

# JUDGES' REPORT 2000

## GENERAL COMMENTS

The year 2000 is the final year of the four categories of *Older Reader*, *Younger Reader*, *Picture Books* and *Information Books* across two judging panels. Next year's judges will be judging an extra category, *Early Childhood*, and picture books can be entered in any category. Fiction entries totalled 270 while entries in the Eve Pownall Information Books Award numbered 53.

This year, it was exciting to welcome a few new authors such as Katrina Germein (*Big Rain Coming*), Markus Zusak (*The Underdog*) and Robert Hood (*Backstreets*) to the awards as well as the 'household names'. Publishers are to be commended for giving new authors the opportunity to have their voices heard. Overall the themes covered this year were more positive and uplifting while still within realistic and often bleak contexts. There was the usual variety of styles, settings and characters, calling upon our imagination, suspension of disbelief, our humour and compassion. Several general concepts emerged: courageous kids, drawing upon their inner strength and creativity to overcome obstacles; the hope and despair that can emanate from family relationships; new approaches to unemployment, and, of course, the ever-present quest, in both fantasy and realistic settings.

It was refreshing to note the respect afforded different family structures and the movement away from stereotypes within writing. Single parent and extended families, families where Dad is the main care-giver and Mum the bread-winner are becoming more common. In *Downsizing* and *Winning Back Dad*, the issue of the father's retrenchment is a whole-family affair. The loss of pride and a sense of purpose are dealt with sensitively and the lateral thinking involved to turn the problem around is heartening. *After Alice* highlights the issues involved in families which adopt a child. *Hannah and the Tomorrow Room* deals with

dynamics within an extended family, and here again, these are not romanticised, but handled responsibly and creatively. Sam, in *The Spangled Drongo*, lives with his sweetly eccentric aunt and this works, too, in its unique way. Harriet in *The Family Tree* struggles to establish her identity in her new 'blended family' when her stepfather and brother move in.

In the Year of the Older Person it was reassuring to see so many authors celebrating positive friendships between the young and the old and encouraging the notion of shared wisdom. There are several examples of books wherein characters bridge very gaping chasms across generations. *Snigger James on Grey* sees a young man engaged in intimate conversation with an ancestor since he can't communicate with his own parents. The touching relationship between Danny and Captain Mack is mutually beneficial despite the Captain not always being entirely lucid. Hannah, in her endearingly conniving way, brings her family's stalemate of understanding regarding Grandpa out into the open. Grandparents are important in *Memorial* where a child's sense of self and place is enhanced through a family line, as in *The Ivory Trail* where a legacy is passed down, resisted and eventually valued. In *Chain of Hearts*, a family's long-standing code of silence is broken at a time of crisis with cathartic, ultimately positive consequences.

Caring families come in many manifestations in this year's offerings, however not in saccharine, idealistic depictions. Satchel's family in *Stripes of the Sidestep Wolf* is suffering at the hands of a deluded father, yet they don't give up on him; their loyalty is unconditional. Aaron and his mother in *Stony Heart Country* are victims through association as the father's job antagonises a whole community, yet they stick together. The siblings in *Pumpkin Head is Dead* are forgiving and supportive of a mother who is

negligent due to her alcoholic live-in boyfriend. In *The Binna Binna Man* the extended family is of paramount importance and tragedy only reinforces this. Greg's family in *Going Off* is far from ideal, yet the empathy of a grandparent means healing takes place where disaster would otherwise have been inevitable.

There are, naturally, those novels depicting horrific family scenarios where communication is broken down irrevocably and violence is the outcome. *I Started Crying Monday* is heart-wrenchingly sad in its realism. *Scoterboy* gives us two characters for whom escape from family is the only option and *Pumpkin Head is Dead* shows the ripple effect of domestic violence within a family.

In many novels, the young male protagonist or supporting character is sensitive and articulate; Dan in *48 Shades of Brown*, Aaron in *Stony Heart Country*, Richard in *Borrowed Light*, Satchel in *Stripes of the Sidestep Wolf*, Danny in *Captain Mack*, Rowan (... of the Zebak) and Earl in *Sink or Swim*. The definition of a hero is being reinvented via characters such as Lily Quench, Captain Mack, Nim of *Nim's Island* and of course Rowan and Bartlett (*Bartlett and the City of Flames*). Many female characters are feisty and innovative, not to be taken lightly. The girls in *Stories to Eat with a Watermelon*, and the old woman in *Graffiti on the Fence*, the protagonist in *The Stinking Great Lie*, and of course, Lily Quench, Hazel Green, Hannah, Nim and Penny Pollard all provide dynamic and encouraging role-models for girls. Even those who appear devoid of self-esteem like Web and Aurora in *Killing Aurora* and Callisto in *Borrowed Light* tackle their problems and define themselves eventually.

