

The Children's Book Council of Australia

## BOOK OF THE YEAR AWARDS

### JUDGES' REPORT 2009

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## INTRODUCTION

There were 451 titles in the 2009 Children's Book Council Awards, being almost the same number as the previous year. Judges in the Information Book category read a total of 77 entries, and judges of fiction books read 374 items, with nearly half of these being for Younger Readers. This strong field of entries was vibrant and highly varied in all categories, and indicative of the excellence of publishing for children in Australia.

Discussion of all titles by the panel of professional interstate judges was well informed, articulate, lively, and inclusive of different opinions and perspectives. All decisions were made following extensive debate and many rounds of voting, with the thoroughness of the process ensuring that the very best children's literature has been honoured.

A number of books entered for this year's awards crossed category boundaries, including the challenging war-based title *Then* and the futuristic title *The Changeling* which may be suitable for either older or younger readers. Other titles were assessed in several categories such as Early Childhood and Picture Book, or Younger Reader and Eve Pownall.

Judges were interested in authors who enabled the reader to *live* the story rather than view it from the outside, making sure that the internal logic and the narrative shape of stories were consistently developed. A high level of innovation in style, design, topic, concept and illustration was enjoyed, with many of the books also having a simple but powerful message.

Endpapers were used to effect in a number of titles, and a range of graphic styles within the stories included collage, watercolours, prints, sketches, computer animation and sequential art. Muted colours with a restricted palette were used for gentler topics, whilst bright primary colours were highlighted particularly in titles using Indigenous art approaches.

Subject matter frequently related to concepts of adaptation and belonging, including explorations of the actions and emotions of those who feel that they don't belong. Consequent problems such as depression, drug use, self harm, relationship difficulties and even death were examined through carefully developed stories for older readers, whilst other authors used the picture book format to illustrate world issues such as refugees and the environment. Picture books also developed strong Australian heritage links, offering new perspectives on legendary tales.

Thoroughly researched historical fiction was well represented, as were futurism and fantasy. Popular culture was explored for older readers, and for younger readers the rhythms of daily life were shown through text, pictures and design. Whilst the several collections of short stories and of traditional rhymes that were entered were a little patchy in quality, they nevertheless showed a high level of creativity.

Anthropomorphism abounded in the younger age categories, usually successfully and sometimes spectacularly unsuccessfully. Camels, penguins and the usual array of Australian animals were shown in many differing ways. Standard fare of horse and pony books mostly of interest to girls was matched with boy-focussed action-packed stories including cockroaches, ferrets and killer whales.

The outstanding skills of Australian illustrators were showcased across the categories, whilst authors matched this pictorial innovation with stories varying from baby-based fun to teenage angst, from harsh reality-based dramas to complex fantasy quests, and from past to present to future settings and scenarios.

## **OLDER READERS**

Australian novels published for young adults in 2008 were generally not as strong as in most years; particularly in the genre of contemporary realism. Despite this, an outstanding core group of young adult fiction was selected for the 2009 CBCA Book of the Year: Older Readers Shortlist as well as the Notables. These included a number of publications that are clearly world class in their innovative structure.

A number of the novels published in 2008 could be classed as 'crossover': aimed at an adult as well as a young adult readership. This 'crossover' trend is becoming more prevalent and leads to a blurring of the boundaries between these two audiences, impacting on a number of features such as cover design, marketing and promotion and age of characters. It was pleasing to see a number of quality publications aimed at the younger spectrum of secondary students; many of whom are still avid readers and needing literary nurturing.

The re-emergence of the quality psychological thriller was welcomed, as were historical novels, especially those profiling little-known aspects of Australia's history. Impeccably developed fantasy worlds were created and peopled with warm-blooded male and female characters. The emergence of some promising new authorial voices was also valued.

## **YOUNGER READERS**

This category caters for children who are independent readers but still developing an appreciation of literature. This year the category attracted 123 entries and included a wide but balanced range of genre, themes and reading levels.

Fiction based on historical themes, particularly those that highlighted details of Australian history which are no longer widely known, were welcome inclusions, thus benefitting this age group's knowledge and appreciation of their heritage. In contrast several books presented insights into other cultures and associated traditions and histories, encouraging readers to be aware and sensitive to the wider world.

Humour was represented with varying degrees of success however the pictorial depiction of humour for this age group was often excellent. Series of mostly humorous shorter stories with varied themes appealing to particular audiences continue to be a useful component of this category.

Fantasy still featured prominently with several authors continuing established series and some new voices creating innovative and exciting speculative fiction set in Australia. Some titles were complex and highly imaginative and aimed at the higher level readers, while others used the fantasy paradigm to create lucid, yet appropriate, works for emerging readers.

Personal growth with associated issues of grief, loss, trauma and unhappiness have been tackled without hesitation but with sensitivity and consummate skill producing powerful and authentic stories that avoid patronising the young reader.

Some of the YR illustrated books were as strong as the novels, and this is due, in part, to the excellent offerings in the *Aussie Nibbles*, *Bites* and *Chomps* series. With so many quality titles to read and consider, the Younger Readers category was a pleasure to decide, and the breadth of both themes and styles bodes well for the future.

