



# Awards

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Awards

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**Colin McNaughton** reports on the **Mother Goose Award** and **Stephanie Nettell** reports on the **Guardian Award**.

This is the 8th year of the **Mother Goose Award** given to 'the most exciting newcomer in British illustration'. It was inaugurated by Clodagh Alborough who provided five bronze eggs to get things going. The eggs are now real goose eggs, gilded and engraved. There is also a cash prize of £500 provided by the sponsor, Books for Children.

**Colin McNaughton** reports on the views of this year's panel of judges

## The Crop has failed

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So it finally happened. What all book prize judges fear: A 'Nothing' year. Nothing stood out and there was nothing to shout about. One sensed that something had gone wrong when the entries flooded in at the rate of about one a month. They were generally bland and dull. So few books came in, that we found ourselves cancelling meetings; there was just nothing to talk about. We kept on hoping for a last minute rush of entries and, to a degree, I suppose it came. But it was the same old story; there was nowhere that certain spark of originality we were looking for, nowhere that something different. Just the same old formulae: The-cute-bear-book-formula. The-richly-illustrated-Arabian-nights-tale-formula. The-Myths-and-Legends-formula. The-respectable-Poetry-Anthology-formula. The- My-Favourite-Nursery-Rhymes-formula. The-Cat-Book-formula. (Arncha just sick of cats?) The Yet-another-Brambly-Hedge-Look-alike-formula. The If-I-Use-An-Incredible-Amount-Of-Detail-Perhaps-no-one-will-notice-there-are-no-ideas-in-this-book-formula. And of course there are those books where the pictures were so appallingly inept that they are referred to as 'naive' when in fact they were just 'naff'.

There were a few interesting books which elicited positive responses from the panel: Ted Hughes' **The Iron Man** (Faber) with Andrew Davidson's powerfully evocative woodcuts which won the Kurt Maschler Award; Alastair Graham's **The Jungle of Peril** and **The Planet of Terror** (Walker Books) which have their illustrative roots in animation and cartoon work; with their highly skilled slickness they are technically excellent (and very funny). Ian Andrew has some lovely underwater pictures in his **Dolphins** (Hippo) but the subject was too limiting, we felt, to show his true potential. Maria Majewska's **Oscar Mouse finds a Home** (Methuen) showed promise but there was, we felt, lack of life and movement in the pictures; hopefully good editorial advice and a better story will help Maria in the future. **The Doom of the Gods** (Oxford): Tudor Humphries' drawings are strong and densely detailed; he has skill and technique and shows a real feeling for the Blood n' Guts of the Norse Myths.

But none of these books, we felt, really stood out enough as a winner, not when we look at the standard set by past winners of the award such as Reg Cartwright's **Mr Potter's Pigeon**, Satoshi Kitamura's wonderful **Angry Arthur**, Susan Varley's **Badger's Parting Gifts** or Patrick Benson's lovely pictures for William Mayne's **Hob Stories**.

So what happened?

What went wrong this year?

Where were all these exciting newcomers to childrens' books with their fresh ideas and new approaches? We know they are out there. We've seen them in the art schools. Full of crazy ideas for books - not always with the drawing skills to match - but that comes with time. What happened to those ideas between college and the publisher's desk and the finished book? Why did they end up as dull sanitized formula books?

Surely the fault lies not with the artists; they're young and easily persuaded, they're nervous and eager to please. They will do what is necessary to get published; unfortunately this usually means taking the safe path; producing safe, boring books. No, the blame, it seems, must be placed on the broad shoulders of the publishers. They must take more risks and work harder with newcomers, or the whole business will simply stagnate. They cannot rely on their older artists for ever. And if the right kind of artists are not coming into the publishers' offices, then editors must go out and look for them. Some of our most talented illustrators are in advertising and editorial work: go poaching - sell them on the joys of children's books; lousy money but loads of freedom. Publishers must forge more links with the art schools, and not just the London colleges (some publishers are doing this already). They must take the time to go and work with the students, set them real projects, invest in them. They are the raw material, the future and the life blood of children's books.

Of course, most of the illustrators in this year's crop will, no doubt, go on to bigger and better things. This is what makes the Mother Goose Award such a difficult, almost impossible, award to judge; lots of well-known illustrators think that if the Mother Goose Award had been around when they started they would not have stood a chance of winning it with their own first book. And to an outsider, without this particular knowledge, it will appear that the harvest of 'exciting newcomers to children's books' in 1985 has failed.

As you may have guessed by now, we decided we could not give the Mother Goose Award this year.

The panel this year was Sally Grindley (Books for Children), Quentin Blake, Colin McNaughton, Jan Ormerod, Beverley Mathias (National Library for the Handicapped) and Jane Little (Lambeth librarian).

## **The Guardian Award**

**Stephanie Nettell** reports on the decision of the judges to make this year's award to **Henry's Leg** by **Ann Pilling**.

The judges of the Guardian Award for Children's Fiction - Douglas Hill, Penelope Lively, K. M. Peyton, Michael Rosen and myself ? were captured by an appealing freshness in Ann Pilling's **Henry's Leg**, a kind of defiant chirpiness that allows its essential seriousness to lie lightly on it. Like every other novel of 1985 (or so at times it seemed), it is saying important things about the realities of life, but it says them cheerfully, without pretension, self-conscious solemnity or grim didacticism.

It is set in a Lancashire town on the edge of the moors, whose mixture of seediness and gentility, the familiarity that is both comforting and boring, and local characters are viewed by Henry with exasperated affection. Henry himself, in his last year at primary school but big and awkward for his age, is a charmer - a young hero who is actually likeable. His room is piled with weird junk the rest of the world has discarded, and his inner life is filled with engagingly daft small-boy schemes to make money for himself and his mum - like secretly storing hedgehog corpses, destined for a research lab, in the freezer of an obsessively hygienic neighbour.

But two dreams above all others fuel his life: to own the pink leg he saw sticking from the dustbin outside Alice Modes one drizzly evening, and to have his dad tire of his girl friend and come home again. The first lands him in an enjoyably complicated comedy thriller of the Boy Beats Local Crooks kind; for the second he can only wait and hope, powerless and bewildered by a lack of explanation for what is happening in the adult world. And it is this direct young longing that, more than anything, the reader shares and cares about. Ann Pilling has succeeded in writing about the vulnerability of childhood with pace, humour, and a light, healing touch.

Two sharply different books shared the role of runner-up. **Trouble Half-Way**, by Jan Mark, is a characteristically perceptive and witty little book which explores the changing relationship between an anxious, rather proper, young girl and the stepfather with whom, in spite of his good-natured affection, she is still ill at ease. Subtly, the action lies less in their journey together across England in his lorry than in her discoveries about herself. **Mundo and the Weather-Child**, by Joyce Dunbar, is a bold experiment in portraying the uncomprehending distress, and its painful but triumphant conquest, of a seven-year-old who becomes suddenly deaf. A magical companion eases his devastating sense of isolation and transforms a symbolic study of the subconscious into an exciting tale of adventure and enchantment. For the first time in fiction, a deaf child has been given heroic status and the world of silence a voice. An ambitious book (for readers older than its own *Mundo*), it is a touching and striking work of the imagination.

**Henry's Leg**, Ann Pilling, Viking Kestrel, 0 670 80720 6, £5.95

**Trouble Half-Way**, Jan Mark, Viking Kestrel, 0 670 80188 7, £6.50

**Mundo and the Weather-Child**, Joyce Dunbar, Heinemann, 0 434 93590 5, £6.95.

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