

Introduction

The process of judging entries submitted for consideration in The Children's Book Council of Australia (CBCA) Book of the Year Awards 2002, comprising one non fiction and four fiction categories, commenced midway through 2001. The judging process is an extensive and thorough one in which two panels of judges, made up of Judges appointed by CBCA State and Territory Branches, carefully consider every entry against agreed and stated criteria. The Judges' aim is to identify and give recognition to those entries that are outstanding books for the child reader. Much discussion in the form of emails and teleconferences precedes the pre-Easter Judges' Conferences, this year held in Perth, at which further extensive discussions occur before final judging takes place. It is at this stage that decisions are made concerning the titles to be short listed and which of the short listed titles will be winning and honour books. The Short List is announced at the end of the Interstate Judges' Conference, but the announcement of the winning and honour books is withheld until the beginning of Children's Book Week in August.

Three hundred and twenty-five books were accepted for consideration this year. From these entries, eighty-three were chosen as notable books and have been listed with annotations in the publication *Notable Australian Children's Books 2002 (Notables)*. A number of books were entered for consideration in more than one category as both the *Notables* and the Short List reflect, with *Baby Bilby*, *Where Do You Sleep?*, *My Dog* and *Papunya School Book of Country and History* each short listed in two categories.

Specific comments about each of the categories - Early Childhood, Younger Readers, Older Readers, Picture Book and Eve Pownall - are presented separately in this report. There were, however, trends common to all categories this year.

All categories featured books that explored the past and recent history of Australia and other countries. Australian history is given a voice in *Shadow Across the Sun*, *Find Me a River*, *Papunya School Book of Country and History*, *Poison Under Their Lips*, the 'My Story' series, *Moondyne Kate*, *A Kiss in Every Wave*, *Soldier Boy*, *The Vietnam War and How the Finnegans Saved the Ship*. Most notable of a number of stories with a setting other than Australia is *My Dog* written by John Heffernan and illustrated by Andrew McLean, a book that gives an insight into the human side of the conflict in the former Yugoslavia.

Humour was a feature of novels in both the Younger Readers and Older Readers categories and in the situations and illustrations of a number of picture books. Reliance on scatological humour was more likely in books for younger readers although fresh and lively humorous writing for this age group was also evident in entries such as *Bungaloo Creek*, *Scruffy's Day Out* and the 'Western Wildcats' series. In the Older Readers category, humour was used in a number of books, including *That Dolphin Thing* and *Finding Grace* in which more serious issues were the focus.

As an outward manifestation of culture, literature does reflect societal trends and fashions. It is not surprising, then, that in the Year of the Outback a number of stories depicting rural settings were among the books entered for consideration. These included *Eddy and the Demon Bowler* in which a realistic picture of small country town community life is presented, and *Bungaloo Creek* and *A Boat for Bridget* in which the slower pace of small

village life is revealed. *Cry of the Karri* is set against the backdrop of Western Australia's tall timbers while *Goat Boy* takes the reader to the wilds of the Flinders Ranges. Rural communities are also depicted in books for older readers, examples of which are *Killer McKenzie*, *Find Me a River*, *Ridge*, *A New Kind of Dreaming* and *Dark Wind Blowing*.

Issues related to health or dealing with disability were the focus of *Butterflies*, *Blue Bottle Mystery*, *Sundogs*, *The Dons*, *A Kiss in Every Wave*, *Finding Grace*, *Goat Boy* and *Guide Dogs: From Puppies to Partners*.

Early Childhood

The Early Childhood Award, which recognises books for children at the pre-reading or early reading stages, was instituted for the first time in 2001. This year only fifty books were submitted for consideration in this category, twenty-three fewer than last year. Judges were concerned that the smaller number of entries may be an indication that publishers are constrained by the costs of producing hardback picture books compared with other book formats. Twelve books were selected as notable books in this category with four books chosen for the Short List.

The Judges did not take lightly the decision to select fewer than the maximum allowable number of titles for the Short List. Careful deliberations and a resolve not to compromise the integrity of the award led to this decision. In the second year of this award category, benchmarks are being set for the highest standards of written text, illustration and design. If a book did not meet these standards it was not considered for short listing. The Early Childhood Award is to encourage and celebrate the very best literature for the youngest readers and the final Short List reflects this.

Not surprisingly a significant proportion of entries in this category were picture books, although picture storybooks and illustrated early novels were also submitted and are represented in the *Notables*. In this category, the illustrative text often plays a substantial part in the storytelling or concept development and books were judged accordingly. Style of illustration, placement, enhancement of the written text, appropriateness of layout and format were all part of the Judges' considerations. Judges also looked closely at a book's age appropriateness in terms of language, theme, content, setting, characters and action. Aesthetic qualities of language were considered carefully, acknowledging that children at this stage of reading development learn much from literature about language patterns and use.

