

# Introduction

Each of the eight judges for the fiction categories of The Children's Book Council of Australia Awards 2001 was selected by members of the State Branches of The Children's Book Council of Australia (CBCA). This panel comprised Lurna Burnham (ACT), Wendy Kleeman (NT), Joanna Coward (SA), Christine Oughtred (VIC), Judy Thistleton-Martin (NSW), Jane Connolly (QLD), Scott Johnston (TAS) and Carlisle Sheridan (WA). In addition, four judges who were judging the CBCA Eve Pownall Award for children's information books were selected by the Western Australian members of the WA Branch (CBCA). This panel comprised Pippa Lightfoot, Margaret Phillips, Nola Allen and Sue Scott. The final judging meetings for both panels were chaired by the CBCA National President, Lefki Kailis, supported by Awards co-ordinators, Eve Morrissey and Peter Williams.

The breadth of experience on these panels of judges and organisers was considerable. As well as being parents and grandparents of a large number of children representing all age groups of the judging categories, ranging from a newborn baby to teenagers, members of the judging panels included librarians; pre-primary, primary, secondary and tertiary teachers; a book designer; university lecturers in art, children's literature and literacy education; children's literature researchers and an art collector specialising in children's picture book originals. All judges had access to responses to the books from children, teachers and librarians.

After teleconferences and written communication, the final judging by each panel was held in Perth, W.A. The interstate panel met in two excellent locations, Wesley College Junior School Library in South Perth for the first two days, and the Perth Zoo Conference Rooms for the last two days. The Eve Pownall judges met for their final deliberation at Eve Morrissey's house.

All the judges valued the quality of the dedicated work done behind the scenes by Eve Morrissey and Peter Williams. Their masterly organisation, patience, knowledge, good humour and boundless energy provided exactly the right environment for long periods of deliberation about the books. Lefki Kailis chaired the meetings with exactly the right blend of clear-headed patience and determination which allowed all the judges to feel that they had had the appropriate opportunity and time to express their ideas.

As well as the contribution of these important people, the judges wish to acknowledge the support, tolerance and interest provided by their families and friends. Their contributions ranged from helping to shift and sort the boxes of books and arranging quiet times for teleconferences, to providing useful feedback through omnivorous reading, or selective rejection of the books. In addition to their families and friends, the judges are particularly grateful for the support and feedback from many classes of children, teachers, student teachers, colleagues and librarians.



## The Judging Process

The CBCA Children's Book of the Year Awards span five categories, and cover an age range of birth to eighteen years.

There are three age based categories:

- Early Childhood - books suitable for pre-reading or early reading stages (EC)
- Younger Readers - books suitable for child readers from mid to upper primary years (YR)
- Older Readers - books suitable for readers in secondary years (OR)

and two genre categories:

- Picture Books (PB)
- Information Books - known as The Eve Pownall Award (IB).

Publishers entered books in at least one of the four categories, EC, YR, OR or IB. Appropriate books from any of these categories could also be nominated for consideration for the PB award. Some books were entered in three categories, for example PB, YR and IB.

From a total of 340 books judges selected three lists of books in each category: a list of approximately twenty-five books which were included in the CBCA publication *Notable Australian Children's Books 2001* (Notables), from which a list of six books were "Short Listed", and from this list, a "Winner" and two "Honour" books were decided. All decisions were reached by consensus and majority vote.

The judging criteria includes:

*The Judges assess entries for the Awards primarily for literary merit, including cohesiveness in significant literary elements; language chosen carefully for its appropriateness to the theme and style of the work with proper regard to the aesthetic qualities of language; and originality in the treatment of literary elements as they apply to the form of the work. Appeal to the child reader should be taken into account. Judges should also consider quality of illustrations, book design, production, printing and binding.*

CBCA Awards Handbook 2000

## Judges' Comments: Introduction

All categories had a good selection of quality books entered, and the Notables and short lists reflect the range and quality of excellent writing for children being produced in Australia. Dealing with the blurring of the boundaries between all the category groups was a feature of this year's judging experience. The clarification of these issues meant that many books had to be carefully considered several times in different categories.

