



The Children's Book Council of Australia

JUDGES' REPORT - BOOK OF THE YEAR AWARDS 2014

Note: This report is embargoed until 12 noon on Friday 15 August

The total number of entries for the 2014 Children's Book Council of Australia Book of the Year Awards was 476. This includes 430 fiction entries and 46 non-fiction.

Australian history dominated the content especially in the Younger and Older Readers categories and more understandably, the Eve Pownall Award. Reasons for this abundance are many, but could be attributed to the advent of the study of History in the Australian Curriculum as well as the upcoming centenary of World War I. The judges noted that many books involved Anzacs. However, it was refreshing to see differing Anzac perspectives and narratives being told, with writers and illustrators opting to use new voices and explore other stories.

It was also noted that while many books had relevant stories, endearing and intriguing characters and exquisite writing, the cover design was often a disappointment, showing little imagination or sometimes even less connection with the content. This was particularly prevalent in the Younger and Older Readers categories, where a judgment about reading a book can be arbitrarily made on looks alone.

This year, as with others, saw a number of second and third instalments of a series being entered as an individual story. Despite high quality writing and storytelling many of these books failed to stand alone, requiring readers to have prior knowledge of characters, setting and plot. As a result, these books failed to reach Notable status. There were, however, exceptions to this rule where writing, plot, setting and characters combined to tell an individual narrative.

Women writers and illustrators continue to be prominent in the Notables in all categories except for Picture Books and the Eve Pownall Award. First-time authors and emerging writers combined to dominate the Short List in the Older Readers category while the Picture Book Short List was brimming with highly experienced illustrators and writers.

BOOK OF THE YEAR: OLDER READERS

There were 61 books entered in the Older Readers category. They were all carefully considered, with some spirited debate before narrowing the list down to 13 Notables. The category was well represented by entries from the large publishing houses along with some from smaller ones. Within these books was a diverse range of topics and subject matter that showcased the strength and breadth of our talented Australian authors.

Crime/mystery was a recurrent theme throughout the category, involving characters disappearing, being murdered or abducted. This made for some interesting and intriguing reading. Many of these books were chilling in their content with some more believable than others.

The inclusion of social realism in many of the books gave young adults something to relate to in the search for identity and rites of passage. This was prominent in both *Wildlife* and *The*

Incredible Here and Now. A number of the books dealt with disability and being different from the norm, whilst other narratives, for example *You Don't Even Know*, spoke of people damaged by experiences or situations. The majority of these stories were written so beautifully it was a privilege to read them. Humour was used well and extensively to uplift difficult subjects, as seen in *The First Third* and *Life in Outer Space*, often succeeding in making the reader laugh and cry at the same time.

Historical fiction was also strongly represented, including Australia during the Depression, the World Wars, and the 70s then moving further afield to the Vietnam War, New Guinea and Europe. It was refreshing to read different stories of the Anzacs and more so with *Flora's War* providing an insight into the role Australian women played in wartime conflict. It is reassuring to read such well-researched books, especially in the not so well documented areas of our history.

There was some strong fantasy and dystopian fiction, along with steam punk and gaslight genres. As many books in this group were quite often part of a series, it was difficult to accept some of these as stand alones. The ones that did stand out transported the reader with fantastic and detailed world building.

People seeking asylum and looking to find a new and better world were prominent in many different narratives, notably *Refuge* and *The Sky So Heavy*. Also present were a couple of excellent books on a post-apocalyptic theme. These books offer many different perspectives on the theme and will no doubt provide a very relevant and necessary topic for discussion.

The small selection of verse novels this year provided some good examples of characters with strong distinctive voices. One book that played with form was *Run*, which used physical presentation of the text to reflect the sport of parkour.

Interestingly, the Short List presented four debut novels while the remaining two books were the authors' second published books. It is wonderful to have such strong fresh voices appearing in Australian Children's fiction, and evidence that publishers are prepared to support and encourage new writers.

PICTURE BOOK OF THE YEAR

The Picture Book of the Year Award is not only recognition of the outstanding illustrations and text, but the synergy of the visual and the written elements, with the illustrations extending the depth and meaning of the text, backed up by quality design and production. It also comes with the reminder that picture books can be intended for all ages, not solely young children. Generally books in the Picture Book category demand a more sophisticated level of visual literacy from readers.

