

# Local librarian helps select nationwide children's book winner

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By Deborah Scannell\*

What does a librarian from the Forks and Clallam Bay branches of the North Olympic Library System (NOLS) have to do with the book honored with this year's Newbery Medal? The story begins in 2021 when Youth Services Librarian, Kristine Techavanich, was notified that she had been elected to serve on the next Newbery Award Selection Committee. Named for John Newbery, an 18th-century publisher, the 101-year-old Newbery Medal recognizes a single book from the previous year, which stands out as "the most distinguished contribution to American Literature for Children." It is given by the Association for Library Service to Children, a division of the American Library Association. Other books are also awarded Honors, a category for noteworthy contenders.

As one of only 15 selection committee members from around the country, Kristine spent all of 2022 reviewing, reading and re-reading countless books for readers through the middle grades. During the course of the year, she was sent boxes and boxes of books from publishers. No full-time librarian has the time to thoughtfully consider so many books on the job; this was an all-volunteer responsibility, a labor of love, to start and finish her days at home!

Though every committee has its own nominating process, Kristine and her peers had frequent virtual communication. They had been asked to look for qualities that make a book "individually distinct," considering theme, plot development, characters, setting and appropriateness of style. Kristine also sought the opinion of other passionate readers of children's literature, including children themselves. October through December were the most intense months, with each member ultimately nominating seven books.

In discussing the nominated titles, the committee deliberated in closed meetings through Zoom. Kristine found she "loved the candor and vast perspectives committee members respectfully offered during these meetings." The final deliberations were held in person at the LibLearnX conference in New Orleans this last January. Kristine was funded by NOLS and a travel grant from the Asian/Pacific American Librarians Association. The day-long proceedings were kept strictly confidential.

It is a remarkable testament to women's often-understated achievements in history that three-quarters of all authors who have been recognized with a Newbery Medal have been women. All four of this year's Medal and Honor awards went to women of color. These were announced at the Youth Media Awards on January 30. It is also remarkable that a Youth Librarian representing our remote communities should be nominated and chosen to serve on the Newbery Award Selection Committee, and to be an integral part of that emotional ceremony.

Kristine's pathway to becoming a Youth Services Librarian began while volunteering at a public library. "As a Thai-American reader growing up in rural Georgia, I didn't see myself or my experiences represented in books," she shared, but there she was inspired by a mentor who created a space where every child felt welcome and a sense of belonging. Some progress has been made, but it has been slow. According to 2020 statistics from the Cooperative Children's Book Center, only 30% of children's books are written about racially diverse characters or subjects.

"This past year has been a whirlwind of moving across the country, starting a new job, and reading like I've never read before for the incredible opportunity of serving on the Newbery Award Selection Committee. What I have learned from each of the committee members, from their dedication and passion for children's literature, has been invaluable and I'm grateful for the support I've been fortunate to receive. While serving on the committee has been an unforgettable experience, I'm most excited for these books to be shared widely with children," said Kristine.

Some of the many books that Kristine received from publishers for consideration of the Newbery Medal will be added to the NOLS collection, but others will be given away to participants of the Summer Reading Program. The reading challenge and activities offered in this fun program aim to engage young people and families to help prevent the "summer slide" decline in reading ability, and build a lifelong love of reading.

The 2023 Newbery Medal went to "Freewater." Written by Amina Luqman-Dawson, it is her debut into Children's Literature and a compelling read about the freedom of formerly enslaved people forming a joyous and thriving society. The three Newbery Honor Books are "Iveliz Explains It All," written by Andrea Beatriz Arango, "The Last Mapmaker," by Christina Soontornvat, and "Maizy Chen's Last Chance," by Lisa Yee.

Looking for other great reads? Kristine stressed that NOLS Youth Services Librarians are highly knowledgeable about literature for children and teens, and love to be consulted! Find one at your local library or email [youth@nols.org](mailto:youth@nols.org).

*\*Editor's Note: Deborah Scannell is a decades-long patron of NOLS, and currently volunteers in the Youth Services department at the Forks Branch.*



*Deborah Scannell holds the Forks Forum, left, and Kristine Techavanich holds the Newbery books, right.*