The new EC category was particularly demanding in terms of decision-making because the criteria needed to be clearly interpreted to differentiate between EC and PB entries. The Awards Handbook states:

The CBCA Awards Handbook 2000 states:

*Book of the Year: Early Childhood awards will be made to books of fiction, drama or poetry for children who are at the pre-reading or early reading stages. They may be picture books, picture story books, or texts in which illustrations play a substantial part in the storytelling or concept development.*

Apart from age groups which generally help to define the themes and content of the books according to different maturity levels and interests, judges felt that there were differences in the presentation of PB and EC books. A good PB is a book where the artwork and text create an artistic whole which is more meaningful than either the text or the pictures alone. Many EC books are illustrated stories, where the pictures deliberately support a young reader and therefore the range of images is restricted. Although many EC books may be picture books, this category also contains junior novels for beginning readers. Similarly, the entries in PB were not all suitable for EC – this year three of the shortlisted PBs, *Fox*, *The Lost Thing* and *The Singing Hat*, have interest levels suitable for younger and older students.

Some entries fitted satisfactorily in a number of categories. *A is for Aunty*, for example, is a short listed book in both PB and IB categories, and was also an entrant in the YR category. Yet the YR entrant *Pannikan & Pinta* was seen to be an illustrated story which did not fit the PB criteria despite the superb illustrations. The judges felt that if the story could be read without reference to the pictures the book is not a PB.

However, there were still some books in both IB and fiction categories which did not fit the criteria available. One was the YR entry, *The Carnival of the Animals*. This is a multi-media package which includes a book of both cartoons and satirical poems, and a CD with musical performance. It provides a complete and valuable multi-media experience for children of many different ages, however, it did not fit satisfactorily into the PB or YR categories. Other books which are difficult to classify are "concept" books, such as counting and alphabet books. These do not fit comfortably into either the fiction or IB sections, but are clearly important EC books.

Both judging panels discussed the problems of judging books in series. The "Deltora Quest" series is an example. The judges vacillated between wanting to consider the series as a single book – that is, a novel printed in eight parts – and finding a single book within the series which "stood alone" as an example of the quality of all of the books. Neither of these ideas provided a solution, given the judging criteria, because the books are designed to fit together as a series. The judges were pleased that the judging criteria were flexible enough to allow the "Deltora Quest" series to figure in the Notables, but were disappointed that it was not possible to short list a series of books. The judges felt that there is room for clarification of the criteria to allow book series more opportunities.

Judges also spent a considerable amount of time discussing the books entered in the OR category which could be considered to be at an adult rather than OR reading level, for example, *Thursday's Child* and *Vigil*. The judges decided that the OR category should include these books which appeal to "literary" teenagers who are already reading widely from adult literature at school and who want to read contemporary teenage material with similar complexity. These readers bring an adult intellect to their reading but have a teenage experience of life, and while they are not a majority they are a significant minority of readers in this category.

Judges discussed the media coverage about "teenage angst" in literature and the community concern about proliferation of depressing themes, such as suicide, violence, unacceptable language and explicit illustrations. The discussion explored issues relating to censorship of school library book selection because of community reactions to books which are "pushing the boundaries". While the judges discussed these issues, they were not considerations in the decisions about the quality of the books themselves in terms of the awards. The judges valued the nature of the CBCA Awards which allow authors and illustrators to present children with changing and challenging literary experiences.

Lack of attention both to editing and factual accuracy was evident in books in all categories. Many IB entries needed careful checking with experts to ensure that both the text and pictures were accurate. Similarly, many of the fiction entries were disconcerting in their disregard for factual accuracy in the development of the fiction, sometimes to the point where it became difficult to suspend disbelief and enter into the world of the fiction. While the judges were overwhelmingly supportive of the high quality entries, they were also clearly outspoken against the publication of trite, inconsequential, condescending publications which have little respect for the intelligence of their child audience.

### **Book of the Year: Early Childhood**

This year is the inaugural year for entries in the EC category. This readership has not been represented significantly in book awards in recent years. As picture books have become more complex and often deal with more mature themes, the simpler books appropriate for early readers have not competed well in the PB category. Similarly, junior novels for beginning readers do not have the potential for exploration of literary features found in richer novels for more experienced fluent readers, so have not been well represented in the YR category. Criteria for judging the EC Award allow for the recognition of quality books for children in many different genres.