The judging criteria for the Picture Book Award demands not only exceptional storytelling, but also strong themes, characterisation, plotting, and beautifully composed and rendered illustration in a sympathetic design backed up by solid production values by the publisher. As in previous years, the entries 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. These were explored both lightly and in depth. Themes included problem solving, in *King Pig*, characters who grow and learn (especially in a cautionary tale), *Noah Dreary*, being told with humour in both text and illustrations. Publishers have been discerning with illustrators who have created quality books using rich characters, atmosphere and bright colours with fine details in the pictures. This year 122 books were judged in this category, with 19 chosen as Notable books.

After the Short List was finalised, the judges noted that all shortlisted illustrators and authors were familiar names, which demonstrates a strong continuation of Australia's current talent. The

judges also noted that 3 out of the 6 shortlisted books had a single creator who both wrote the text and illustrated the book.

BOOK OF THE YEAR: EARLY CHILDHOOD

The Early Childhood category consists of books written for young children who are at pre-reading or the early stages of reading. This year there were 95 entries from which 16 were chosen as Notables and 6 were shortlisted. The judging of these books focussed on the close relationship with early childhood development, their appeal in both topic, style and their encouragement of exploration, reflection and enjoyment of life experiences. Enriched language was sought. Judges considered that other necessary elements were illustrative styles, placement of text, appropriateness of layout, and cohesion of text and pictures.

Judges of this year's books observed the production qualities closely and were impressed overall with the standard and variety. Many books were graced with interesting cover treatments which included padding, embossing, debossing, silver highlighted print and beckoning pictures. Among these were *Baby Bedtime*, *Kissed By the Moon* and *Clementine's Walk*. Other outstanding covers were *Noah Dreary*, *Esther's Rainbow* and *The Lilac Ladies*.

In many books the font chosen enhanced the text by being well placed and varied. There were many creative uses of text to augment the meaning. Books that demonstrated this were *The Short Giraffe*, *Little Big* and *Scarlett and the Scratchy Moon*. Endpapers were often a feature, adding interest and enriching the storyline. An outstanding example of this is *Banjo and Ruby Red* where in the beginning there is the morning silhouette of the farmyard and at the back, the evening. There were many creative and exciting illustrations using a wide selection of media. In *I'm a Dirty Dinosaur* Ann James used a brush dipped in mud and produced a delightful textured appearance.

Animals featured strongly in the entries this year including Johanna Bell's playful repetitive dogs in *Too Many Cheeky Dogs* and Michelle Dawson's sleepy animal babies in *Let's Go to Sleep*. Animals were also the main characters in books where concepts were explored, particularly in the gentle pictures in *Bird and Bear*. Overcoming fears was a recurring theme and was found in *Parachute* and *Hold On Tight*.

The Early Childhood entries this year included many books which easily met the high standards of literary merit demanded by the award criteria. There were some books that utilised layers of meaning and sub-plots which extended the simple and sometimes complex themes of the books. The cohesion between text and illustrations was the highlight of this category where illustrators outdid themselves with variety and creativity.

BOOK OF THE YEAR: YOUNGER READERS

With 152 entries, the Younger Readers category once again had the largest number of submissions this year. The broad range of the category (covering beginning independent readers through to upper primary children) made deliberations challenging, with a dearth of quality fiction for newly independent readers. Verse novels, previously finding success in the category, were very limited this year, as were strongly illustrated books and graphic novels for the age group, which is an interesting development.

A significant number of entries in this category were series books, many of which did not meet the CBCA criteria of standing alone, although many were of high literary standard. The *Our Australian Girl* novels continued to entertain and educate with strong messages and historical merit, while favourites such as *Truly Tan* and *Violet Mackerel* demonstrated that series books can indeed meet the stand-alone requirement and target the lower end of this reading age.

The influence of Australian Curriculum topics could be seen in several titles, while the usual crop of books examining war was of high quality and perhaps greater in number than usual because of the lead up to the centenary of the First World War. Historical stories and books focusing on other cultures featured strongly, such as *That Boy, Jack*, *Through My Eyes: Shahana*, *To Brave The Seas: A Boy At War*, *The Girl Who Brought Mischief*, *An ANZAC Tale*, *The Wishbird* and *Light Horse Boy*.

Other topics ranged over pets and animals, pirates, adventure tales, exaggerated humour, fantasy, mysteries and school stories. Most books were set in Australia, but several ventured further afield to Asia, Europe and elsewhere. One refreshing development was the increase in quality books where sport was central to the novel, including *The Year My Life Broke*. Some of these featured both male and female protagonists. Another favourable progression was seeing protagonists of difference becoming more common, and it was exciting to see this explored as natural rather than unusual, such as in *View from the 32nd Floor* and *My Life As an Alphabet*.

