



The Children's Book Council of Australia

BOOK OF THE YEAR AWARDS 1999



General comments

Australian publishers achieved high standards of quality in design, production, editing, illustrating and writing in the majority of the books entered for the 1999 awards; slightly more of the books in contention were all-Australian productions. The only section to disappoint the judges was the younger readers, which registered a fall in quantity and quality of books compared with recent years. We hope that the new award for beginning readers will encourage a renewal of writers' and publishers' attention to the vital need to have a sufficient range of quality books to convince young children that literacy is not only essential but enjoyable.

Whilst the emergence of small and new publishers entering books is a sign of optimism, the continuation of quality publications has been threatened in recent years by the mergers, takeovers and downsizing in the Australian children's book trade. Rapid and continuing staff changes, the loss of expert experienced people and the virtual disappearance of children's publicists, give us concern for the future. The employment of experienced readers and editors should be a significant part of a book trade that has a continuing commitment to quality. Good editors do make a difference, and there were a disturbing number of books in which inexperienced writers were not given the editorial assistance they needed. Some publishers unfortunately neglected to enter books which had been favourably reviewed in specialist journals. Even books of obvious quality were out of print by early April when the Short List was announced; surely titles on the carefully considered Notable Books list deserve more than a year's shelf life to succeed?

The judges noted with pleasure the number of Aboriginal presses which entered books. IAD Press, from Alice Springs, produced *Going for Kalta* which has the distinction of being the first book to be deemed notable in two categories (Information Books and Picture Books). This is the first year in which publishers have been able to enter titles for both Information Books and one other category.

While more books were typeset and printed in Australia, the majority of the coloured printing for the picture books was done offshore. Publishers are gradually recognising that information about the visual aspects of technical production are valued by readers. This year judges found more useful notes about typefaces, methods of illustration, types of paper used and other details such as whether the illustrations had been produced on coloured paper or printed on to it. The Random House book *Cherry Pie* by Gretel Killeen, illustrated by Francesca Partridge and Franck Dubuc, was an exemplar for this improved practice.

Watercolour was still a favoured medium of illustration in the picture books despite the formidable array of computer graphics available. A large number of books in all categories used photographic covers, often computer manipulated; among the best were *Fat Boy Saves World*, *Homestrung*, *Video Zone*, *Walking through Albert* and *Watersky*. Outstanding covers which did not use photography included *Pobblebunks*, *The Twelve Princesses*, *Bim Bam Boom*, *Archie the Big Good Wolf* and *Norton's Hut*. The cover of *My Girragundji* combined a traditional Aboriginal drawing with a photograph, and succeeded in conveying the warmth of a text dealing with fears. Elizabeth Honey continues to provide a lively interaction between her written texts, illustrations and page layouts, as well as to play with finding inventive things to do with bar codes. Several illustrators provided detailed pictures which repaid careful exploration, Shaun Tan's *The Rabbits*,



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Steven Scheduling's *King Gilbert (the Indolent)*, Roland Harvey's *Islands in My Garden* and Colin Thompson's *Paradise Garden* all rewarded the careful reader with jokes, puns and/or new layers of meaning.

Unfortunately some otherwise well designed covers gave away too much of the plot (*Bartlett and the Ice Voyage* and *A Ghost of a Chance*), and *Daughter of the Regiment* seemed crowded with too much information. Two covers were quite inappropriate: Gary Crew's grim tale of baby farming, *Mama's Babies*, was not well served by the smiling face and choice of pink and blue colours; Anne Campbell's *Voodoo Dolls* has a striking cover which promises a horror book rather than its interesting collection of multicultural stories.

