

THE CHILDREN'S BOOK COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIA

BOOK OF THE YEAR AWARDS

JUDGES' REPORT 2008

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THE JUDGES' REPORT

INTRODUCTION

The 2008 Children's Book Council of Australia Awards saw a total of 453 books entered across the five categories. The Winners, Honour Books, Short Lists, and Notable Lists were the outcome of two weekend meetings with the judges, awards coordinators and chairperson, all of whom brought wide knowledge and experience to the task. The decisions were not individual ones, but made through consensus after extensive discussions.

The books we received are testament to the talent of Australia's authors, illustrators and the publishers, talent that enables us to enjoy such literary excellence. The strength across all categories invited long Notable lists. This provided an inspiring challenge throughout the year and invigorating discussions when the judges met in Melbourne. Rules of eligibility were tested in many ways, illustrating the confidence of Australian publishing for our young people.

Quality book design has been a notable feature, with many authors, illustrators and publishers taking risks to produce exciting and innovative approaches in all categories.

This year has seen a recurrence of the fascination with the Middle East, evident in several books. Many works address contemporary issues in the world of today's young people, such as refugees, death (not always as a central issue), the diversity of Australian society, country towns, family relationships and the environment. The treatment of people with disabilities in mainstream society featured in several titles in different categories.

A wide use of intertextuality, with references to fairy and traditional stories adding depth and familiarity, provided readers with a springboard to further reading and discussion.

Across all categories there was a mix of traditional and contemporary literature and lifestyles, with exceptional books from Indigenous creators and titles that encompassed Indigenous themes. History underpinned many of the books, giving readers a refreshing and informative experience; from Ancient Egypt to the recent Australian past, events have been realistically represented with identifiable characters and themes.

A number of young writers' work featured this year, providing a voice and incentive for the next generation of authors and illustrators. Category boundaries were blurred by a number of books: exemplary titles, such as *Pharaoh: The boy who conquered the Nile* and *Master of the Books* were discussed at length to determine which category was suitable. The continuation of excellent series across all categories is to be commended.

Other trends included feisty female characters, druids, affirmation from others and encouragement to be yourself, ponies, penguins, irritating protagonists, the importance of grandparents, surfing girls and the effective utilisation of end papers in design, and in preceding and concluding the narrative. There were a number of re-workings and adaptations of well-known stories and, interestingly, several titles with the name 'Lucy'.

Australian children's literature is rich with ground breaking, heart-warming and sometimes angst-ridden material, and we congratulate all involved in the industry.

OLDER READERS

The decision by the judges that 20 books of the 58 entered were Notable indicates the depth of quality in this year's entries. Science fiction and fantasy were common, but realism was still popular, with a number of stories set in country towns, and many that focused on the harsher side of life for teenagers. It was extremely pleasing that so many books had a humorous bent, many flavoured with a darker tone. Most encouraging was an increase in the number of books that are changing the face of publishing for older readers, such as books that incorporate multi-media, graphics, artistry and unusual writing styles.

Rite-of-passage and topical issues in teenage lives were recurring themes, while multiculturalism and environmental issues were not as prevalent in this year's entries. Titles from a range of publishers made the Short List, and many of those publishers pushed the boundaries of what is a book for older teenagers. The paperback format seemed to be the preferred medium for titles in this category, with only one published in hardback.

In a marked comparison with previous years, only one of the shortlisted titles was by a first-time author, with many 'old hands' showcasing their consummate skills once again. The high level of creativity shown by these talented authors created much discussion amongst the judges, and made the judging process challenging. It was a pleasure and a privilege to be able to read so many books of such high standard.

YOUNGER READERS

Entries in this category encompass the years when readers are consolidating their skills, so that illustrations may still play an important part in scaffolding the written text. The judges therefore acknowledge the work of illustrators in the annotations for these entries.

The judges particularly commend authors on their skilful storytelling for this age group, and are appreciative of the numerous fine examples of good short fiction. Many series continued to encourage younger readers to extend their reading progress. Familiar ones like *Ranger's Apprentice*, the *Quentaris Chronicles*, *The Chain of Charms*, *Doomsday Rats* and *Fantastica* (presented as an impressive quartet), were joined by new series such as *Bonnie and Sam*, plus sequels/conclusions to *The Book of Lies* and the *Dragonkeeper* trilogies. Other series skilfully combined fact with fiction as found in *Making Tracks*, a Museum of Australia initiative. As with previous years, the increased number of series has meant some difficulty in the judging process to ascertain if titles 'stand alone'. However, the Notable list of 30 titles is testament to the many excellent books available in this category.

