

JUDGES' REPORT 2011

INTRODUCTION

With 403 entries in the fiction categories and 59 entries in the Eve Pownall Award for Information Books, the total of 462 books represents a slight increase on last year's 455 submissions. As the reports for each category indicate, a broad range of topics offered the judges a breadth of reading experiences.

This was the year for women writers and illustrators in all fiction categories. Twenty of the 24 shortlisted writers are women, and 13 women illustrators are also represented in the Short Lists, some of whom are both authors and illustrators. The CBCA has been unfairly accused in the past of 'ignoring' women but anyone who understands the rigour of the judging process will appreciate that the Short Lists emerge regardless of gender or any other attribute, and this year happens to have been a particularly strong one for female creators.

The high standard of entries in all categories meant that voting was extremely tight and went to a number of rounds before Short Lists were finalised. Once again, the judges stress that the Notables represent fine titles that in another year might have made the Short Lists. They urge readers to explore and enjoy the rich variety to be found in the Notable books alongside the six that ultimately emerged as the top titles in each category.

Themes of identity and coming of age were predominant again and were encountered in all genres from contemporary realism, paranormal, speculative and historical to the verse novel in two interesting entries in the Older Readers Category. Historical fiction, particularly Australian history, was popular in both Older and Younger Readers, with Jackie French contributing several excellent accounts as diverse as ancient Greece, Australia at the cusp of Federation, bushranging and Queen Victoria's underpants in this genre.

Several titles used the 2009 Victorian bushfires as the catalyst for their narrative, but the judges felt that some achieved realism and integration of the theme into the story more successfully than others.

If last year was the year of the chook, this year there were dragons galore in the Early Childhood and Picture Book categories. From a boy who didn't believe in them, a girl who went hunting for them and a 'dragon wash' small business enterprise, there was a dragon for every reader in 2010.

Some trends noted this year include a significant number of young authors under the age of 20, with some foreshadowing a successful writing career in the future. Books with contemporary indigenous themes were welcomed, particularly those created by community schools and successful collaborations such as *Me and My Dad* and *Shake a Leg!* both of which are Notable. A delightful trend is that a number of established creators have begun working with their offspring: Kym and Oliver Lardner; Bruce and

Ben Smith Whatley; Sally Morgan and Ezekiel Kwaymullina, while the Niland dynasty has moved into the third generation.

In this electronic age, is there a revival of the book as a beautiful object? Many entries demonstrated that great care had been taken with every aspect of design: cover and appropriate and often witty endpapers, as well as page layout. This was evident in paperback and hardback entries across all categories and there is no doubt that such detail enhances reading pleasure. It was pleasing to note that the partnership between designer, author and illustrator was acknowledged on the cover of *The Race for the Chinese Zodiac* (Black Dog Books). On the other hand, the covers of some titles continue to let down the quality of the writing to be found within and poor standards of proofreading, especially in the Older Readers category, were disappointing to encounter.

While the production standards of some self-published books have improved with changing technology, in most instances lack of professional editorial input has resulted in narrative and characterisation that fail to match the best entries from established publishers.

The problem of late submissions from publishers continued with almost half of the 403 fiction books arriving after the end of November. This puts considerable pressure on the judges to complete their reading, especially as many of the books had been published quite early in the year. CBCA has addressed this problem by bringing the submission date forward a month to 30 November for the 2012 Awards.

If fear of forgetfulness on the part of judges is the reason for such late entries, publishers might be reassured to know that the strong claims of quality books submitted early in the year remain with the judges throughout the judging process and often these are the benchmarks against which later entries are compared.

OLDER READERS

This category attracted a large and strong field this year with some 95 books entered, which were eventually whittled down to 31 Notables. The high standard of candidates produced vigorous debate and made the judges' job enjoyable and challenging.

A recurrent event in books this year was the death of a young girl by murder. In at least six novels this was the catalyst for examining the causes and/or repercussions. This may reflect a societal anxiety about girls as victims; it certainly portrays them as vulnerable. Boys also died; in three books it was at the hands of their peers.

It was encouraging to see quality books incorporating Australian history seamlessly into engrossing narratives. The 70s were captured in at least three books, the Depression and interwar years in two, the 40s and the 50s in one book each and 19th century in Melbourne in yet another. Three were based on actual events – a child

drama group travelling to India in 1910, the murder of a young German girl in SA in 1902 and the catastrophic flood of the Murray River in SA in 1956. A sweeping saga covered iconic Australian history events from 1894 -1915, and a voyage to Australia by ship in the 1800s was the setting for a shipboard romance.