However, the judging in this category was not limited to recognition of aspects of the books which support young children as they develop literacy skills. Themes which reflect the early childhood stages of development, attractive presentation which will entice a child to want to open the book, and ideas which will enrich a child's experience are important. These books include those which adults will read to children as well as books which young readers may read themselves.

This year, of the seventy-three books entered in the EC category, twenty-four were selected by the judges as Notables. The Notables include simple books suitable to share with babies and toddlers, for example, *Nighty Night!* and *Can You Keep a Secret?* Books such as *Pog*, *You'll Wake the Baby!* and *Faust's Party* are appropriate for reading to preschool and junior primary children. The list also includes junior novels appropriate for young readers, for example, *The Two Gorillas* and *Lily and the Wizard Wackoo*. Poetry is represented in the wonderfully illustrated *The ABC Book of Nursery Rhymes* in which nursery rhymes were illustrated by thirteen noted Australian artists.



A large number of picture books were represented, understandably, given that one of the criteria for the books is that "illustrations play a substantial part". All the short listed books are picture books, which suggests that there is a gap in the Australian publication of quality junior novels, poetry and non-fiction for very young children. The short listed books are all high quality publications, presented in sturdy hardback formats appropriate for books likely to be "loved to death" by children.

Hopefully, future short lists will include junior novels. Many children's authors are approached to write junior novels, but these are particularly difficult to write successfully. Teachers and parents of those children who are almost independent readers know that there is room for many more books of this type to keep up with the reading needs of these children.

There is also scope for more EC books in the IB category. *Animal Food* is one EC book which is on the IB short list, however, there were not many quality EC books in the IB category this year.

### **Book of the Year: Younger Readers**

This category had the most entries of any category – 145 books were accepted for entry. Of these entries only twenty-five individual titles and the eight books in the "Deltora Quest" series were listed as Notables, almost the same number of Notables as in the EC category which had half the number of entries.

While the category included many books which allow children space to think, imagine and be entertained, the judges expressed disappointment at the poor quality of some of the books entered. While the judges recognise that children need to read a wide range of material to develop literacy competence as well as to develop individual tastes in literature, some individual books and book series were so simplistic, stereotyped and inaccurate in the depiction of events and characters that it was hard to imagine that they could provide rewarding reading experiences. Some books which used animal characters were particularly prone to distortions of animal characteristics through a blend of anthropomorphism and fantasy in a seemingly naturalistic environment, which led to confusing messages being presented. Other books presented factual information accurately, particularly important material which needs wider exposure with children, such as the nature and effect of a child's disability. However, the quality of the writing and editing did not allow these books to become more than "didactic" representations of experience, rather than satisfying literary experiences in their own right.

The judges discussed the role of the Notables to provide a guide for buying and categorising books for schools and libraries. In this respect, they noted difficulties categorising books at the upper end of the YR readers and the lower end of the OR readers. This is complicated by the school system where the ages of the children top of the primary school and bottom of the secondary school are different in different states. As a result of this discussion some books were re-classified, for example, *No-Name Bird* was moved from the YR to the OR category.

Features of the best YR books included natural dialogue, attractive characters and the exploration of many aspects of childhood experience. Some of the historical books were excellent in that they crossed the divide between fiction and non-fiction, providing rich insights into the historical events through the detail in the stories. Some historical events took on a startling new focus, for example, the main significance of the Eureka Stockade as seen through the eyes of Rosa Aarons in *A Banner Bold* was that it interrupted a play!

### Book for the Year: Older Readers

This was the smallest category, with seventy-one titles being entered. However, it included the longest book, *Vigil*, which has 357 pages. Judges noted the high quality of many of the entries, and as a result this category took longer to discuss and judge than any other. After discussing all the entries, the major problem in the judging process was to produce the list of six short listed books. This meant agonising and lengthy deliberations to try to identify six books that were clearly better than the others in terms of the literary criteria. Voting was frustrating and had to be repeated because many books gained the same number of votes. The judges deliberated overnight, and finally a vote the following day resulted in the firm list of seven books being reduced to the current six short listed books. The one which was so close was *Vigil*. Judges expressed their disappointment that the CBC judging criteria did not allow for a seventh short listed book where there are continued "dead heats" in the voting process.