Apart from *Cherry Pie*, the entries did not feature much that was innovative or unusual in design. *Camphor Laurel* was distinguished by layout changes and the division of the 147 page text into 140 sections of from one line to five pages - which complemented the lyrical tone of the novel. The designer's use of the single indented dash to punctuate conversation gave the pages a spare, uncluttered look which again suited the reticence of the present tense narration. Two younger reader titles had striking design features: *My Girragundji* used soft focus photos, reverse printing and changes in typeface to establish and reinforce mood; and *The Little Blue Parcel* caught readers' attention with its brown paper cover and evocative black and white drawings highlighting the importance of the blue parcel. The simple text of *Felix Smith Has Every Right to be a Crocodile* was extended and enhanced by David Stanley's striking drawings with their exaggerated perspectives.

Terry Denton's whacky illustrations crowded the borders and took over the page numbers in *Just Annoying*, while Kim Gamble's page numbers add to the charm of *First Day*. Arthur Weldon's *The Kid with the Amazing Head* featured the funniest imprint page as well as its clever 'More great reading from Puffin' section. In fact the judges welcomed the very many humorous titles entered this year.

Endpapers play a vital part in establishing the appropriate mood in the best picture books. Traditional designs using a blank page of colour, carefully chosen to suit the text, contrasted with complex compositions. Shaun Tan's idyllic endpapers for *The Rabbits* showing water birds in a billabong were major works, reminiscent of Arthur Boyd's Wimmera paintings. Ron Brooks suggested the warmth of Margaret Wild's story with his green and brown eucalypt leaves in *Rosie and Tortoise*. Snow gums were greyed out for the endpapers in *Norton's Hut* (Peter Gouldthorpe), contrasting with the bright alpine colours inside the book. The drama of thunder and lightning was creatively introduced by Wayne Harris's abstract grey and white design for *Bim Bam Boom*, and the sunny yellow endpapers of *Mr McGee and the Biting Flea* (Pamela Allen) suggest both the beach setting and the cheerful story within.

The **Aussie Bites** series and **SOLO** series continued to provide author and illustrator profiles directed to their young readership; together with Koala Books' **Tadpoles** series they published some excellent titles for newly independent readers. Congratulations to **SOLOs** for maintaining a consistently high standard - five were selected for Notable Books.

One sign of editorial skill was seen in the creation of realistic street dialogue from adolescent characters with a minimum of four letter words. Examples include *Loose Lips*, *Raw* and *Falling Forward*, as well as the Short Listed titles. In this age of spellcheck programs, editors need to be particularly vigilant to ensure that homophones do not slip through; misspellings, characters who change name inexplicably, wandering margins and grammatical errors all caused the judges considerable irritation - and were produced by a wide range of publishers.



As far as themes were concerned, fairies kept appearing (last year it was angels). Two titles stood out for their success in integrating fantasy into everyday life: the elves in *Bob the Builder and the Elves*, and the 'phairie', werewolves and vampires in Jackie French's *Stories to Eat with a Banana* added a great deal of fun to these books, their authors' sense of conviction carrying readers along with them. Three novels made clever use of fairy tale conventions: in *Green Fingers* by Emily Rodda kindness is rewarded in the best tradition; *Translations from Celadon* by Sally Odgers calls upon myths and archetypes and the importance of names (and has the most unusual narrator - a girl who has transformed into a horse); and Sophie Masson combines the traditional tale *Tattercoats* with the fairy characters from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in *Cold Iron*.

The most common trend as far as style was concerned was multiple voice narration; many authors successfully used a variety of voices to add depth and a range of perspectives to their stories. Realism is still popular with writers for adolescents, but although gritty realism featured in a number of books, authors managed to integrate these themes within their stories and to mediate the 'doom and gloom'. The older readers' Short List contains a number of fine examples, and others are to be found in *Red Golf Balls* by Laurie Croasdale (an exciting novel featuring the recent Sydney bushfires) and two 'road' novels: *Full Moon Racing* by James Roy and *Feral Tracks* by Euan Mitchell. The harsh world of penal institutions is depicted with grim realism in Scott Monk's *Raw* and *Hard Times* by Elspeth Cook and Anna Donald.

