

Mid-Twentieth Century American Ideals: The Life & Children's Literature of Robert Lawson

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ABSTRACT

Robert Lawson is the only children's book creator to have been awarded the highest United States honors for both children's book illustration and children's writing. In addition to receiving honor awards in each category, he won the Caldecott Medal for *They Were Strong and Good* in 1941 and the Newbery Medal for *Rabbit Hill* in 1945.¹ Though critical analysis of his work continues to this day, no substantial biographical work has been undertaken since his death in 1957. The most extensive work published to date is found in a slim monograph by Gary D. Schmidt, one volume in *Twayne's United States Author Series*.² A brief biographical sketch is included in the work, but the majority of the text is Schmidt's literary analysis by genre.

My biography of Robert Lawson comprises one of three biographies in my larger work, a cultural history of the 1936 picture book *The Story of Ferdinand*—the other two being that of the picture book's author, Munro Leaf, and its editor, May Masee.³ All three were important players in the development of modern children's literature. The narrative created from this biographical work enriches our understanding of youth literature from a print culture perspective.

During a career that spanned four decades, Lawson created over sixty-five books, but the 1936 picture book *The Story of Ferdinand* remains his best-known and well-loved. Munro Leaf wrote the tale specifically for Lawson's illustrative talents and the two friends enjoyed the book's immediate success, as well as its immediate controversies. Both also went on to enjoy long, prosperous careers. Between the World Wars Robert Lawson, along with a handful of other artists, defined children's literature illustration.

Periodically, fields or groups emerge that struggle to gain status or respect. Scholars have often made celebratory identification with these fields or groups in early historical inquiry. For example,

¹ The Caldecott is awarded annually by the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC), a division of the American Library Association (ALA), to the artist of the most distinguished American picture book for children. The Newbery is awarded annually by ALSC to the author of the most distinguished contribution to American literature for children. These awards are considered to be "the Academy Awards" of youth literature.

² Schmidt, Gary D. *Robert Lawson*. Twayne's United States Authors Series. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1997.

³ McQueen, Sharon. *The Story of "The Story of Ferdinand": The Creation of a Cultural Icon*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2010.

feminism's impulse was to make a celebratory identification with suffrage.⁴ This is not surprising. But as Denise Riley states, these types of emergences are "the tips of their own icebergs." Early youth literature scholarship did celebrate its heroes, but it also gave subsequent scholarship a platform. It is a platform from which we may spring, but I'm often equally interested in exploring what lies beneath. Robert Lawson's life and work may be admired without ignoring imperfections.

This paper explores various components of Robert Lawson's work both within the context of their times, and through our eyes today. Lawson's experimentation with genres and their boundaries is also an element of the study. In addition, this investigation also looks at the various influences of the time as they may have affected the creation and reception of Robert Lawson's works. Spanning the fields of history, cultural studies (including print culture and popular culture), the visual arts, and literature, this research marks the most in-depth biographical work conducted on this titan of Mid-Twentieth Century children's book creation and brings to light the life and work of a man whose influence is still evident today.

⁴ Riley, Denise. "Does a Sex Have a History? 'Women' and Feminism." *New Formations*. No.1, Spring 1987. p35.