The judges discussed the ways that many of the books provided rich and thought-provoking reading experiences for teenagers. The books covered the usual teenage themes of family and inter-generational relationships, peer group relationships, coping with difference, teenage sexual relationships, rite of passage through traumatic experience, violence and injustice. Overall, the books asserted the value of everyday experience and demonstrated the power teenagers have to take charge of their own lives. There was a wide range of formats, often the stories were told through multiple voices, using verse, chat-line shorthand or contemporary dialogue. The judges were most impressed by the apparent ease of access some of the books provided, presenting a seamless fusion of events, characters and philosophical themes in a format which is attractive and accessible to a wide range of teenage readers. The number of high quality books which appeal to boys in particular was noted. With the focus on visual literacy in schools, secondary students are increasingly interested in the picture books being presented for this age group, and the judges were impressed with the high quality of such picture books.

However, as in the YR category, concern was expressed about the poor editing in some of the teenage novels. The books started promisingly with great characters, interesting situations and settings, but did not develop consistently or had unsuccessful and unsatisfying conclusions. Detailed editing and rewriting would have resulted in fewer disappointments.

## Picture Book of the Year

All eighty-seven entries in this category were also included in one of the other four categories, so were judged twice. This was also the second largest group, and the most varied. Judges were unanimous in their appreciation of the high quality of most of the books entered in this category. The richness and thematic depth of the PB Notables, the variety of media used, the wide range of content and appeal to different ages, made this a particularly interesting and demanding but rewarding category for judging. Judges consistently noted the special Australian quality of many of the books, and words such as "complex", "multi-layered" and "rich" were commonly used during the discussion. It was noted and appreciated that many books were designed so that every page, including endpapers and covers, was used to extend the story.

However, there were some books which had excellent ideas and outstanding pictures but where the design or production of the book detracted from the reading experience. Folds through the middle of faces, unsympathetic colours, unimaginative text placement and irrational differences of picture size were some problems noted, which good editing could have avoided. In this category the book presentation was particularly important, and in deciding on the books for the Notables the judges noted that:

*Judges should also consider quality of illustrations, book design, production, printing and binding.*

CBCA Awards Handbook 2000

## Eve Pownall Award for Information Books

The number of books in the Eve Pownall Award increased this year to eighty-four entries. Thirty-three books were hardback. Nearly half of the books were nominated in other categories and one, *A is for Aunty*, was short listed in both PB and IB categories.

The most active publishers in the field of information books were Random (with the *Investigator* series), Heinemann, Omnibus (Scholastic), Echidna (Heinemann) and Hodder. One publisher of interest was *jukurrpa books*, an imprint of IAD Press in Alice Springs.

The Eve Pownall Award is for "outstanding books which have the intention of documenting factual material with consideration given to imaginative presentation, interpretation and variation in style". Information books can range from the traditional presentation of facts on a topic through to one that involves using a story to convey information. There is a need for all these types of books: children need books that give them information on a subject whether it be for the dreaded school project or for following up an interest or query just as much as they need information books that they can read for pleasure and enrichment. What distinguished the books that came under notice in this category was the quality of the writing and presentation, the design of the book including integration of illustrations and graphics, factual accuracy and the enthusiasm created by the author for the subject.

Again this year, the range of topics covered was very wide. Nearly half the books were on animals/ecology/environment. Interestingly there were few books on social issues: *A Culture of Peace* dealt with organisations working for world peace, and *Sexwise* with issues on sexuality. *Sexwise* tackled the issue of sex education in a different way – less about the mechanics of it all and more about relationships with quirky line illustrations, chatty



engaging text and many short real life vignettes. Humour featured in a number of books. *Stamp, Stomp, Whomp (and Other Interesting Ways to Get Rid of Pests)* was a chatty eco-friendly text and the short listed *Sick As – Bloody Moments in the History of Medicine* had all the sick humour and grotty detailed Roland Harvey illustrations to keep any child (and adult) reader amused. What a wonderful way to make that dry subject, the history of medicine, fascinating and enthralling for the reader!