The science fiction and fantasy entries were strong, and included many feisty female protagonists. Two series (Brian Caswell's **Alien Zones** and Michael Pryor's **Doorways**) cleverly used multiple worlds to give variety to the adventures; and genetic technology and cloning, unsurprisingly, featured in a number of titles, most notably Claire Carmichael's *Originator*, Christine Harris's **Vibes** series and Kerry Greenwood's *Feral*, the latter also included metamorphosis. Alison Goodman's first novel *Singing the Dogstar Blues* had a particularly effective 'voice', and included time travel and a convincing alien race.

Rory Barnes's *Horsehead Boy* sends up the mad scientist tradition with his main character reduced to a brain in a wheelie bin. The Internet provided the means for a series of horrific crimes in Simon Hughes's thriller *Doctor Id*.

A major theme this year was that of overcoming fear. Picture books including Tim Winton's *The Deep*, *Arabella* and *Bim Bam Boom* all depict children coping with fear. In the younger readers section titles included *My Girragundji*, and *Fraidy Cats* by Penny Hall, sensitively illustrated by Greg Rogers, which suggests that everyone has a fear of something. For older readers Libby Hathorn's *Rift* demands extreme physical and moral courage from its hero. There was less emphasis on bullying at school, although it forms a minor theme in a number of titles and of course the major one in James Moloney's *Buzzard Breath and Brains*. The fear of social ostracism was significant in a number of titles. There was a noticeable drop in the number of horror series and titles this year, with the first title both written and illustrated by Shaun Tan, his spooky story *The Playground* (**After Dark** series), being selected for Notable Books.

As was the case last year, many good stories included adults and the elderly as significant characters in the narrative. Picture books included *Leaves for Mr Walter*, *Grandpa* and *Arabella*, and the younger readers included *Barney's Blues*, *I Miss You Grandpa* and *Horsehead Boy*. The older readers category produced many fine examples, some of the most noteworthy being *Refuge*, *Rift*, *Summer Ghosts*, *Homestrung*, *Angela* and *Killing Darcy*. Many writers depicted children taking up adult responsibilities, most notably Morris Gleitzman in his humorous novel *Bumface*.

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Phillip Adams would be pleased with the number of writers who resisted the trend towards the Americanisation of our language (and spelling). Although Brian Caswell fills his **Alien Zones** series with references to American films, and James Moloney names a character Buzzard Breath, while in *Beyond Blue* Jerri Kroll introduces an American visitor to whom aspects of Australian language and culture can be explained, there are many positive examples. In both books about builders, *Bob the Builder and the Elves* and *Falling Forward* there are wonderful examples of the Australian idiom, and Jackie French calls a chook, a chook in *Daughter of the Regiment*. Two of our obsessions, cockroaches and betting, feature in *The Cockroach Cup*, and *Sebby, Stee, the Garbos and Me* is full of references to traditional customs - including the placatory gift of beer to the Garbos at Christmas.

This is not to promote parochialism, multicultural references now regularly appear without obvious effort. The kindergarten class in *First Day* represents a typically diverse ethnic mix, and some illustrated books depict children of different ethnicity without any specific reference to this in the text (for example in *Game Plan* and *The Cockroach Cup*). In *What a Mess, Fang Fang!* Sally Rippon shows us that some Chinese Australians can be just as messy with their chopsticks as anyone else. Helen McKerral, in *Homestrung*, refers to past ironies when Dutch migrants found themselves in German towns in the Barossa Valley, and Broome's multiracial society is depicted in Garry Disher's *The Divine Wind*. Two novels were set in Indonesia: Steve Talbot's *Escape to Kalimantan* and Sophie Masson's *The Tiger*. Deborah Lisson set her exciting historical novel *Red Hugh* in sixteenth century Ireland. Louise Elliott assumes that readers will understand something of Eastern European Jewish culture when she introduces a dybbuk into *Summer Ghosts*. Chris Wheat gives his young adult readers credit for understanding parody when he goes over the top with cultural stereotypes in *Loose Lips*.