Gratifyingly, the value of disabled people to society is acknowledged in books such as *More Than a Game* where the protagonist is intellectually disabled. The story is written with great dignity and humanity.

It is wonderful to see the traditional quest revamped in so many forms. *The Ivory Trail* shows a quest to draw humanity together via a linking thread; *Killing Aurora* has two girls on a

search for identity and meaning in abysmal circumstances, and in many novels maturation via a journey of self-discovery is a key feature. The more traditional mystical quest such as *Bartlett and the City of Flames*, *Tajore Arkle*, *Lily Quench and the Dragon of Ashby* and *Rowan and the Zebak* have been well received. Several traditional stories were given a new, original 'lease of life' such as *Into the Dark*, a retelling of the Dracula tale from the perspective of a servant; *Clementine*; *The Devil's Trousers*; Jackie French's *Stories to Eat With A Watermelon*; *The Brothers Gruesome* and Henry Lawson's stories in *The Dog King*, among others.

Humour features more across the categories this year with hilarious novels like *The Stinking Great Lie* and *48 Shades of Brown* and much of it is subtle and understated, emanating from observations of quirky but recognisable human behaviour. Hannah's attempts to get rid of Grandpa are very funny, as are the 'chits' in *Penny Pollard's Scrapbook*. There are some lovely touches in *The Spangled Drongo*, *The Worst Team Ever* and *The Binna Binna Man*. Hazel Green's escapades are gently amusing as are many of the picture books like *Mrs Wilkinson's Chooks*, *What Rot!*, *Unplugged!* and the subtle moral dilemmas of *The Six Wonders of Wobbly Bridge*. Once again Andrew Weldon provided the funniest imprint page (*Clever Trevor's Stupendous Inventions*) along with the witty 'More Great Reading from Puffin' section.

The Book of the Year Award is no stranger to controversy and this year will be no exception, shortlisting as it has several books with important and sensitive themes. Again, these books were chosen for their outstanding literary merit and their adherence to the other criteria of the particular category. Judges will uphold their selections from this standpoint and also from a belief that children *can* handle the issues raised in these books; that even previously taboo subjects can be tackled if dealt with sensitively. *Jenny Angel* chronicles the last few weeks of a young boy's life and the way his sister comes to terms with death. *Hello, Baby* lovingly depicts a home birth in intricate detail. *The Great Bear* graphically shows the

abhorrent practice of keeping bears in captivity for circus in Eastern Europe which in many ways is a metaphor for all inhumane oppression. *Tyro* deals with humiliation and physical cruelty in the workplace; *Killing Aurora* with anorexia and other self-destructive behaviour; *Borrowed Light* and *Stony Heart Country* feature teenage pregnancy. *Captain Mack* and *Graffiti on the Fence* deal with bullying and harassment. Judges are aware of the necessity to endorse literature that effectively reflects the realities of some children's lives.

War is a universal and timeless theme that again makes an impact on these awards. In *Memorial*, the First and Second World Wars are mentioned, as well as the Vietnam War, and the effect they had on the lives of people involved. *Chain of Hearts* introduces us to Jimmy and his friend whose legacies from Vietnam are nightmares and a need to escape. *Hitler's Daughter* highlights the tragedy of war for the Jews and other unfavoured people in Europe at the time. *Captain Mack* draws our attention to the plight of P.O.Ws in World War 2. All these books, while dealing with wars that are technically over, make very strong associations with the present; the notion that *essentially* they still go on. Today's children are obviously deemed by these authors to be very much a part of this legacy, as custodians of the future. *Thunderfish* is a very pertinent novel, as the mercenary sinking of refugee boats is a direct consequence of war for millions of displaced people.

These same novels provide a sense of history easily accessed by young readers in the form of story. Similarly, Victor Kelleher's *The Ivory Trail* and Catherine Jinks' *The Stinking Great Lie* allow children insight into past times where the way of life and the moral values varied greatly from our modern world. In *Cockawun and Cockatoo*, Christobel Mattingley captures the slower pace of life in the 'old days' in Australia by tracking the friendship between Arthur and two sulphur-crested cockatoos rescued from the site of the first Parliament House in Canberra.

The empowerment of children is an over-riding theme in this year's entries. The creativity and perceptive insights of children is valued in stories

like *Hazel Green* and *Luke's Way of Looking* where children 'show up' the adults for their lack of sensitivity and vision. Children play a major role in the enlightenment of their elders in many novels - *Hitler's Daughter*; *The Ringmaster*; *Stinking Great Lie*, *Downsized* - and come up with ideas that solve problems and dispel misconceptions. These novels affirm children working together for positive change.