Generally, the Judges were pleased with the presentation of books in this category with hardback books accounting for more than half the entries. *The Waterhole*, *Baby Bilby*, *Where Do You Sleep?* and *"Let's Get a Pup!"* were particularly notable in terms of overall design. The use of bold colours to engage the very young was used to great effect particularly in *Muddled-up Farm*, *Baby Bear Goes Camping* and *Whose Tail?* Conversely in *Brown Bread and Honey* and *Little White Dogs can't Jump*, the skillful use of white space proved an effective technique to focus the reader's attention.

Evocative and lyrical texts were evident in a number of the entries and were a feature of each of the short listed books. A number of stories used rhyme: *Dinnertime!*, *Baby Bilby*, *Where do You Sleep?*, *Muddled-Up Farm* and *Passing On*. Many focussed on situations familiar to the very young. The celebration of birthdays underpins *Where does Thursday Go?*, the anxieties of sleeping somewhere other than home are touched on in *When Anna Slept Over* and *Baby Bear Goes Camping*, and the dynamics of family life are explored in *Scruffy's Day Out*, *Maddy in the Middle* and *"Let's Get a Pup!"*, and in *Millie Starts School*, Millie does just that!

The Judges of the Eve Pownall Award also recognised information books for the very young as notable. These included *Eyes in the Dark*, *Jirrbal*, *Rainforest Dreamtime Stories* and *Baby Bilby, Where Do You Sleep?*

Younger Readers

Almost half the books entered for consideration this year were entered in the Younger Readers category. Each of the other award categories caters for a wider age range than that of the Younger Readers so it is interesting to note that this category attracted the greatest volume of entries. Generally, these books are appropriate in style and content for child readers from mid to upper primary years. Use of a variety of formats to tell a story is one of the hallmarks of this particular category. Entries this year included picture books: *In My Backyard*, *The Red Tree*; illustrated stories: *The Rainbow*, *Yellow-Eye*, *Joseph*; short novels: *Dear Writer*, *Velvet*; collections of verse: *Love Poems and Leg Spinners*, *See What I've Got* and *Muster Me a Story*; and longer more complex novels such as *A Boat for Bridget*, *Blat Magic* and *Hannah's Winter*. In the books entered in this category children are likely to encounter many and various characters, providing seemingly endless possibilities for stimulating young imaginations. With the mechanics of decoding successfully behind them, readers in the mid to upper primary years start to explore and expand their reading horizons. This is arguably the time in which children develop an independent love of literature.

Those books identified this year as worthy of inclusion in the *Notables* are examples of quality literature that will satisfy, enrich and extend younger readers. However, the listing of only twenty-one notable books out of the one hundred and forty-four entered in this category is indicative of the Judges' overall disappointment in the standard of books entered. A number of entries represented the very worst in writing for children. In too many of the books entered there was evidence of didacticism, inappropriate and excessive anthropomorphism, condescension, scatological humour, predictable plots, stereotypical characters, poor editing and unimaginative, static and dated illustrations.

The promotion of Australian authors has received a significant financial boost in the past year through grants to primary school libraries as part of the Book Industry Assistance Plan. Recognising that the *Notables* often acts as a buying guide for primary schools and in the light of the grants program, it was particularly disappointing to Judges that so few entries in this category were worthy of notable listing. The need for quality literature (such as that exemplified by notable and short listing) to support these child readers in their quest cannot be overestimated.

Books belonging to series (Aussie Bites, Aussie Nibbles, Aussie Angels, Western Wildcats, Ramose and My Story) are a feature of this particular fiction category. Ancient Egypt is the historical setting for the Ramose series, *Ramose: Sting of the Scorpion*, *Ramose: Prince in Exile* and *Ramose and the Tomb Robbers*. Excellent design, attractive cover art and the addition of a glossary were features of this series. The 'My Story' series was new in 2000 and continues an exploration of events in Australian history through the diary or journal format with four new titles this year: *The Yankee Whaler: The Diary of Thomas Morris*, *Who Am I?: The Diary of Mary Talence*, *A Different Sort of Real: The Diary of Charlotte McKenzie* and *The Rum Rebellion: The Story of David Bellamy*.

