Bonnie Grant (White Plains) and Rebecca Newman (Mt. Vernon) co-moderated the discussion. Also in attendance were Deb Gaffney (White Plains), Eileen Corbett (Scarsdale) and Teresa Bueti and Miriam Budin (both of Chappaqua).

The books under discussion were:

BOMB by Steve Sheinkin
LIAR AND SPY by Rebecca Stead
THE ONE AND ONLY IVAN by Katherine Applegate
SPLENDORS AND GLOOMS by Laura Amy Schlitz
THREE TIMES LUCKY by Sheila Turnage
WONDER by R.J. Palacio

Bonnie and Rebecca began by polling the group as to their first, second and third choices to win the award. This was just for fun to see where we were before any discussion.

We then proceeded to trash THREE TIMES LUCKY, which had not garnered a single vote and was universally disliked as overloaded and ridiculous.

After that was over we talked about BOMB, which we all agreed was paced like a thriller, packed with information we had never encountered before, skillfully organized and remarkably insightful as to the psychology of various of the participants in the race to create the atom bomb and their reactions to its eventual use. Negative comments were made in regard to the placement of photographs, which didn’t always correspond well to the facing text, but generally we were all very favorably impressed and agreed that the book met each of the Newbery criteria.

THE ONE AND ONLY IVAN garnered praise for its accessibility, empathy and consistent presentation of a non-human point of view. We were all in agreement as to the high quality of Applegate’s writing and thought that the book met every one of the Newbery criteria. There was mild controversy over whether the text is free verse or not and whether it matters if it is. Then the conversation digressed to reminiscences about roadside zoos we’ve seen and wept over.

SPLENDORS AND GLOOMS was much-appreciated for its blending of Dickensian characters in a Victorian setting and the magical elements that drive much of the action. We admired Schlitz’ ability to pithily encapsulate her characters’ backstories, rendering nearly every one of them somewhat sympathetic. (Except the archvillain. He’s beyond redemption.) We also admired the ever-tightening tension of the plot.
There was some misgiving expressed over the epilogue which one participant felt actually detracted from the book, as it seemed an attempt to tie everything up with a neat, happy bow, which was at odds with the tone of the rest of the book. She was shouted down.

All of us liked WONDER enormously. Eileen told about a presentation by Palacio she’d attended during which the author showed a video clip she’d been sent by a family with a child who exhibits one of the disfiguring genetic anomalies that Augie has. The family told Palacio that they felt she had written about their child—the experiences seemed so true-to-life. We all found the book to be powerful and insightful. It’s been a popular choice for book discussion groups. Several of us said that, after the first time we read it, it leapt to the top of our list of Newbery candidates.

Everyone liked LIAR AND SPY, too. We talked about how skillfully Stead slowly revealed the secrets her characters have been concealing. We tried to restrain ourselves from discussing her previous books, so as not to compare them (since The Real Newbery Committee can’t do that).

Then we voted again. Opinions had shifted slightly.

Our winner: BOMB

Honors books: THE ONE AND ONLY IVAN SPLENDORS AND GLOOMS WONDER

Respectfully submitted,

Miriam Lang Budin