

CHILDREN'S BOOK COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIA
CHILDREN'S BOOK OF THE YEAR AWARDS
1980

Judges' Report

Between December 1979 and March 1980, the seven judges of the Awards discussed and evaluated sixty-six entries of which seven were short-listed for Class A and six for Class B. 1979 was not a vintage year, with few entries of outstanding quality, many mediocre stories and perhaps half a dozen of quite appalling frightfulness.

Publishers who submitted titles for consideration concentrated mostly on works of fiction and imagination, though the judges were pleased to see several works of non-fiction.

As is predictable and desirable, Australian writers and publishers sought to develop themes and insights drawn from our own national sources. Included here were scholarly works and more general writing on Aborigines and quite a number of titles which depicted a wide variety of aspects of Australian rural and urban life, both past and present.

The best of the entries not only reflected the Australian society and environment in ways which would be intelligible and interesting to international readers, but also tackled themes, characters and settings which are not specifically Australian at all. This seems to indicate a gratifying level of literary maturity and a broadening of view from an earlier parochialism.

It is evident that increasing attention is being paid to the multicultural nature of Australia, though few writers have yet worked in this field with mature skill. One entry with a text in several languages (*Stephen's Tree* by Libby Hathorn, published by Methuen in English, Greek and Italian), was an innovation favourably noted by the judging panel.

The judges appreciated many entries where due regard had been given to the quality of book design and production. However, as in previous years, many irritating typographical errors, some use of hack illustrators and numerous production faults showed a lack of editorial responsibility which diminished the work of the authors concerned and spoilt the pleasure of readers.

Regrettably, few new writers and illustrators appeared in the lists this year though many established authors and artists made new contributions, in some cases with innovative style. The judges observed a slight trend towards trilogies or sequences of books and experienced some difficulty in assessing individual units within a planned but incomplete work.

Although many books were not worthy of an award, a substantial group will be worthwhile additions to libraries and personal collections. In this group, the judges particularly noted Susan Burke's entertaining and un-sentimental story of a boy in a wheelchair, *Alexander in Trouble* (Bodley Head, New Acorn Library), and *Black Dog* by Christobel Mattingley, which has much appeal, especially in the detail of the black-and-white illustrations.

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Class A—CHILDREN'S BOOK OF THE YEAR

WINNER

HARDING, LEE *Displaced Person*

Hyland House

Lee Harding's original and compelling story has a tightly constructed plot and perceptively drawn characters. The urgency of the first-person narrative as Graeme is gradually displaced from his environment and enters another dimension, creates a tension which is brilliantly sustained. The theme is acutely relevant to young people and its treatment allows the reader's identification with the boy in his increasing isolation and loneliness. Published simultaneously in the U.S.A. as *Misplaced Persons* by Harper & Row.

HIGHLY COMMENDED

BRINSMEAD, HESBA *Once There Was a Swagman*

Oxford

This is a wholly satisfying book, good on all counts, which should appeal to young readers. With directness and simplicity, it evokes the warmth of a family's relationships and the reality of country life in the depression years. The text is admirably complemented by the sensitive, muted illustrations. The judges were impressed by the high quality of production.

COMMENDED

GOODSIR, DON *The Gould League Book of Australian Birds*

Golden Press/Gould League of N.S.W.1

Useful information, simply presented, is combined with vivid and life-like illustrations. The text, without being over-technical, includes enough detail to satisfy young readers and to stimulate their interest. An attractive production which fills a widely recognized need for children.

COMMENDED

THIELE, COLIN *River Murray Mary*

Rigby²

Colin Thiele presents a realistic portrait of a country childhood on the River Murray fifty years ago. Though, written simply, it slowly builds to a satisfying climax. Robert Ingepen's beautiful, but static, illustrations do little to extend the story but do reflect the timeless quality of the landscape.

Class B—PICTURE BOOK OF THE YEAR

In the Picture Book Award, *One Dragon's Dream* emerged as the clear winner. The judges felt unable to allocate a Highly Commended Award. Apart from the two commended titles, there were only a few books worthy of serious consideration.

WINNER

PAVEY, PETER *One Dragon's Dream*

Nelson³

Peter Pavey's book shows great originality of conception and style. It is full of beauty, imagination and humour and is touched with the bizarre quality of dreams. Each spread of pictures glows with rich, sharp colour. The illustrations are drawn with great fair combined with fascinating inventiveness and meticulous draughtsmanship. The whole book is beautifully designed and impeccably printed. Although it takes the form of a counting book, it is really much more than that, introducing as it does strong elements of fantasy.

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COMMENDED

PENDER, LYDIA *The Useless Donkeys*

In this visually captivating book, Judith Cowell makes inventive use of watercolour and collage to set the period and capture the mood of a perhaps over-long story. A sense of family love and security pervade both text and illustrations and the affectionate caring extends even to the use-
less donkeys, Garibaldi and Peccadillo.