Humour featured prominently in many works, although this proved difficult to combine with high literary merit, with a preponderance of coarse jokes in the 'funny' books. Humour was most successful when written with a lighter touch, in novels where the jokes were integrated within the story and made sense in terms of character and plot. The Notables list provides several examples of how this can be done well, with many works bringing a smile or even laughter during reading.

Fantasy and other speculative genres presented a strong showing this year, with some truly outstanding stories set in fantastical worlds. Although mainly at the upper end of the readership, strong examples in a variety of sub-genres including steampunk and slipstream, stood alongside more traditional works, with books such as *Song for a Scarlet Runner*, *A Very Unusual Pursuit* and *Ice Breaker* providing engaging and intriguing reading.

Books varied widely in production styles and values, although paperbacks dominated the category. The judges noted that cover artwork, typography and internal design were not of a consistently high quality, which was disappointing. While the adage may be 'don't judge a book by its cover', in reality, young readers do appreciate and enjoy publications that entice them. It is gratifying to see that Australian publishing for this age group is alive and well with a continuing increase in number and variety of titles even though the literary quality was mixed this year.

EVE POWNALL AWARD FOR INFORMATION BOOKS

This year, judges for the Eve Pownall Award examined a total of 46 entries, as opposed to 57 entered in 2013. This year also saw fewer entries from the publication houses of museums and art galleries. Some imaginative presentations of factual material were depicted through cartoons and graphic novels. Books that stood out for their visual appeal paid particular attention to good layout, fine photography and illustrations of diverse media which enhanced the verbal text. The books selected as Notable Books represent thoughtful, imaginative productions with narrative consistency. Those selected for the Short List were obviously well researched, used authentic sources and offered new insight into their subject areas.

Amongst the themes explored, over a third of the entries were biographical, reflecting a diverse range of styles and presentation. Themes included narratives of exploration, colonial and war histories, those of the two World Wars and the Vietnam War. The predominant theme this year was environmental, including expositions of Australian native fauna. Art books also featured amongst the range of instructional books. Indigenous themes included cultural, autobiographical and colonial history stories.

Many of the titles submitted will be relevant to specific subject areas of the Australian curriculum, including some that may well have been contracted works to meet an area of need as identified by the publisher. There were several cases of writers' lapses in accuracy with regard to their

subject matter. Judges noted that it is vital to the integrity of an information book that all facts are accurate and occasional lapses in this regard are unfortunate. As the prime intention of books considered for this award is the documenting of factual material, references should be accurate, current and accessible to the reader.

COMMENTS ON CATEGORY WINNERS AND HONOUR BOOKS

WINNER - BOOK OF THE YEAR: OLDER READERS

WOOD, Fiona: **WILDLIFE**

Pan Macmillan ISBN: 9781742612317, 369 pages

Three very different teenagers find out about themselves and some of the big questions of life during their school's outdoor education term. Life, death and sex are the hefty themes of this book and they are handled brilliantly with honest and authentic teenage voices, as the characters reveal not quite all through writing in their daily journals. The setting in the wilderness campus of a school is a wonderful platform to showcase the difficulties and issues arising from living so closely together along with relationship dynamics. There is a clever use of intertextuality using Othello parallels to highlight betrayal masked as friendship as well as the isolation of the physical environment.

HONOUR BOOKS

NEAR, Allyse: **FAIRYTALES FOR WILDE GIRLS**

Random House, ISBN: 9781742758510, 432 pages

Isola Wilde sees things differently to most, as might be expected when one is protected by ghosts, and lives next to a magical wood. From the opening pages, the reader is carried away into Isola's world. This suspenseful and intricate story of whimsy and darkness is full of glorious intertextuality. The text is woven together in a fresh intelligent combination of words to balance magic and realism to successfully explore the themes of grief, love and friendship. This is an emotional story that combines history with mystery and a dash of romance, with twists that will keep the reader guessing beyond the thought provoking last page.

ZORN, Claire: **THE SKY SO HEAVY**

University of Queensland Press, ISBN: 9780702249761, 304 pages

Everything changes for Fin one morning when he wakes and finds snow everywhere. There is no power, no phone and no parents. Left to look after his younger brother Max, Fin must find a way to survive in this original post apocalyptic novel set in changing rural and urban landscapes. Social certainties change as Fin struggles to negotiate a way through to safety and security. Characterised by rising tension, vivid world building and fluid language, this stunning novel engages the reader right from its gripping sequence. Fin's journey puts the spotlight on human relationships under stress. The moral and ethical dilemmas he faces are not sensationalised or glossed over. The gradual disappearance of Fin's known world is realistic and very moving. This novel is set apart by its impressive understated layering of social issues.