Other novels set against an historical backdrop included *Market Blues* (Melbourne at the turn of last century), *The Great Plague*, *A Kiss in Every Wave* (WW II), *Saving Saddler Street*, *How the Finnigans Saved the Ship* (migrant experiences) and *Night Without Darkness* (mutton birding in Tasmania).

Overseas settings giving an insight into the lives and experiences of children from different cultural backgrounds featured in a number of stories. Kierin Meehan's first novel, *Hannah's Winter*, an engaging blend of fantasy and reality, is set in the depths of a Japanese winter. Closer to home, *Sarindi and the Lucky Bird* is an accomplished story of an impoverished but optimistic Indonesian family in Yogyakarta. Both *Jamil's Shadow* set in Turkey and *My Dog* set in the former Yugoslavia depict the loneliness of children facing uncertain futures.

Indigenous experiences are also depicted in a number of books: *Land of the Kangaroo People*, *Yellow-Eye*, *Who Am I?: The Diary of Mary Talence* and *Jaleesa the Emu*.

Older Readers

This year the Older Readers category was the only category to attract a greater number of entries than in the previous year. The variety of formats evident in the Younger Readers category did not extend to this one; offerings for older readers were predominantly novels of varying complexity. Of the eighty-one entries this year, only one entry, *Dreamwalker*, was an illustrated text. Four were verse novels: *Jinx*, *The Angel of Barbican High*, *Volcano Boy* and *The Year it all Happened*. Verse novels are a relatively new phenomenon which have immediacy and the capacity for a distillation of emotion. By their very nature they invite close critical attention to style.

A number of first time novelists feature in this category. These include Bronwyn Blake (*Find Me a River*), Alyssa Brugman (*Finding Grace*), Laura Budd (*Augustine's Lunch*), Eve Martyn (*Killer McKenzie*), and Irimi Savvides (*Willow Tree and Olive*). The skill of these new writers is evident in that all five books are listed in the *Notables* and Alyssa Brugman's novel is short listed.

Adolescence is a period of transition in which issues relating to physical, emotional and social changes are paramount and the literature for this age group reflects as much. Social breakdown and individual responsibility are strong themes in *Hunters and Warriors*,

Forest and *A New Kind of Dreaming*. *Moondyne Kate* explores a boy's search for identity, a search which leads him into the past. In *Finding Grace*, Rachel, the main character, learns much about herself as she comes to know the brain-injured Grace, and in *Mahalia* Matt must rapidly come to terms with the changes in his life when he is left to care for his five-month-old daughter. *Yoss* prompts much reflection on the nature of human interaction.

Rapture, *Journey to Distant Mountains* and *Lirael: Daughter of the Clayr* are complex stories in which some of these same issues are explored through fantasy, whereas in *Nostradamus* and *Instant Noodles* and *Fergus MacPhail* humour is used to great effect.

The bonds and influence of family are evident in a number of stories. Jen's family of mother and sister is a powerful support structure in *Jinx*. The Wolfe family is Cameron's anchor in *When Dogs Cry*, and tensions of family life and generational relationships are skillfully evoked in *The Dons*.

A number of novels depicted life at secondary school: *Augustine's Lunch*, *Hunters and Warriors*, *The Angel of Barbican High* and *Grinders*. The latter is remarkable for its convincing portrayal of the life of the staff room as well as that of the students.

The high quality of many entries was again acknowledged this year. Australian teenage readers are well served by writing in which diverse issues and points of view are explored. *That Dolphin Thing* in which humour is used as a vehicle through which deeper issues are confronted, *Flyboy and the Invisible* which alternates between gritty and magic realism, and *Grinders*, a story told through multiple perspectives, exemplify such writing. Humour, pathos, romance, horror, history, science, technology, religion, families, friends, health, loyalty and integrity were, this year, all raw ingredients of a rich selection of stories to satisfy the many tastes of those readers in secondary years for whom this category caters.

Picture Book

The Picture Book of the Year Award is not merely a recognition of the outstanding illustrative qualities of a work but rather an affirmation of the seamless unity of visual and written elements. Since the advent of the Early Childhood Award, picture books are entered in either the Eve Pownall, Early Childhood, Younger Readers or Older Readers categories, from where they are also selected for consideration for the Picture Book of the Year Award. As a result, the range is diverse, the readership varied and the mix of entries eclectic. This year's Short List reflects as much. *Papunya School Book of Country and History* was an Eve Pownall Award entry, *Horrible Harriet* an entry for the Early Childhood Award, with *The Red Tree*, *An Ordinary Day*, *In My Backyard* and *My Dog* as entries in the Younger Readers Award.