The age-old debate as to whether books that are part of a series stand alone surfaced again this year and each book was stringently judged according to the criteria for the category. We farewell Marsden's *Tomorrow* series and acknowledge the place of Carmody's *The Keeping Place* in a folkloric continuum. The SOLO series for emergent readers and *Aussie Bites* and *Takeaway* again contributed several titles with a variety of themes - and quality! Margaret Clark's *Aussie Angels* and *Chickabees* series and Jenny Pausacker's *Blake Mysteries* alongside David Harris' *Cliffhanger* series successfully fill a 'lighter reading' niche, without sacrificing sound theme, plot and character development. The *After Dark* titles continue to cater well to the reluctant or ESL older reader.

There was some agreement about the standard of the science fiction entries generally; even though some new concepts such as cyberforms in *Spare Parts* were introduced, judges considered the treatment of ideas lacked originality and spark at times.

Much discussion centred on the presentation and format of the books entered. Titles and cover designs were considered to be generally magnificent; seemingly a recognition that children actually *do* judge a book by its cover and that immediate impact and sensory appeal is vital. There is an interesting move towards integration of standard text and modern formats such as email entries. This is evident in *Nim's Island* and *Penny Pollard's Scrapbook* as well as *Dear Venny*, *Dear Saffron*.

In the *Picture Book* category, authors and illustrators are generally to be commended on their collaboration. Many different media were

employed this year, with text and illustration complementing each other admirably in most cases. Some still make the mistake of literary/illustrative text duplication. As well as the usual array of water-colour, oils and pastels, there was stunning silk painting in *Neptune's Nursery*, Tan's amazingly tactile collage in *Memorial* as well as some examples of lino-cut, gouache and paper sculpture. This year there were more collaborative teams. Inclusions such as smelly stickers, a tape/CD and DIY projects at the end of the story all attempt to go beyond paper to involve more of the senses. End-papers are increasingly significant as an integral part of the story and are often symbolic as in *The Great Bear*. Fiction/non-fiction combinations such as *Sand Swimmers* and *Neptune's Nursery* are at once visually pleasing and informative.

Picture-book illustration is being increasingly recognised as an exciting art form in its own right and the originals are readily accessible as they are exhibited in museums nationally for a time before being sold.

Anthropomorphism is still alive and well, evidenced in books such as *Ibm Goes to Kindergarten* and *Sleepy Bears*. While it could be argued that this flies in the face of realism, judges felt that it allows children to distance themselves from the subject and see it from another perspective in a non-threatening manner. The fact that out of 80 picture book entries, 39 featured animals, is testament to the ongoing popularity of animals amongst children. The elephant in *Zarconi's Magic Flying Fish* is a real character and we mourn her when she dies.

European artistic styles are showcased in *The Devil's Trousers*, *The Great Bear* and *The Brothers Gruesome* as well as in *Once upon a Place*. Pictorial narratives celebrating Australia include *Big Rain Coming* with a recurring motif of the rainbow serpent, *Sand Swimmers* and *Memorial*. *Luke's Way of Looking* introduces children to surrealist and impressionist styles.

There were a number of self-publications again this year including some by children. It is interesting to note the efforts of people outside the publishing mainstream. *The Glow-Worm Cave* was published by Aboriginal Studies Press and *Jeemuluk* by the Department of Conservation and Land Management in Western Australia. The A.B.C. entered eight of its spin-offs from television programs.

As with last year, judges are becoming increasingly concerned with the marked lack of editing and proofreading in children's literature and are bemoaning the fact that economic rationalism seems to be affecting market forces in an area where Australia has shone for many years. This sad trend inevitably leads to mediocrity and it is to be hoped that these sentiments will be acknowledged by publishers who must, above all, value and respect children. While the judges give high credit where it is due, they were dismayed to discover that publishers' limited resources were not being channeled into quality literature in some cases, hence the shorter notables lists, particularly in the *Younger Readers* category.

The judges are delighted with their selections for both the Shortlist and the Notables and believe that the chosen books uphold the integrity and prestige of the Awards, with respect and love for children and the recognition of the importance of children's literature as the overarching focus.

*Liz Thomas*  
*CBC Judge Tasmania*  
*May 2000*  
*assisted by*  
*Diane Humphery*  
*CBC Judge Northern Territory*

# THE EVE POWNALL AWARD FOR INFORMATION BOOKS

## GENERAL COMMENTS

At the centre of this award is recognition of outstanding books which have as their prime intention the documentation of factual material. All other features, including literary and artistic merit, need to work together to enhance that documentation and increase its accessibility to children. Rigorous searching for knowledge is to be encouraged in the authors, illustrators and publishers as well as in the children for whom they write.

The judges were pleased with the high standard of entries this year. Fifty-three books were judged in this category, a pleasing increase from 50 in 1999 and 38 the year before. While these books cover a diverse range of subject areas, over a third could be loosely labelled natural science books and just under a third have historical themes.

