



The Macmillan Prize

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Martin Salisbury discusses its history and influence.

One of the least visible but most important of the awards for work in children's books, the Macmillan Prize for Children's Picture Book Illustration, is now in its twentieth year. **Martin Salisbury** discusses its history and influence.

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Sara Fanelli, Jane Simmons, Lucy Cousins and Selina Young are just a few of the well known artists currently working in picture books who have been winners of the Macmillan Prize during their days as students at British art schools. The award is open to all UK art students (usually studying Illustration or Graphic Design at either BA or MA level) and every year the brief comes out in January, inviting students to submit a complete set of roughs and a minimum of four finished spreads for a 32-page picture book, this being either the student's own concept, or in the form of a non-copyright traditional tale.



For art students with an interest in the picture book the Macmillan has become something of an institution, being the only award of its kind that gives students an opportunity to work creatively to a professional brief and, if they are successful, to exhibit their work before peers and publishers at the annual winners and commended entries exhibition. In recent years, this has been held at the University of Central England in Birmingham. Here the 1st, 2nd and 3rd prizes are presented from among the 25 or so commended entries on show. The competition attracts anything up to 300 entries and is judged by a team of five. The top prize is a handy cheque for £1000 to make a minor dent in the winner's overdraft. In the early years the team of five judges was made up entirely of leading illustrators. This usually guaranteed that the work of the prize-winners exhibited the highest artistic ambition. Early winners included the brilliant (but sadly no longer with us) John Watson (for **The Secret People**) and the iconic Sara Fanelli (**Button**). More recently though, the pressure on the publisher to unearth winners whose entries are more immediately and safely publishable has led to a gradual shift in the make-up of the judging panel toward a majority of publishers, librarians and booksellers.



There are a number of prizes and awards for students of illustration, but only Macmillan have had the foresight to encourage such a challenging task as designing a complete book. This foresight has been well rewarded over the years with the amount of talent that they have gained first look at, and frequently gone on to publish. The competition has had its hiccups though. In 1995 the judges declined to award a first prize, presenting a joint 2nd instead. The following year they went further, deciding to award no prizes, only 10 'joint commendations'. It was felt that none of the entries had reached the required standards. A get-together between Macmillan and some of the illustration tutors served to highlight the massive gulf in understanding between tutors and publishers on the subject of 'talent' (always a slippery concept). As with many artwork competitions, criteria based on visual/pictorial excellence sometimes get confused with editorial skills. It was interesting to note that many of the students whose entries were not deemed of sufficiently high standard in those two prizeless years went on to achieve great success with other publishers, notably Jane Simmons of Daisy

Duck/Orchard Books. Jane had been joint 2nd and then joint 10th and was told that her work 'had not progressed'. A freshening up of the judging panel ensued and over the following years many more goodies were unearthed including the excellent Joel Stewart who has gone on to produce a number of books for Macmillan and more recently, the extraordinary Paula Metcalf whose first book for the publisher, **Mabel's Magical Garden**, is shortly to be published having already received rave reviews.

This year's winners of the Macmillan Prize for Children's Picture Book Illustration are Helen Bate of North East Wales Institute and Gary Lees of University of Central Lancashire who were awarded joint 2nd prize (no 1st prize awarded this year).

Martin Salisbury is Course Director for MA Children's Book Illustration at APU Cambridge.

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