Judges were impressed this year by the outstanding design of a number of books considered for this award. In *The House of Narcissus*, the tall, narrow size and shape of the book reflect the narrow worldview of the house. *The Waterhole* is a clever, stylish

integration of many elements as is *Papunya School Book of Country and History*, a book created by a community, a triumph in terms of unity of design. Design simplicity is a strength of *Baby Bilby, Where Do You Sleep?*.

Fewer illustrators chose this year to extend illustrations to the endpapers although Bob Graham was notable for including the title page as an integral part of the story in "*Let's Get a Pup!*".

Although fewer picture books were considered for awards this year (sixty-nine compared with eighty-seven in 2001) a variety of styles was still evident. In *Mermaids Most Amazing*, the illustrative style varies with the cultural background of each of the stories. Leigh Hobbs' expressionism perfectly suits the character of the anarchic *Horrible Harriet*. Surrealistic elements create whimsy in *Zara's Zoo* and are used powerfully in *The Red Tree* and *An Ordinary Day*. The noise and movement of city life is pictured in the realism of Anne Spudvilas' illustrations for *In My Backyard*.

The picture book form is being increasingly used to explore complex issues. The gentle watercolour illustrations of *My Dog* sit almost paradoxically beside a written text in which the devastation of war on the lives of a family and community is made apparent. The illustrations are emotive and add a richer, deeper level of meaning to the text. In *The Red Tree* themes of consolation and desolation, hope and despair are explored through minimal written text and mesmerising illustrations. The increasing sophistication of picture books such as these is an affirmation that picture books are for readers of all ages, providing richly rewarding visual and literary experiences.

Information Books

The Eve Pownall Award for Information Books is presented to "outstanding books that have the prime intention of documenting factual material with consideration given to imaginative presentation, interpretation and variation in style" (*The Children's Book Council of Australia Awards Handbook 2001*). The books entered in this category varied considerably in content, approach and format. While the short listed and notable books clearly shone in the light of the judging criteria, inaccuracies, dull design and bland writing marred a number of entries.

Information books can range from narratives interlaced with facts in both the text and illustrations to the traditional presentation of information on a topic accessed by retrieval tools such as contents and index pages. This variety in approach is important and necessary in catering for the needs, interests and abilities of children. Some information books provide the detailed facts required for academic purposes, while others are designed to stimulate further reading and investigation into a topic. Innovative design and layout, reflecting both the nature of the subject and the intended audience, are striking features of *Papunya School Book of Country and History*, *Baby Bilby, Where Do You Sleep?* and *Eyes in the Dark*. Intensely personal insights into other lives and times are captured in Maisie (Yarrcali) Barlow's recollections in *Jirrbal, Rainforest Dreamtime Stories* and Anthony Hill's use of primary source material in *Soldier Boy: The True Story of Jim Martin, the*

Youngest Anzac. Enthusiasm for and admiration of the subject are evident in the detail in *Guide Dogs: From Puppies to Partners*, as is the humour in *The Fascinating History of Your Lunch* and the diversity of subjects in *Australian Heroines: Stories of Courage and Survival*.

The number of books entered in this category fell from eighty-four in 2001 to sixty-four this year. This fall was attributed in part to fewer titles from one series being entered in 2002. Series' titles constituted half of the entries ranging from larger format hardbacks to the more portable handy paperbacks. Eighteen titles nominated in this category were also entered in other categories. Two titles short listed in the Information Books category also appear on the short lists for the Picture Book category - *Papunya School Book of Country and History* – and the Early Childhood category - *Baby Bilby, Where Do You Sleep?*.

The most active publishers in the field of information books were Heinemann with several series including 'Emergency Services in Australia', Omnibus (Scholastic) and its 'Solo' series, Echidna Books (Heinemann) with 'Behind the Scenes' amongst others, and Random House once again this year with the 'Investigator' series. Magabala Books, a regional Western Australian publishing house, entered two titles *Nardika Learns to Make a Spear* and the short listed *Jirrbal, Rainforest Dreamtime Stories*.

Animals, industry, Australian history and indigenous history and culture were subject areas strongly represented in the entries received this year. Animals, insects and birds featured in *Bony Fish, Sharks and Rays* and the 'Solo Wildlife' titles, *Lion* and *Elephant*, as well as the visually striking picture books *Baby Bilby, where Do You Sleep?*, *Eyes in the Dark* and *Birds Build Nests*. The latter three titles employ rhyming texts to accompany vastly differing illustrative styles to engage readers in the natural world. Worms inspired two quirky titles, one with an unusual perspective on mating and the other on world history – *Mega, Mega, Mates!* and *A Worm's Eye View...The History Of The World*. *Guide Dogs: From Puppies to Partners* effectively demonstrates how a well-written text, fascinating case studies and exceptional colour photographs can increase a subject's accessibility and readability for children.