Biography and autobiography continue to feature this year; the interest in these and Australian history reflecting publishing trends in the adult market. Overall, this year's books address a particularly wide range of interests and needs and cater for the full range of age groups, from early childhood to late adolescence. It is particularly pleasing to see books catering for the very young child's interest in the real world and books demonstrating an ability to engage readers on a number of levels. Just over one third of the books entered are from series, a drop from previous years where about half were in this category.

The distinctive nature of the shortlisted books is evident, with each book displaying its own special way of connecting information and children. The author's passion is a key element in these books. It is obvious behind John Nicholson's meticulous research and outstanding draftsmanship in *Fishing for Islands* and Jackie French's delightful mix of information, responsible advice and fun in *How to Guzzle Your Garden*. Much more than

facts can be seen in the stunning fusion of information, art and text in *Sand Swimmers* and the honest and moving portrayal of an Italian-Australian family in *Tapestry*. The use of primary sources rather than the incestuous referral to recently published books is one of the features which stand out in the documenting of a significant Australian performing arts company in *Inside The Australian Ballet* and of the story of bravery and survival in *Crash!* These shortlisted books all explore new territory - whether in subject matter as in *Inside The Australian Ballet*, *Tapestry* or *Fishing for Islands*; in format as in *Crash!*; in close partnership between writer and reader as in *How to Guzzle Your Garden*; or in provision of a feast for the senses as in *Sand Swimmers*.

Within the wider field of books entered, a variety of approaches to historical themes provides young readers with a range of paths by which to explore the past. *Bass and Flinders* uses sustained narrative, a refreshing change from the popular short snippets approach. *Homelands and Frontiers* documents detailed findings from research into Aboriginal - white disputes. A fascinating account of the scientific methodology for discovering the past is given in *Shipwreck at Madman's Corner. To the Goldfields!* illustrates the effective use of contemporary sources, and especially art, to recreate a period in history. Disappointingly, a substantial number of books remain pedestrian in their approach.

Personal research or personal involvement in a subject is a striking feature of a number of entries, often with very different outcomes. In *Tapestry* the author's own experiences as a member of an Italian-Australian family act as a strong, almost irresistible stimulus for documenting experiences of other family

members, this resulting in a complex but very moving picture of the forces which shape not only families but whole societies. In contrast, the personal voice in *Yumba Days* results in a quiet, people centred and optimistic reflection of childhood on an Aboriginal settlement while *Ngay Janajirr Ngank :This Is My Word* engages our emotions in its gentle mixture of reflections and traditional stories. The author's infectious enthusiasm for her subject in *Body Bizarre*, *Body Beautiful* results in a tumbling out of past and present methods of decorating or changing the human body. *Inside The Australian Ballet*, while also based firmly on personal research and an obvious deep interest in the subject, is a more measured documentation of all the facets of this company.

A sense of fun contributes significantly to a number of entries, including *How to Guzzle Your Garden*, *Anyone Can Cook!*, *Wow!* and *Body Bizarre Body Beautiful*. It is a strong element in the child appeal of these books and in the connection between reader and information. When aligned with a strong sense of the writer as a person as in *How to Guzzle Your Garden*, it deepens the reader's engagement with the book and the information within it. The refreshing and often humorous voice of the young writer of *Cyberscene* adds to the credibility of the information presented for its young adult audience.

Connections between reader and information are reinforced through imaginative design and format in many books. *Dinosaurs*, with its active, dynamic CD ROM style presentation, captures readers immediately. Omnibus should be congratulated for their publishing of *Crash!*, *Zap! Splat! Ka-Pow!* and *Shipwreck at Madman's Corner*. Their bright, magazine style format and innovative design techniques, combined with the deliberate choice of high interest subjects, attract even reluctant readers. In contrast a number of series entries are constrained by the need for uniformity of approach. Many series titles, while not displaying outstanding features, are valuable for the classroom and reflect a response to curriculum needs. *Australia's Money*, with its use

of design to enhance the information presented, illustrates this well.

Knowing and responding to the needs of the intended audience is an important factor in a book's success. *Encyclopedia of Australian Wildlife* presents a great deal of information in a readily accessible format. *Jeemuluk: The Young Noisy Scrub-Bird* uses a story form to introduce young children to what conservation means in concrete terms. It also caters well for the young child's need to know details which adults often gloss over or fail to see from a child's viewpoint. *Straggles of Tidbinbilla* also uses story to communicate information about emus to young children. Neither of these books compromises scientific objectivity for the sake of making the material more interesting for children.

The judges acknowledge the commitment of many authors, illustrators and publishers to a high standard in presentation of information and the courage of some to extend existing boundaries. While moving into new territory in subject, design or complexity is to be encouraged and applauded, there are risks in doing so. One pitfall is failing to consult appropriate authorities to ensure that the information presented is up to date and comprehensive. Editors, authors and illustrators all have a responsibility in this regard, for children deserve to have access to the best available information presented in a way which will bring delight.