WINNER - BOOK OF THE YEAR: YOUNGER READERS

JINKS, Catherine: **CITY OF ORPHANS: A VERY UNUSUAL PURSUIT**

Allen & Unwin, ISBN: 9781743313060, 329 pages

Catherine Jinks has created a well-constructed historical adventure that combines with fantasy to capture the atmosphere of Victorian England. This is the first book in *The City of Orphans* series with a storyline that is original and satisfies the reader on a number of levels. The setting in underground London is dark and menacing and full of fascinating and believable Dickensian characters that draw the reader into their often dark and risky world. Birdie, a ten year-old waif, is a feisty and courageous character with a beautiful voice and a ferocious loyalty to the shady characters around her. The visual imagery is extraordinary in its detail and historical authenticity.

The writing is very accessible to the intended age group and the inclusion of a glossary of nineteenth century jargon is beneficial for the readers.

HONOUR BOOKS

JONSBURG, Barry: **MY LIFE AS AN ALPHABET**

Allen & Unwin, ISBN: 9781743310977, 256 pages

Candice is an unforgettable and endearing character. She is unusual, funny, engaging, warm, guileless and perhaps autistic. Her aim is to bring happiness to everyone in her life including her parents who are recovering from the death of her baby sister Sky. Her friend Douglas Benson, 'from another dimension' is also very unhappy and of a similar nature. Her innocent attempts are hilarious and heart warming. Each chapter starts with a letter of the alphabet signifying an event in Candice's life. The story is also told through intermittent letters written to her American pen pal Denille. The alphabetic form is novel and makes the disjointed events cohesive. The reader is engaged emotionally from the beginning. It is a beautifully written text with realistic dialogue, conversational letter writing and poignant diary entries.

WOLFER, Dianne: **LIGHT HORSE BOY**

Illustrated by Brian SIMMONDS

Fremantle Press, ISBN: 9781922089137, 118 pages

A thoughtfully written narrative with many perspectives, this book uses a variety of photographic media and haunting illustrations to tell the story of Jim, the Light Horse Boy. It entwines fact and fiction, drawing comprehensively on primary sources to create a poignant and authentic adventure. A series of letters, black and white images and photographs, as well as beautifully crafted text, describe Jim's experiences. The book exudes an ambience of a family photo album and gives the appearance of age and history. The reader is captured and transported to the era and events of World War 1. The success of the book is the seamless merging of the various forms and styles to produce a lasting impression.

WINNER - PICTURE BOOK OF THE YEAR

TAN, Shaun: **RULES OF SUMMER**

Hachette Australia, ISBN: 9780734410672, unpagged

To become lost in a Shaun Tan picture book is to suddenly find your imagination. *Rules of Summer* is an extraordinary book containing stunning artwork and a sparse narrative amid an emotional landscape. The reader is invited to follow two boys, perhaps brothers, as they experience some essential lessons of life within a surreal fantasy. Reading this book is like exploring an art gallery and losing yourself in the stories that the paintings inspire. The spare but thought provoking text meanwhile offers opportunities for reinterpretation and reflection on the magnificent artwork. Although Tan's books can be challenging, the experience is always enriching.

HONOUR BOOKS

BLAND, Nick: **KING PIG**

Scholastic Press, ISBN: 9781742834955, unpagged

King Pig is a complex character who changes, grows and learns but still needs to improve. He wants the sheep to like him but his hilarious attempts to earn their loyalty are studiously ignored. Finally he realises that he has to do something for his subjects. They accept his efforts with reservation and the conclusion hints that he will need to do more. Bland's illustrations, particularly the facial expressions of the sheep and their actions, augment the text. The bold use of colour catches the eye and entices the reader to explore the finer details within each double page spread. *King Pig* is a right royal romp delivering a gentle message about the abuse of power.

GRAHAM, Bob: **SILVER BUTTONS**

Walker Books Australia, ISBN: 9781406342246, unpagged

Jodie draws a picture while Jonathan takes his first step and in that moment the reader is diverted to snapshots of people all over the world going about their lives. This is the frame of this exciting, demanding and compelling book. The soft watercolours exude a warmth and

understanding of the diverse characters from around the world. Small touches, such as the feather falling on the endpapers and within the story, emphasise that the events take place over a moment in time. Details of family life can be found in the illustrations which extend and support the themes of humanity, compassion and understanding.