Food and food production were covered in several titles including *Vegetables* from the 'Workboot' series, a comprehensive look at one of Australia's primary industries. Comical and entertaining cartoons balance the detailed written text and well placed colour photographs. In *The Fascinating History Of Your Lunch* the author's humour and conversational style invite readers to explore history through the contents of the humble lunchbox. A younger audience can easily navigate its way through the processes and stages of bread manufacture as set out in the clear and logical progression and structure of *Bread* from the 'Where Does It Come From?' series.

Ten books focussing on indigenous history, culture and way of life were entered by a diverse array of publishers, including mainstream educational publishers, a collaboration between a school community and an established commercial publisher and a small regional indigenous publishing house. The weaknesses of some of these books are exacerbated when contrasted with the strengths of others. Terminology, stereotypes, inaccuracies and attitudes are some of the objections raised by indigenous educators when evaluating some of the entries. Generalisations applied to the many different language groups are frequently

misleading and inappropriate. Although the facts, in many cases, may be accurate, it is often the tone, writing style and language that do not reflect the perspective of the peoples or cultures described.

Of the series' entries, several titles offer readers more than purely functional information in a predictable format. While design constraints can limit the presentation and coverage of a subject in a series title, the 'Australians At War' title *The Vietnam War* is noteworthy for its balanced and comprehensive treatment of the topic. The 'Solo Transport' series title *Trains* presents information in a child-friendly format with accessible language and well-executed illustrations that speak directly to young train enthusiasts.

The inherent value of the book as a source of information can be compromised when the factual accuracy is questioned. An inaccuracy in one title of a series can cast doubts on the authority and veracity of the entire series. An error in printing (in the case of *Vegetables*) marred an otherwise information-packed, highly useful publication. After consultation with experts in the field, it was disappointing once again to discover basic inaccuracies in the two titles entered from the series 'Discover Wild Australia with the Bush Tucker Man'. High in child appeal and displaying excellent design and layout, both titles were found to have inaccuracies including incorrect scientific names and misleading statements. The Judges acknowledge that information books are expensive and risky undertakings for publishers. However this should not impact on a book's veracity, particularly when considering the intended child audience. It is a sobering exercise to read past Judges' reports for this category where similar concerns have been raised each year since the inception of this award.

Notwithstanding these concerns, the short listed titles in this category display some of the finest features of the best books for children. Hidden pictures and clues in *Eyes In The Dark* encourage curiosity and questioning. The authoritative and skillful use of primary sources in the writing of *Soldier Boy* reveals one of the ways in which history can be pieced together. An author's fascination with a subject is communicated to readers in the style and presentation of *Guide Dogs: From Puppies to Partners*. The wonders of the natural world are introduced to the very youngest child through play and interaction in *Baby Bilby, Where Do You Sleep?*. Children can empathise with and appreciate a very different childhood through a grandmother's storytelling in *Jirrbal, Rainforest Dreamtime Stories*. *Papunya School Book Of Country and History* brings together the past and the present to create a vision for the future, thereby investing a great significance and importance in the book itself. These authors, illustrators and publishers are to be applauded for their creativity and care in producing these information books. In order for books to be regarded as essential and authoritative resources, particularly in an age of instant information on the Internet, their creators need to continue to strive for excellence.

Conclusion

The Children's Book Council of Australia's Judges' Panels are, in effect, interpretive communities in which the recognition of the literary qualities of a text emerges through a process of collective exploration and decision making informed by predetermined criteria. The judging process is extensive and intensive as members of the panels apply the criteria to each of the entries seeking to recognise, commend and celebrate outstanding books written for the child reader.

The announcement of the award winning books is the culmination of the process and a significant event in the world of Australian children's literature. However, of equal significance is the acknowledgement of quality writing for children evident in the titles included in *Notable Australian Children's Books 2002*, which includes the Short List. The *Notables* exemplifies the wide range of themes, subjects, formats and styles available to all age groups of children. It is a significant publication promoting commendable Australian books.

Finally, members of this year's Judges' Panels wish to acknowledge both the generous hospitality of the CBCA Western Australian Branch and particularly the invaluable assistance given by the Awards Coordinators Eve Morrissey and Peter Williams. Masters of organisation, with patience and good humour, this team has provided, for the last two years, support and encouragement throughout the long and rigorous judging process. We thank them!