## **EARLY CHILDHOOD**

The Early Childhood entries for this year's Awards numbered 120, many of which were also nominated for the Picture Book category. There were several series entered which were designed especially for the very young – small format, very simple illustrations and with a minimum of text. This will prove to be a wonderful entry into the world of books for this particular group.

The judges were impressed with the overall quality of the entries – those books shortlisted and deemed Notable were all worthy of high praise and deserved to be recognised. Simple storylines, complemented by outstanding illustrations ensure our Early Childhood readers a wide range of high quality books to enliven their young lives and send their imaginations soaring. Recurring themes included – my place in the world, the everyday rhythms of life and simply belonging and being accepted.

It is particularly noteworthy that many of the books chosen as Notable in the Early Childhood category, were of such high standard that they were also included as Notables in the Picture Book category. This is an excellent indicator of the health and wealth of talent writing and illustrating for young children today.

## **PICTURE BOOKS**

The judges were impressed by the large number of high quality picture books that continue to be published despite production costs and difficult economic times.

The overwhelming majority of entries in this category were books suitable for the younger age-range. Most were gentle, encouraging stories. Books with confronting themes, or themes demanding considerable maturity, were few.

Entries featured a great variety of illustrative style and use of colour. Noteworthy were very simple cartoon illustrations using a limited palette, richly and brilliantly coloured work drawing its inspiration from traditional aboriginal designs, clever use of panelling, and perspective employed in a very dramatic manner.

Once again, there were a number of self-published books in the category. While none of these met the judging criteria in sufficient degree to merit short-listing, or the designation 'Notable Book', three works among them deserve special mention. One was beautifully illustrated in a traditional Chinese style, another was an exceptionally well-designed book that told its story principally through the medium of photographs, and a third the work of a particularly talented child.

Exactly where individual illustrated books belonged in terms of the awards categories was a matter discussed by the judges. In particular, a large number of books had been entered in both the Early Childhood and Picture Book categories, and whether they fitted the criteria of both equally well was a debatable matter. As with all judging issues, the matter was finally decided by vote in the case of each individual book.

## **INFORMATION BOOKS**

The increased number of 77 books entered for the 2009 Eve Pownall Award for Information Books indicates a pleasing growth in local non-fiction publishing for children. It also validates the worthiness of the genre and its place in our national children's literature. The 2009 entries represent a broad spectrum of subjects, a readership from infants to adolescents and a great many approaches to stimulating design.

The variety among the entries challenges the misperception that information books are synonymous with classroom curriculum resources. Specific utility is not a criterion of the awards. Instead, the judges are ever mindful of the guiding principle of the awards which recognises books which have the prime intention of documenting factual information with consideration given to imaginative presentation, interpretation and variation of style. While a small number of entries were of the 32 pp topical spread design, as favoured by educational publishers, the judges were impressed by the majority of entries that deviated from that constrained and ubiquitous format. Across all ages, the appeal of non-fiction to the recreational

reader is sure to be enhanced by the growing variety of content, presentation and style within the genre.

Thirty-one publishers, from the major houses to the self published, entered titles in the 2009 awards. Good design is vital in attracting readers and clearly presenting textual and pictorial information so it was pleasing to see some self-publishers engage professional book designers to make their books optimally attractive and functional to readers. In so doing, some corporate entries matched the publishing houses in their high standard of production and reader suitability, most notably *Tuart Dwellers*, published by the Western Australia Department of Environment and Conservation. Smaller publishers need to be mindful of production quality; it was disappointing to note each copy of one notable title fell apart for the want of better binding.

The entries ranged right across the broad spectrum of Dewey subject divisions with history, particularly Australian history, and natural history being the most abundant. Among the subjects, various approaches were taken in the presentation of the information. Picture books were particularly effective in conveying a strong sense and appreciation of time and place in their pictorial detail, such as *The Dog on the Tuckerbox*, *The Boy from Bowral* and *Phar Lap the Wonder Horse*. Judges felt some authors, in trying to present history appealingly to a new generation of readers, misused humour in text and cartoon illustration to the extent of lampooning their subjects; in other titles, cartoon illustration enhanced understanding of the text. Other authors effectively interpreted and presented Australian history through a historic survey of postage stamps and art.

Lapses in editorial diligence were evident in a small number of titles with a few factual errors, imprecise language eg *pine forests have grown smaller*, unclear meaning and careless writing eg *The tiny Blue-ringed Octopus can fit into the palm of your hand*. Writers need to be mindful of how their texts may be read and interpreted.

Conceptually and textually, some entries appeared to have been primarily intended for a mainstream audience. While having potential interest for some child and youth readers, such books, it was felt, would better suit a wider, general readership which would more fully appreciate their textual as well as pictorial content. Some titles purported to be published for children but their preliminary pages were clearly addressed to adults. It was also noted that some books listed in their recommended reading, mainstream titles that were in text and concept much more advanced than that of the text recommending them, as if their recommendations were for teachers rather than the child readers of the particular book.

In summary, the judges are impressed by the diversity and quality of Australian information books available to our children and are particularly pleased to see a growing number of titles being published for adolescent readers, notably, aptly designed books like *Girlforce Friends*. The judges feel privileged to commend what they regard as a very distinctive and highly worthy set of six shortlisted books for the 2009 Eve Pownall Award for Information Books.

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