Indigenous issues underlie the stories in *A is for Aunty*, *Ernie Dingo: King of the Kids* and *Down the Hole, Up the Tree, Across the Sandhills...Running from the State and Daisy Bates*. All three are told from the indigenous point of view in a non-confrontational way.

There were a number of biographies. *Ernie Dingo: King of the Kids* is an adaptation of the adult biography and successfully captures the childhood of Ernie. However it is marred by lapses in continuity. *Nan Chauncy: a Writer's Life* was submitted but the judges felt that, although it is about a children's author, it was not written for children as the audience. On the other hand *Marsden on Marsden* was written by the author for his teenage readers.

Because of the wide range in the design, format, quality and subject of the books in this category the judges found it difficult to make generalisations that are valid for all. A feature of this category was the large number of series – approximately one third of the books submitted. The quality of these series varied. In many of them the author remained the same for the whole series. They were produced to a formula with graphics/photographs being repeated and the text seemingly being seen as secondary to the design chosen for the series. While many of them were pleasant to look at, the writing often lacked depth, verve and imagination. These books nevertheless do fulfil a need in libraries and will continue to find a ready market.

However there was a number of series that stood out. While this year there were not many quality books for the very young, the short listed book *Animal Food* was one of a series which used simple text and excellent photographs to create an information book for the very beginning reader. The "Endangered Animals of Australia" series was one that was noteworthy for its setting out, excellent photographs and clarity of text. *Ned Kelly* and *Eureka Stockade* of the "Australian Library" series also were imaginative in the way these books used reproductions of historical photographs and paintings, ballads of the day and excerpts from letters.

Two other series were in the smaller A5 format. The "Investigator" series was innovative. Its topics were chosen as a result of a survey of the interests of the intended market – boys in the upper primary range. The books have different authors but the authors were not highlighted in the book – the consultant and illustrator were seen as more important. The publisher thus aimed to ensure the accuracy of the text. Full of interesting facts, enticing to dip into, they were brightly illustrated although at times the background tended to obscure the text. They were arranged in the traditional way with glossary, index and further reading including websites. This series seemed to be aimed at an international market as the Australian content was not dominant. Those in the series on the continents were less successful as the topic for each was too large to be covered successfully. The other series, "Solo", was aimed at a younger age group and included books on wildlife, travel and Australian bush babies.



Factual accuracy was still a problem with some books, even if the errors are ones of omission. This also could be the result of trying to simplify the text for younger readers. This was not acceptable as children's ability to understand technical terms in context should not be underestimated. It was a pity when well-designed, attractive books such as the "Bush Tuckerman" series had factual errors.

Many books were let down by poor design, crowded text and generally pedestrian writing making them uninspiring and difficult to read. Despite this, these books are purchased because they fulfil a need and are cheap. It is a pity that some publishers seem constrained from going that one stage further and making books that attract and reward the reader as well as satisfy the need for information.

On the reverse however there were books that pushed the boundaries. *Olympia: Warrior Athletes of Ancient Greece* was an outstanding example of an innovative approach to a topic by a publisher. The artist was encouraged to research the topic and produce his drawings; the text followed. The action and movement in the illustrations, the arrangement of the pictures on the page and the deliberate occasional use of colour all combined to make this a stunning information book. *Pole to Pole* was an example of a book that had been designed very carefully and thoughtfully so that all aspects were integrated and consistent throughout, from the tern that flies through the pages to the half circles enclosing the text and the star charts. Who can forget the detailed drawings of the Sydney Harbour bridge painstakingly drawn in *Building the Sydney Harbour Bridge* or the bright naïve style paintings in *A is for Auntie* or cartoons in *Sick As: Bloody Moments in the History of Medicine?* This year's entries in the Eve Pownall Award for Information Books show that some Australian publishers are producing outstanding and innovative information books.

### Judges' Comments: Conclusion

The overall impression the judges gained from reading and discussing the books published for children in 2000 is the wide range and variety of the themes, subject matter, style and publication formats presented for all age groups. There were many recurring topics in the books in all categories, as is expected in publications which respond to the interests of children.