WINNER - EARLY CHILDHOOD CATEGORY

ORMEROD, Jan: **THE SWAP**

Illustrated by Andrew JOYNER

Little Hare Books, Hardie Grant Egmont. ISBN: 9781921541414, unpagged

Caroline is jealous of her dribbly little brother and when she is left in charge she tries to swap him at the Baby shop. She trials several replacement baby brothers and finds fault with them all. Her own baby brother may not be so bad after all. The playful language in the book makes clever use of onomatopoeia, alliteration, repetition and simple rhythm, which creates a joyous, read aloud text. The detailed and expressive art, a delightful homage to Richard Scarry, provides multiple opportunities to engage with Caroline's dilemma. As well as resonating with well-known children's stories, the illustrations offer rewarding vignettes for observant readers.

HONOUR BOOKS

BRIAN, Janeen: **I'M A DIRTY DINOSAUR**

Illustrated by Ann JAMES

Puffin Books, Penguin Group Australia, ISBN: 9780670076154, unpagged

The author uses sharp, lilting language to convey the light-hearted, fun filled celebration of guilt free playing in the mud. The magic pencil and watercolours of the illustrator's seemingly effortless outline drawings, which imbue the dinosaur with so much personality, augment the text. The mud-splattered pages are constructed from real mud which gives an air of authenticity to the action. Double and single page layouts add to the visual delight as the reader and listener are taken on a joyous dinosaur romp. The bright engaging cover, the thicker shiny pages through to the '*let's start again*' endpapers, make this book a delight to be shared with younger children.

GLEESON, Libby: **BANJO AND RUBY RED**

Illustrated by Freya BLACKWOOD

Little Hare Books, Hardie Grant Egmont, ISBN: 9781921541087, unpagged

An unlikely friendship between Banjo the dog, who gets the chooks into their pen at night and Ruby Red the independent chook, who prefers to be different, features in this heart-warming story. Deceptively simple composition and design capture the chaos of the evening chook round up and the restrained colours effectively highlight the nostalgic rural scenes. Blackwood uses multiple techniques including framing perspective and point of view to progress time across the page, creating a simple suspenseful story that comes to a satisfying conclusion. The elegant brevity of language carries the action along with every word carefully selected for maximum impact. The inviting cover illustrations and endpapers, would appeal to young children.

WINNER - EVE POWNALL AWARD FOR INFORMATION BOOKS

FAILLE, Chris: **JEREMY**

Illustrated by Danny SNELL

Working Title Press, ISBN: 9781921504402, unpagged

Jeremy is a baby kookaburra brought into the lounge room by the family cat. The layout and design makes this book appealing to very young readers. It follows Jeremy's development as he is carefully reared by a family, from a featherless hatchling to a mature kookaburra and finally his release back into the wild. The simple chronological narrative is enhanced and extended by the realistic acrylic paintings. The illustrations are vibrant thus encouraging the reader to explore in detail not only the physical but the behavioural characteristics of a kookaburra. Mature readers will benefit from the additional informative, scientific facts concerning kookaburras which fill the endpapers.

HONOUR BOOKS

BURARRWANGA, Laklak: **WELCOME TO MY COUNTRY**

Allen & Unwin, ISBN 9781743313961, 209 pages

The history and culture of the Yolngu people of north-east Arnhem Land are captured in this detailed book. Laklak Burarrwanga, along with eight other family members tell of their spiritual beliefs and understanding of the environment. Yolngu languages are used throughout, with the English translations incorporated in the text. This approach emphasises the importance of the Yolngu language and of their culture. The depiction of animals in the illustrations highlights the importance that these creatures have in the culture of the Yolngu people. There is a variety of media used including indigenous artworks which tie in with the corresponding chapters and their themes. This book presents complex and insightful information from a unique perspective.

GOULDTHORPE, Peter: **ICE, WIND, ROCK: Douglas Mawson in the Antarctic**

Lothian Children's Books, Hachette Australia, ISBN: 9780734411556, 32 pages

This is a beautifully presented book with high quality illustrations. Realistic and accurate depictions of Mawson invite empathy with his character and the challenges he faced. The full colour paintings use light and shade to show not only the Antarctic landscape but also the mood and tone of the text. Black and white drawings have the feel of historic photos about them, giving a sense of the time period. The information is thoroughly researched. The text is very well written, mostly in the present tense but changes to the past tense near the end of the book. Maps of Antarctica and the expedition routes at the end of the book are a useful addition.

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