville branch.

As a critic, she zealously defended the moral high ground, never tiring of making the case against lax standards for children's reading fare. Writing in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Hunt declared with her trademark fervor, "A long continued diet of mediocre reading will weaken a child's mental powers and ruin his appetite for good books. . . . The child allowed to indulge in the cheap series habit becomes a sort of psychological dope fiend. . . . Of course, some strong-brained children break free away from a trash reading period, just as they emerge unhurt from the diseases of childhood."⁷

Hunt's successor, Irene Smith Green, would recall her as "a person apart, a power absolute. She was unacquainted with compromise, implacably fair, idealistic, the unshakeable arbiter of right and wrong in a world of shifting values."⁸

Melcher and Hunt consulted from time to time as the committee drafted the Newbery selection guidelines. That September, he offered to raise the money needed to pay for the design and production of the medal. (Melcher added that he had no idea

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what the bill might come to; in the end, he covered the entire cost himself.) He predicted—quite accurately—that whatever the guidelines adopted, no more than six books would emerge as contenders.

As a practical matter, Melcher recommended that eligibility be limited to books "published in the United States during the calendar year. Otherwise, voters might not feel informed to judge of books printed in other countries which they had not had reasonable opportunity to see, and few books in foreign languages get over here in sufficient quantity to be considered."⁹

Balancing inclusion against expertise, Hunt and her colleagues opted to invite anyone engaged in at least part-time work with children—a standard met by nearly five hundred librarians in 1921—to nominate a book in the initial round.

"To give everyone this chance," she wrote to the committee's vice-chairwoman, the Cincinnati Public Library's E. Gertrude Avey, "will create interest and induce good feeling."¹⁰ Hunt, however, was not willing to leave the ultimate decision to majority rule. "It is most important that the final judges of the award be a few of the people of recognized high standards and experience. If a majority vote of all so-called children's librarians determines the award it is entirely possible for a mediocre book to get the medal."¹¹

As it turned out, the 163 librarians who submitted their choices voted so overwhelmingly in favor of the same title—Hendrik Willem van Loon's *The Story of Mankind*—that a second, expert round was unnecessary.

In December, Hunt sent Melcher a draft of the planned press materials. He replied by asking that his name be featured less prominently and with the news that he was in conversation with a sculptor about the medal design. Melcher reported having told the young, New York-based sculptor, René Paul

Chambellan, that the allegorical message he wished the medal to convey was “genius giving of its best to the child.”¹²

The central standing figure in modern dress featured in Chambellan’s heroic design was thus meant to represent “literary genius” and not John Newbery the man, doubtless a source of confusion, to some, over the years. Had Newbery himself been the subject, the scene on the obverse of the medal might have been a good deal livelier, as the London bookman whom Melcher had chosen to memorialize was so well known in his time for his ebullient manner and aggressive business practices that his good friend, Samuel Johnson, writing in *The Idler*, had dubbed him “Jack Whirler.”¹³

Newbery operated at the very center of eighteenth-century literary London. Oliver Goldsmith and Johnson himself were writers on his list. Tobias Smollett, author of *The Adventures of Roderick Random*, and the star-crossed visionary poet Christopher Smart both made ends meet by working in his shop. Although children’s books were not his sole specialty, Newbery approached the fledgling juvenile trade with uncommon seriousness and in a spirit of innovation, building a substantial list of affordable, illustrated books that exemplified John Locke’s far-sighted vision for the genre by placing delight on an equal footing with instruction and, in the little books’ overall conception, by always taking the child’s natural capabilities into account.

It is ironic that the flesh-and-blood namesake of an award launched as an antidote to commercialism boosted his own bottom line not only by selling a popular Georgian remedy called Dr. James’s Fever Powder at his shop but also by planting ads for the miracle cure in the pages of his children’s books. Even so, English historian Harvey Darton, in his magisterial *Children’s Books in England* (1932), came unreservedly to the conclusion that the originality and extent of Newbery’s contributions combined to “wholly justify the claim that Johnson’s Jack Whirler was in fact the first genuine ‘children’s publisher.’” Darton noted a further irony—thanks to the prestige surrounding the American medal, John Newbery’s legacy had come to be “perhaps more treasured in the States” than by his own countrymen.¹⁴

Sure enough, the memorial plaque erected in 1978 near the site of Newbery’s shop, “At the sign of the Bible and Sun” in St. Paul’s Churchyard, was paid for by the Pennsylvania Library Association.

In the end, Hunt’s committee reformulated Melcher’s suggested eligibility criteria to include any child-appropriate

book of the previous calendar year written by an American citizen or resident. A few years earlier, the organizers of the Pulitzer Prize for literature had set the even narrower requirement of US citizenship. In both instances, the nationalistic focus suited a time when America’s industrial and military

might was dramatically on the rise, but American culture remained the stepchild of Europe. For librarians, Melcher, and for many of their contemporaries, naming the Newbery for an Englishman while reserving the honor for an American seemed a purposeful way to honor the past and build for the future.

Days ahead of the start on June 26 of the 1922 ALA summer conference, plans for the presentation of the first Newbery Medal had yet to be finalized. Before leaving for Detroit, Melcher wrote Clara Hunt to feel her out about the situation and to offer another sound piece of advice. “It would seem to me,” he said, “that, if I am to be part of the ceremony, as seems to be suggested by the convention program, the process should be that I would turn over to you, as Chairman of the Children’s Section, the Medal as a continuing and permanent institution, and then you would present it

as this year’s award to the winner.”¹⁵

The rather austere ceremony, on the afternoon of June 27, was tacked on to the end of the first Children’s Section meeting. Following the announcement of the winner, a secret held in strictest confidence until that moment, the symbolic handoff of the medal—Melcher to Hunt to van Loon—was carried out more or less exactly as Melcher had envisioned it. During the brief interval when it was Hunt’s turn to hold the bronze medallion, she turned to Melcher to offer him a public statement of thanks. “I would I had the ability to express adequately the gratitude which we children’s librarians feel for the inspiration which prompted you to make this gift to the cause we love. . . . We feel strong and powerful because you believe in us and are putting in our hands a weapon, one of the most potent of our times—publicity of the best kind.”¹⁶

Melcher modestly kept his silence, but a month later was back at his old stand promoting Children’s Book Week in the pages of *PW*. He urged readers to think of the publicity generated by that observance as a contribution to something far more fundamental than increased book sales at holiday time. Engaging the public’s interest also served the larger goal of fostering the creation for America’s children of a worthy literature of their own. Now the second annual burst of excitement produced the Newbery Medal would further accelerate the process.

As Melcher explained: “We should not forget that by creating a greater audience, we are also creating literature itself, for the

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creator of literature is drawn out by the appreciation of literature, the author needs the audience as much as the audience needs the author."¹⁷ &

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