Appropriately for books published in 2000, the year of the Olympic Games, there were many IB and fiction books about sport. Stories included those of runners, swimmers, racing greyhounds, soccer players, rugby players, Olympians and the history of the Olympics. Also, appropriately, leading up to the year of the celebration of the Centenary of Federation, there were many books which commented on or were set in periods of Australia's social and political history. These included *Edward Britton*, set in a boys' prison in Tasmania; the "My Stories" series; the evocative tale from the Kelly gang era *Whistle Man* and *The Hidden* which explored the practice of "black birding" during the early days of the pearling industry in Broome. There were also many books with an historical perspective set outside Australia, notably *No-Name Bird*, set in East Timor in the 1970s and *Lady Dance* set in medieval Europe.

Innovations included the multiple voice presentation possible through the Internet "chat-room" format. *What's Hector McKerrow Doing These Days?* was a positive example of the power of this format for the development of character, theme and plot. *Remote Man* was another innovation in format with the use of emails and computer graphic designs. On the other hand, the use of the icon buttons in *Sick As: Bloody Moments in the History of Medicine* does not work as well because when they are pressed nothing happens.

As usual, fantasy characters were included in books for every age group, monsters in *Pog* and *Inside Mary Elizabeth's House*, the 'lost thing' in *The Lost Thing* and angels in *Ferren and the Angel*. *Incognito*, *Blackout* and *Breakaway* demonstrated chilling futuristic environments, and traditional fantasy worlds were presented in the "Deltora Quest" series and *Rhianna and the Wild Magic*.

There was humour in some entries in all categories. Notable examples were *Troy Thompson's Radical Prose Portfolio*, *Spy Babies* and *Sick As: Bloody Moments in the History of Medicine*. Many of the books dealing with serious issues such as violence and abuse, for example, *Fighting Ruben Wolfe* and the verse novel *The Simple Gift*, included some of the finest humour. However, some books offered little apart from the humour, and collections of verse were particularly disappointing in this regard.

As children and teenagers delight in emotion and drama of all kinds there were also many books dealing sensitively with unhappy, violent or dramatic problems. Family tragedies were explored in *The Colour of Sunshine*, *The Shape*, *Missing You*, *Love Sara* and *Small Sacrifices*. Mental illness and disability were also topics, presented in different forms in *Lady Dance*, *What's Hector McKerrow Doing These Days?* and *Thursday's Child*. The problem of adult illiteracy was used sensitively in *Something's Fishy*, *Hazel Green!* Race relationships and reconciliation were issues in books in all categories, notably *Two Hands Together*, *Nips XI*, *Nukkin Ya*, *Ernie Dances to the Didgeridoo*, *Ernie Dingo: King of the Kids* and *Down the Hole, Up the Tree, Across the Sandhills . . . Running from the State and Daisy Bates*.

Most characters in the fiction categories were human, but there was a rich selection of fantasy and animal characters. In addition, over half the IB entries dealt with animals and the environment. Of the animal characters in the fiction categories, birds and dogs seemed to be the most common, which reflects the strong emotional ties children have with these everyday pets. Dogs included the embarrassing "Miffy" in *Fighting Ruben Wolfe*, the greyhound "Monster" in *Dogs*, the lost dog that attaches itself to Nathan in *Vigil*, "Biff" and "Buff" in *The Pocket Dogs*, "Faust" in *Faust's Party*, and there was even a dog confusingly named "Bear" in *A Dog Called Bear*. Significant birds were the courageous pelicans in *Pannikin & Pinta*, the homing pigeons in *Away with the Birds*, the tern which links the ideas in *Pole to Pole*, the fighting cock in *No-Name Bird* and the birds which are spiritual messengers in *The Game of the Goose*.

Throughout the judging process, all the judges consistently demonstrated their respect for the nature of the creative process of the writers and artists and their concern for children and the quality of their literary experiences. Overall the judging experience was wonderful - intensive and unparalleled. Judges shared good company with new friends in new places and enjoyed intellectual discussion, humour, philosophical debate and personal insights. They explored a wide range of vicarious and real experiences, and appreciated good food and wine at excellent venues, and ran the gauntlet of emotional experiences ranging from excitement to exhaustion.