Aboriginal themes and issues featured strongly in all categories, and in fact on all the Short Lists. Both Aboriginal and non Aboriginal writers are presenting Australian society in ways which are not only inclusive, but authentic; there was a distinct lack of special pleading or overt didacticism. The access to Aboriginal cultures given to both black and white readers is an inclusive access which recognises that cultural diversity is vital to a multicultural society. Elizabeth Hutchins in *Bring Back the Songs* and James Moloney in *Angela* are both very careful in their depiction of Aboriginal characters, perhaps too careful, although in the latter title issues of black history and the stolen children are confronted in all their complexity and readers are forced to examine their own assumptions about what is best for other people. Melissa Lucashenko, in contrast, has achieved in her first novel, *Killing Darcy*, a text that sings with passion and authority.

Both black and white writers demonstrated confidence in their readers' ability to cope with Aboriginal words within their texts, finding no need to supply a glossary. *Killing Darcy* is the exception here, but *My Girragundji*, *Deadly, Unna?* and *Going for Kalta* include Aboriginal words within the flow of the narrative, and *Deadly, Unna?* even dares to use dialect in its title. It is highly significant that the winners in all four award categories confront, in various ways, the issues of acknowledgment of our history and the need for reconciliation. The judges selected the winners according to the criteria, with no reference to the books' political stance or subject matter, so that the overall results came as a genuine surprise. But the remarkable outcome is a reflection of the fundamental importance of this issue in contemporary Australian society, and a magnificent tribute to the commitment of Australia's children's writers to exposing their young readers to books that will challenge and empower them.

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THE EVE POWNALL AWARDS FOR INFORMATION BOOKS



General comments

The number of entries in this category rose from 36 in 1998 to 50 this year. Almost 60% of the entries were from series.

While the best of the books carried in them the sense of the child reader both being taken somewhere new and sharing in the discovery, there were many ordinary books which failed to elicit such a response. The outstanding information books balanced awareness of audience, accurate information, passion, well crafted language, quality of design, imaginative presentation, effective organisation of information and stimulation of independent thought. The others varied widely in the number of these factors present and the degree of success in balancing them.

Child focus was an important issue in judging this year. The most satisfying books were those which attempted to see the subject from a child's point of view, for example, *Going for Kalta* and *Who's Running This Country?*, while also stretching the child's horizons. There were books which acknowledged and stimulated independent thinking, such as *The Penicillin Puzzle* and *The Little Book of Big Questions*, and those which empowered children by showing what they could do to make a difference, such as *Turtle-Taxi* and the **Ecosystemsⁱ** series. **The Extraordinaryⁱⁱ** series deserves acknowledgment for its child centredness and attempts to increase the accessibility of historical characters, even though the books lacked other qualities needed to excel. Similarly, the **Young Achieversⁱⁱⁱ** series entries, with their welcome focus on young, contemporary people with whom the young reader could identify, lacked depth, imagination and a sense of the subjects as real people. Passionate, beautifully written and painstakingly researched though it was, *The Wrightson List* was not regarded by the judges as primarily a children's book but a valuable reference tool for adults. There were also entries which either imposed blatantly adult views of what children understood and wanted to know or failed to explain concepts clearly.

Biography and autobiography were significant elements this year. While some of these were strong, passionate accounts which provided a real

sense of person and context (*Maybe Tomorrow, Not Only a Hero, A Man Called Possum*), others failed to rise above the ordinary, even though the subject promised to be interesting.

This year's entries included a range of writing by indigenous authors or about Aboriginal culture or race relations. Many different perspectives were employed, from the powerful and moving account in *Maybe Tomorrow* of what it means for one person to be Aboriginal in today's world to the carefully researched and wide ranging stories of nineteenth century race relations presented in *Side by Side*. The distinct voices of indigenous groups were clearly heard in the warmth of *Going for Kalta* and the first hand accounts quoted in *The Ngaanyatjarra of the Gibson Desert* and *The Anangu of Uluru and Kata Tjuta*. A strong theme of reconciliation ran through these books.