London between the wars, the Celtic coast in the early Middle Ages, Ancient Greece, medieval France and Pakistan provided intriguing settings for five novels.

Angels, it appears, are the new vampires and we had a slew of these with three novels describing their adventures on earth. Witches had one look-in and vampires themselves appeared in contemporary WA and Sydney.

In the fantasy magic realism/sci-fi vein there were about 15 books with three from the Steampunk genre where fabricated beasts continue to fuel machines for men. At least six were from established series. A dystopian future figured in several novels.

Girls coping with dysfunctional families, toxic friends, grief or school stress was another theme, as was gritty boy material such as risk-taking with drugs or petty crime. Gay fathers appeared in several books. Alternative sexuality including lesbianism and the transgender experience also featured.

Two succinct verse novels on relationships made a welcome appearance, as did the few novels dealing with ordinary teen relationships. Two of these explored the 'boy-meets-girl and they stay up all night' scenario in an edgy urban environment.

Humour is always appreciated and was found in some dozen stories. Authentic teen voices of both genders were a real strength throughout these reads.

A varied field provided much interest and enjoyment but some authors in the self published category could be better served by editors and there were a handful of books from mainstream publishers whose covers did them no favours.

YOUNGER READERS

The high level of literary and artistic merit in this level continues in many of the 163 books entered for this category. Of particular note were the quality designs and productions of outstanding books aimed at the newly independent readers and reflected in their prominence in the 32 Notables.

A wide diversity of genres were encompassed, including lots of humour, around a variety of themes: historical fiction – both Australian and other cultures and countries, encouraging readers to gain a greater awareness of and sensitivity to traditions and cultures from many places; delightful verse novels and a quality book of poetry exploring the Australian rural scene; bushfires in Victoria; and fantasy, including animal fantasy. There were fewer entries centred around bullying while science-fiction and paranormal genres continue to attract few authors.

Family issues are a continuing popular theme, incorporating a strong sense of families surviving difficulties and emphasising that the problems are not caused by the children. A welcome trend is the increasing number of entries exploring contemporary issues, including friends with cancer, changing family circumstances and make-ups aimed at young male readers. These are dealt with in engaging, age-appropriate ways.

There are also a pleasing number of high calibre picture books aimed at this audience, combining an appealing array of illustrative styles with pithy, witty word plays and clever language.

Readers of this category continue to enjoy expanding their reading through books in a series that appeal to them. Authors and publishers are catering to this desire with a mixture of ongoing and new series covering a wide range of genres and reading abilities. New series for the lower end include *Little Else*, *Mr Badger* and *Skoz the dog*; *Spying on the past: Battle boy* maintains appeal in an increasing number of adventure series of varying quality, aimed at young male readers; and *Phoebe Nash* is likely to appeal to older female readers looking for a series in this genre. Fans of Garth Nix's long-running *Keys to the kingdom* series will greet the final book with mixed feelings.

Continuing and expanding themes and styles in books for this category keep impressing the judges and ensure delight for its readership.

EARLY CHILDHOOD

The quality of the 135 books entered in the Early Childhood category mostly maintain the high standard and cohesive working partnership of illustrator, author and publisher. The close voting at the Notable and Short List stages reflect this. The judges stress the importance of referring to the Notable list as well as the Short List when looking for quality literature. Quite a few entries were moved to more appropriate award sections and publishers need to be more aware of the criteria for each section when entering books.

The younger end of the Early Childhood category is very thinly represented with only one board book specifically written and catering to the reading interests and capabilities of pre readers (1-3 year olds). Very few concept books have been entered compared with previous years. Perhaps publishers need to look more closely at this age area of the market. Very few Early Childhood books entered deal with multiculturalism in Australia.

Animal characters are numerous with books using animals to convey messages about everyday situations within the family setting. Rural life style in Australia has been highlighted with some of the books being written by and for indigenous children. Indigenous community groups are to be congratulated on the high standard of their productions.