Popular themes this year included bullying and dragons, and many titles contained philosophical undercurrents. Despite some mismatching of language and form with illustration, judges noted that texts, illustrations and cover designs in many instances matched well, and the books were language and age appropriate. There were also many excellent additions to the *Aussie Nibbles*, *Bites* and *Chomps* titles, as well as some fine debut novels from young authors, and some quality adaptations. All these factors ensured quality books for today's younger readers that reflect contemporary society as well as encouraging their reading enjoyment.

EARLY CHILDHOOD

The Early Childhood entries for this year's awards were strong in quality, design and originality. There were 107 entries, 87 of which were also entered as picture books. Several series for the intended age group, between 0 - 7, were entered, ensuring young readers have titles with which they are familiar in design and layout. The *Puffin Baby* series is durable and reliable, while Alison Lester's trio of animal books are just the right size for little hands. Several books centred on the small events so important to little children.

PICTURE BOOKS

The number of notable titles is evidence of the strength of the picture book field in 2008; thirty-five titles in all were recognised as Notable, signifying an increased level of excellence in this area. The spread of publishers also indicates a broad commitment to producing high-quality picture books, of which a significant number challenged the traditional picture book form.

This year there was an increase in the number of titles that demand a more sophisticated visual literacy of readers of all ages, using perspective, complex colour palettes, and graphic novel panelling conventions. Many of these also tackled contemporary and large-scale social issues, framing them in an

accessible format for young people. A number of excellent books represented those displaced – physically, culturally and emotionally.

In line with these more difficult thematic representations there has been an attempt to broaden the scope of the definition of picture books, with a number of creators taking risks with their work, including a couple of titles that challenged the criteria of the Awards in their re-interpretation of previously-published work. Challenging themes include personally-created realities and perceptions of the truth, social acceptance, convention subversion and anti-consumerism.

Close attention was given to careful collaboration between author, illustrator and publishers. Production values were high, with a holistic approach to the quality that didn't overwhelm the delicate balance of the narrative and picture relationship.

INFORMATION BOOKS

The 62 books entered covered topics which included Indigenous Australia, the natural world, Australian history and biographies. It was particularly encouraging to see previously less well-known historical events receive prominence in books such as *The House that Was Built in a Day: Anzac Cottage* and *The Catalpa Escape*. Some titles successfully integrated both primary and secondary sources: *Written True, Not Gammon, Whose Land?* and *Ned Kelly's Jerilderie Letter* were notable in this regard. Despite the inclusion of a number of books on music in this year's entries, there was a disappointing lack of books on the arts in general.

The pleasing increase in entries about Indigenous Australians was complemented by increased cultural sensitivity and correct acknowledgment of sources. Several books paid particular attention to presenting events from an Indigenous perspective, which was encouraging. However, it was disappointing to note that in some cases there was a lack of editorial care; this meant that there was confusion between Aboriginal/Aborigine and a lack of capitalisation for both the words 'Indigenous' and 'Aborigines'. Indeed, editorial problems resulted in grammatical errors, missing words and poorly-labelled and illegible maps in a number of titles.

Some covers were inviting and cleverly designed, others less so. Publishers should be aware when posing questions on the cover of a book that the answers need to be easily retrievable through the index. Furthermore, greater care is needed to ensure that indexes are useful, adequately covering the contents – particularly where there is a complex text.

There were books in which the referencing was detailed, relevant and clearly differentiated between sources designed for children to further investigate the topic and those used for the author's own research. Unfortunately, others did not make this distinction clear. Additionally, although most books entered had a

clearly identifiable audience of young readers, others were really directed at adults and not suitable for this Award.

Graphic design is particularly important in information books and a number excelled in this area. However, in some books there was a mismatch between the style of illustration used and the material presented. In particular, the use of cartoons often trivialized the serious nature of a text, and publishers are encouraged to give this aspect of book production more consideration.

Book production this year ranged from the sumptuously produced *The Search for Tutankhamun*, the stylishly designed *Girl Stuff*, to the inexpensive *The Surfing Scientist* and *Prehistoric Australia*. This means Australian information books are available to the widest possible audience.

In summary, the judges have enjoyed reading the information books and selecting the best of them. They were pleased with the variety of topics covered, the wide range of audiences addressed, and the variety of techniques used to illustrate the texts. The Short List reflects the diversity of excellent information books available to young readers in Australia.

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The Children's Book Council of Australia

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