In the series entries, many were competent but lacked enthusiasm. A number contained inaccuracies or misleading statements. The obsession with poorly thought out boxed information remained a feature of this year's entries, resulting in page design being given greater importance than meaning. There was a real sense of disappointment with the **Ecosystems of Australia** series, which seemed impressive in its selection of information, awareness of audience and attention to design. Reference to experts in the scientific field, however, revealed basic inaccuracies and led to reservations about highlighting otherwise well written books. The entries from the **Fighting for Survival^{iv}** series impressed with their breadth of coverage, accessibility of information and close collaboration with the communities involved. **The Australia's Worst Disasters^v** series entries were consistently readable and well crafted.

Because the best writing is seamless, literary merit is often not appreciated as such. *Going for Kalta* demonstrated it in its effortless explanation of words as the text flowed. *Who's Running This Country?* brought vitality into what is commonly regarded as a dry topic by the use of inclusive and yet precise language. The successful integration of text and illustration, with each complementing the other, was most clearly seen in *Going for Kalta* and



Who's Running This Country? In some other cases, illustration and design tended to overshadow and clutter the information. Imaginative use of the book format to complement the information was demonstrated well in *Going for Kalta* and *Turtle-Taxi*. The quality of production, as seen in paper, printing and binding, varied from impressive entries, such as *Side by Side*, to cheap items which would not tolerate even gentle use. Sometimes book design or decoration seemed more highly valued than communication of accurate information. In other cases it was the ordinary quality of a book's format or design which limited its appeal.

Problems arose when authors did not separate fact from opinion or did not back up opinion with evidence. In contrast, both *Who's Running This Country?* and *The Little Book of Big Questions* gave clear opinions and urged children to research and develop their own. The unevenly successful technique of reconstructing eyewitness accounts in the **Extraordinary** series did enliven the topics in some cases but also detracted from the authenticity of the writing.

Many books did not contain any acknowledgment of sources. Others, such as *The Penicillin Puzzle*, were meticulous in that area. Bibliographies and further reading lists were often limited. Inclusion of Internet addresses and relevant organisations was a useful addition. *Not Only a Hero*, to be praised for its use of primary and secondary sources, did not provide readers with enough tools to access the wealth of information it contained. Some books were trying to do too much or suffered from an inability to select or organise material.

The judges would encourage everyone to look beyond the Short Listed books to the notable list in order to experience the diversity in subject matter and approach revealed in this year's entries. In a number of cases, decisions were reached after long and difficult deliberation. Much of this arose from the range of the material entered and perceptions of the degree to which flaws, present in all entries, were seen as affecting the overall quality of each book. As a result of this detailed examination of all the entries, the judges reluctantly made the difficult decision to produce a Short List of five titles, and to select a winner, but no honour books.

Eve Pownall Award WINNER

**EDWARDS, Yvonne
& DAY, Brenda**

Going for Kalta

IAD Press

A seemingly simple story of an Aboriginal group on a lizard hunt, this book for younger children immediately stands out as a satisfying publication on many levels. It is most notable for its delightful integration of text, illustration and design. From the moment the child points proudly to Yalata on the map, both Aboriginal and non Aboriginal children are invited to join in the hunt for the lizard or kalta, the story of which is told in natural language in the present tense. In the process, the reader finds out about the lizard and is introduced to Pitjantjatjara words in an effortless way. The rolling text and imaginative sequencing of the photographs reinforce the idea of a hunt and discovery. Bold earthy colours and careful attention to design detail make the book a delight to explore.

To complement the basic text, the authors have added a map, word lists, a pronunciation guide and a more factual summary of information about kalta. These help to answer questions the reader may have. It is hoped that in a future edition, an explanation of the word 'kalta' could also be included, since this is not a Pitjantjatjara word. Unlike many of the books offered for consideration for the Eve Pownall Award, this book provides acknowledgments that help to authenticate the information being presented. *Going for Kalta* has succeeded in using the book format in an enjoyable and wonderfully imaginative way to impart information to young readers.