The judges have been impressed with publishers returning to the use of endpapers. These colourful detailed pages engage the reader, reflecting and integrating the plot and characters within the story. It is refreshing to see the blended family making an appearance in Early Childhood books with a humorous and positive outlook on their family situations. The *Aussie Nibbles* series are to be commended for offering the beginning reader quality novels by reputable authors and illustrators. Young readers are very lucky to have access to the variety and quality of the Australian literature entered in this category.

PICTURE BOOKS

A large field of 169 entries are in this section. The lengthy and difficult voting process reflects the strength of entries, particularly among the more outstanding books. This has been reflected in the very strong list of 29 notables, which includes a number of books, which only just fail to make the short list.

Content ranges from books suitable for the very young to demanding and challenging works for older readers, with some significant works showing depth and complexity, requiring the reader to revisit them in order to tease out additional meanings. Well-known and accomplished illustrators make a strong showing, including some represented by more than one title, while there is evidence of a growing group of emerging illustrators. Several interesting and talented newcomers, some represented by more than one entry, are noted with interest.

The best entries are marked by skilful and imaginative approaches to the content and fresh use of media and design. It is also interesting to see a number of established illustrators trying new styles and media. The judges remarked on the continuing, gradual movement beyond the traditional picture book form towards comic book and graphic novel formats, as well as the inclusion of additional material and reference to associated websites. One outstanding example of the wordless picture book has been submitted. Of particular interest are several books illustrated with children's own drawings and paintings, or in which children's work is incorporated into the completed illustrations.

Content includes works with strong Australian emphasis, historical, fantasy, and family genres, post-modernism and the absurd. It is pleasing to see the use of humour, especially in the illustrations, in many successful picture books. Other themes noted included dragons, the environment, contemporary indigenous life, and the re-imagining and re-interpretation of existing texts.

INFORMATION BOOKS

Large well established publishing houses, smaller publishers and self publishers entered 59 books for judging for the 2011 Eve Pownall Award. Titles encompass Australian and international content, and range across biography, science and the environment, history, indigenous and gender issues, self-help guides and activity

books and Australia's involvement in theatres of conflict. Some books are directed at specific age groups, while others are intended for broader audiences.

Biographies included studies of the life and achievements of Ron Brooks, World War II veteran Ernest Brough, Burke and Wills, James Cook, Mick Fanning, Adam Gilchrist, Vida Goldstein, long-distance rider Lennie Gwyther, Bindi Irwin, Ned Kelly, Sir Douglas Mawson, Dame Nellie Melba and Shaun Tan. Historical works cover ancient China, the ANZACs at the Western front, gender minorities in Australia, Australian society 1945-1972 and Fantome Island, Queensland.

Books with a scientific and environmental focus are a major component of the titles submitted. Studies of species in the animal world predominate – tigers, reptiles, penguins, a puggle, deep-sea and polar creatures, water scorpions and koalas. Experimental science and problem-solving, for the very young through to middle years readers are the focus for seven titles. Self-help or advice books are also a significant offering: coping with year 12, how to surf or cook and successfully establishing personal style and relationships. Other titles highlight contemporary issues in Aboriginal communities, adolescent peer group concerns and possible actions to save the environment and endangered species.

The 2011 Short List is representative of the best of contemporary Australian children's non-fiction. The shortlisted titles and those included in the Notables list are books demonstrating detailed research and considered writing, complemented by relevant images that work with, and add to, the written texts. Attention has been paid to careful editing, imaginative design and layout. The inclusion of useful reference tools of various types will aid research by young readers.

Unfortunately there are some titles entered where the judges felt the accuracy, indexing and production qualities did not meet a high standard. The judges recommend that publishers examine the Short List and Notables, taking note of the strengths of these titles to improve the books they are presenting to young people.

The judges have been impressed by writers and illustrators who successfully incorporate factual material into narrative and picture book presentations for pre-school and early readers and who provide valuable insights into 'other worlds' such as that of the community at One Arm Point, WA in *Our World: Bardi Jaarwi*, and of *The Lighthouse Kids of Maatsuyker Island*, from Tasmania.

The inclusion of humour to enhance information books is also welcome; the illustrative work of Terry Denton and Tohby Riddle being especially noteworthy. Three further titles, which display admirable passion for, and personal knowledge of, particular subject matter are Ursula Dubosarsky's *The Return of the Word Spy*, and Alison Lloyd's *Wicked Warriors and Evil Emperors*, and Ron Brooks' *Drawn from the Heart*.