Methuen⁴

COMMENDED

ANDERSON, ROBIN *Sinabouda Lily*

Oxford

Sinabouda Lily is based on a folk tale from Papua New Guinea and contains bright, stylized illustrations which make use of elements from folk art. The story contains just the right degree of scariness to satisfy small children without terrifying them. The text is straightforward and includes a few long but mellifluous names which will delight a young audience.

Report signed by judges:

Glenn Pullen	Tas.	Marion Calvert	N.S.W.
Peg Goode	Vic.	Helen Coghlan	Qld.
Stephen Williams	S.A.	Diana Page	A.C.T.
Andrew Thomas	W.A.		

1. R.T. January 1980.
2. P. 33 this issue.
3. R.T. July 1979.
4. P. 19 this issue.

A LETTER FROM LEE HARDING

Dear Eleanor:

You have asked me to write a small article expressing how I feel to have my novel, *Displaced Person*, chosen as Children's Book of the Year for 1980. I would like to oblige, but the truth is that I am still in a state of stunned surprise, and, as writing for me is always a difficult and protracted business, I hope you will accept this letter as my only possible response.

Writing about my own work is not an easy task. I prefer to let my books speak for me. One has to accept that the nature of all success is transitory, and that a writer is really only as good as his next book. I have mixed feelings about awards in general, but in the case of those made by the Children's Book Council I feel there is much value in drawing attention to books that might otherwise escape the general reading public. There is far too much fine writing in the field of children's literature for it to be kept secret, and enjoyed only by children.

Although I have written books specifically for children, I am not exclusively a 'children's writer'. *Displaced Person* was written ABOUT young people, not FOR them. The decision to market the book for the 'young adult' or 'teenage' audience was made by my publishers, both here and in the U.S.A., and I saw no reason to disagree. It is also a work of science fiction, which makes me particularly pleased that it has been chosen for such a prestigious award. Perhaps it will help some readers—and librarians—towards an understanding that science fiction is not all star wars and treks—what we in the genre call 'space opera'—and that the rich domain of inner space is equally worthy of exploration.

Here in Australia we have an established tradition of good writing for and about children, but I find that for the most part these books either

look back to a mistily nostalgic past or are set in a present which to me seems curiously out of focus. We no longer live in a static, comfortable society. For today's young people the future is already here. They are the most educated generation in the history of the world and they are aware of the possibilities of the future in a way that previous generations would have found impossible. In every day in every way (as the jungle goes), the future world is being brought home to them. The media bombard their minds with images of tomorrow, and, while the popular glossy magazines promote a euphoric Disneyland promise for the future, the overwhelming impression one gets from our youngsters is that the future is NOT going to be a particularly nice place to live in, and for a vast number of people. The fuel crisis and the unemployment crisis; urban terrorism and international war games; crime and violence—the future begins to look dark and awesome.

The best American writers, people such as Paul Zindel, M. E. Kerr, Robert Cormier, S. E. Hinton and Judy Blume, to name but a few, have a great gift to look at our world through the eyes of the young, and to be aware of the impact of our rapidly changing world upon them. That their books are popular with Australian readers is to me significant—perhaps this is a spin-off from the concept of our global village, that our young people are identifying more closely with the American way of life and with American fiction.

Reading around, I am puzzled by the evidence that most Australian writers seem to be reluctant to come to grips with today's world as seen through the eyes of the young. Some prefer to plunder aboriginal mythology, perhaps preferring folklore and all its comforts to the more telling fantasy of the modern world? Is it possible that some are put off by the possibility of writing 'downers', or producing what is so often called a 'problem novel'? But a careful consideration of what the future holds in store for our society need not necessarily result in a work of stark realism and unremitting doom. The story itself comes first, and if it is in the nature of today's young people to be confronted by the future, and to seek answers to their questions in the books they read, why is it that more writers have not looked in this direction? Perhaps publishers have told them that there is 'no market' in Australia for this type of fiction, which is by way of uttering a self-fulfilling prophecy, because if publishers believe this then they will not be likely to give the book the promotion it deserves.

Which brings me back to *Displaced Person*. This book was a cry from the heart, not only from myself, but for those young people whose lives had touched mine and with whom I had shared a vision. I feel privileged to have had the book selected by the Children's Book Council, all the more so because of the nature of the finished work. I was once told it was not worth publishing. However, I would like to thank the judges of the Alan Marshall Award who together chose it as their selection for 1978, when it was still an unpublished manuscript. I am also indebted to my publishers—Anne Godden and Al Knight of Hyland House, Melbourne, and to Joanne Ryder of Harper and Row, New York—who were of accord in their enthusiasm for the book and extremely understanding of what I had tried to achieve. As readers have noticed, the novel is not laid out in formal chapters, but in one very long 'section' and one very brief 'section'; I would also like to thank my publishers for appreciating that this was the only possible way of presenting the narrative. In some ways