

Edited by Kerry Neary

Judges of the Book of the Year Awards 2006

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Beryl Siemionow (SA)

Leonie McNair (TAS)

Susan La Marca (VIC)

Margaret Robson Kett (WA)

and the NSW-based Panel for the Eve Pownall Award

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Book of the Year Awards

Introduction

Aside from the excellence of the short listed books and those selected for the Notables list - even those that failed to achieve just one more vote to reach the qualifying tally of six - there was a shortfall in the quality of entries for this year, as measured against the criteria for these Awards. Perhaps this was a reflection of the trend towards the publication of series directed at the popular market, especially for the Younger Readers readership. In future Awards, publishers might want to consider whether such entries can meet the literary scrutiny required of this competition.

However, success in popular sales gives publishers some leeway to develop new writing and illustrating talent. The value of such investment is shown in the representation of authors and illustrators new to Australian children's literature in this year's list of notable books, being almost one quarter (including late bloomer 86 year old Amy Lissiat - as if CT, but we did enjoy the anagram!). The emergence of so many new authors and illustrators as well as fresh directions taken by known authors and illustrators, indicates that Australian children's literature will continue to maintain the high standards for which it is renowned.

Some adventurous formats enlivened the publications entered this year. A variety in sizes of books will attract attention and be comfortable for small hands to hold and young readers to cradle. Sculptured pages also attract reader attention and this device varied from sculptured edges of the entire book to holes that draw the reader through the story to a bright and felicitous colour at the end. Fold outs were again used to extend pages in many directions and to attract, extend interest and build suspense for the reader. At a time when publishers are consciously producing books in formats that are affordable, many still venture to produce expensive editions in hardcover and even with dust jackets. This is commendable in reminding young readers of the book's aesthetic appeal over digital forms. In one case a bejewelled and sculptured cover gave a luxurious invitation to the reader to enter the book.

An interesting field of picture books, with several innovative contributions, was submitted this year. Picture books can be written for children of all ages and are seen by the judges as distinct from the writing forms that are required by the Early Childhood, Younger Readers and Older Readers categories. Nonetheless, a book can be considered notable in one of these categories as well as being notable as a picture book. Before considering the particular merits of picture books, the judges made a clear decision on the distinguishing criteria of the picture book 'genre' (as stated in the Awards Handbook).

Thus, an illustrated book is one in which the illustrations depict fairly literally what is being described by the text. The characters may be illuminated, the action may be portrayed, but there is little expansion upon the narrative. Illustrated books, of course, can be published in picture book format.

In the picture book genre, however, the illustrations not only represent what is happening in the text but they also amplify and expand upon it. In an exceptional picture book, the illustrations harmonise well with the narrative but they also communicate ideas that take the reader beyond the limits of the written word without conflicting with it. Those authors who achieved success this year in the picture book category produced books where the text was strong and the accompanying illustrations offered a further wealth of ideas for the reader to enjoy.

The judges were impressed by the deceptive simplicity of a number of works across the categories. Stories told with pared back language or in some cases draped over simple structures often belied great depth of content and emotional scope.

Notions of philosophy were a common thread, explored through several thought provoking and discussion evoking works. This was an enriching and illuminating element of this year's field and impressively, these works covered a broad range of ages. Unusual treatments were found in several picture books, including the creative questing for happiness, a direct though open-ended treatise on spirituality, and innovative and quirky philosophy.

This year's reading saw families wrestling with mental illnesses such as bi-polar disorder, depression and schizophrenia. In several notable works authors were able to provide shimmers of credible optimism as a counterpoint to despair in the face of unremitting bleakness. Without exception, these works resounded with the ring of lived experience.

A number of books confronted grief and loss with powerful authenticity. Death came in many guises, via the waste of war, through illness,

avoidable accident or mystery. Treatments of the healing process ranged from the folkloric to the realistic and extended into the supernatural. Often, treatments of tragedy were tempered with refreshing though poignant humour which further served to underline tragedy's contrariety while moderating events for the young reader.

There was a welcome increase in the number of notable humorous books in general. Humour appeared both in its own right and as a device for handling more than one weighty theme. The full spectrum of reading pleasure was there, from the wryly-turned-up-corner-of-a-smile to the muscle wrenching release of a cathartic belly laugh.

These then, are the books which the 2006 judges found most outstanding in their categories, in the context of the Awards criteria. We strongly commend your attention as well, to the books selected for the *Notable Australian Children's Books 2006* lists for each category.

Eve Pownall Award for Information Books

Information books submitted this year ranged from narrative presentations, interlaced with facts in both the text and illustrations, to the traditional presentation of information that can be accessed by retrieval tools such as contents and index pages. A variety of approaches is important to cater for the needs, interests and abilities of children. Some information books are used for academic purposes and so require detailed facts, while others are designed to stimulate further reading and investigation of a topic.

The judges were pleased with the range of topics that met and extended the recreational and informational needs of children. The inclusion of entries such as *The Glory Garage* and *Bodytalk* emphasised that subject matter and aged-based materials are extremely relevant to this category. Both are high-quality examples for adolescent readers, which facilitate honest discussion about current cultural and personal issues.

The judges were encouraged that some publishers were moving away from the pattern of dividing a topic into sections each covering a double-page spread. While parts of the topic may suit this format, indepth discussion of important issues may be better served by allowing authors to go beyond page limitations created by a design template.

It should be noted that this award is not aimed exclusively at any age group: early childhood, primary or lower secondary children. Nor does it

limit itself to books designed to support the school curriculum. This year the judges noted a pleasing increase in the range of information titles for older readers. While there is a significant amount of material aimed at encouraging the wellbeing of teenage girls, the judges would be pleased to see companion material for their male counterparts.

It was pleasing to see that some titles included juxtaposition between contemporary and historical issues, enhancing the historical presentation. However, there still seems to be some reticence among authors and publishers to explore topics in sufficient depth to challenge readers. Controversy in social, historical and environmental aspects of topics seems to be generally avoided. This leads in some cases to very bland texts.

White space, well-captioned and relevant images enhance any information work but judicious use of images must always be a priority when presenting factual information. Many information titles are effectively modelled on fictional works with quirky-style illustrations, fonts, contents pages and layout that will be well received by young readers of the 21st century whose own knowledge of fonts and layout has been developed by their exposure to computers.

Australian history figured prominently in books submitted this year. It was pleasing to see that most of these used primary as well as secondary sources, and that sources were acknowledged in a manner that provided a good model for readers. The one or two exceptions to this rule were notable: it seems arrogant for authors or publishers to think that today's students are not being taught to seek such information in any 'factual' publication.

Accuracy is of prime importance with information books. Judges again noted that more accurate proofreading to correct errors of fact is imperative. Additionally, care should be taken to ensure that images are correctly captioned and relevant to the information presented. Several books were notable for their obvious lack of careful checking in these areas. Factual content was disappointing in some titles where the author was not a subject specialist, and the use of stock photos with facile captioning did a disservice to readers.

It was pleasing to note that many authors who are not subject specialists in the topic area are consulting with specialists, such as the Australian War Memorial, and providing detailed endnotes. These authors bring their enthusiasm and passion to the topic, which is evidenced by producing empowering, encouraging and exciting books. Additionally, consultation with an acknowledged subject specialist produces a high quality, credible and authoritative work.