**RISING FROM ASHES: THE PHOENIX AWARD AND CHILDREN’S LITERATURE**

**ALEX WINKS**

**SPONSOR: ELIZABETH GOODENOUGH PHD**

**ABSTRACT**

Often the only books for young readers remembered and kept in print for more than a few years must become immediate bestsellers or win prestigious awards, sometimes both. Some books—just as good, or better than these prominent few—slip through the cracks and fall into obscurity, despite their literary merit. Such exciting and original fiction or non-fiction—only discovered by a handful of lucky readers—escapes the wider audience it deserves. The Children’s Literature Association attempts to remedy this problem with the Phoenix Award. This annual honoring of a book published 20 years earlier, one that received no major awards, includes a national publicity campaign that coordinates authors, agents, publishers, editors, marketing staff, booksellers, librarians, and scholars. I support these efforts at the ChLA’s website. In addition to assisting these research and promotional goals, I study reviews of former winners and current candidates to develop a blog tour bringing these deserving works to a second life of publication and readership. I collect books being considered for next year’s award and have produced a filmed interview of Ann Arbor author Zibby Oneal, the 2002 recipient of the Phoenix for her Y/A novel *A Formal Feeling*. Streaming on the ChLA website, this film documents Oneal’s perspective on her career and writing process.

**OBJECTIVES**

This project surveys the arduous process of selecting a book to receive the Phoenix Award. The Phoenix Committee, comprised of six ChLA members, takes nearly a year to reach its final choice at the annual ChLA meeting each June. The 2015 committee, consisting of Lisa Fraustino, Lois Gibson, Elizabeth Goodenough, Wally Hastings, Karla Schmit, and Jean Stevenson, serve three-year terms that overlap. The group begins compiling a list of hundreds of titles and then gradually whittles them down to nominations for a list of finalists. To draw attention to the award and past winners, I helped stage and produce a film on Y/A novelist and 2002 Phoenix Award Winner Zibby Oneal that casts light on the impact that the Phoenix Award had on her career.

**METHODS**

Methods included extensive library research: procuring eligible books published in 1997, eliminating those that had won major awards, and evaluating the merits of finalists in consultation with my sponsor. I had to learn the cataloging system of the University libraries and work through Inter-Library Loan. Methods of bringing attention to the award and to past winners involved aiding in the creation of a blog tour. Methods of bringing attention to the award and to past winners involved aiding in the creation of a blog tour. Past winners—Karen Hesse, Kyoko Mori, Gary Soto, and Virginia Euwer Wolff—will now be featured on prominent literary blogs. Conducting research on winning novels and finding reviews of books and interviews with authors, I coordinated the virtual tour with an Eastern Connecticut University student and the Phoenix Chair. To promote the award, I forwarded the film on Zibby Oneal to the Phoenix Committee. With two other UROP students I conducted background research on Zibby Oneal, prepared interview questions, acquired camera and microphones, familiarized myself with film and lighting equipment, and arranged transportation to the author’s home. Months of editing resulted in a half hour of raw footage. We then trimmed the rough cut down to a five-minute video screened for University of Michigan students February 17. Their written feedback enhanced our final post-production edit.

**RESULTS**

In her interview Zibby Oneal asks, “What is imagination?” To her own question she responds, “I think it’s meeting yourself over and over again.” Just as these words apply to how we relate to ourselves over time and throughout our lives, they also suggest ways that we can revisit literary works. When one first encounters a book, it might not make any impression. However, every so often someone will return to a story and see it in a brighter light. This project allowed me to witness a process that fosters such revelatory re-evaluations.

Hundreds of books receive renewed attention and analysis annually though their consideration for the Phoenix Award. I have observed through producing a film interview the effect that this award has on an author’s career: Oneal reveals that much of her work relies on meeting herself and reconstituting scenes from her own early life.