



# BfK Briefing ? July 1996

[99](#) [1]

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Awards - **Jay Heale** and **Nicholas Tucker** report on The Hans Christian Andersen Award and the Carnegie Medal.

How are children's book awards actually... well, awarded? In a special News Feature, two distinguished commentators report on the deliberations that lay behind two of this year's top prizes: The Hans Christian Andersen Award and the Carnegie Medal.

## The Best Children's Author in the World?

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(And the best illustrator, while we're at it.)

### Jay Heale

Often referred to as 'the Little Nobel Prize', the Andersen Award is the top international award for an author and an illustrator of children's books. It is awarded for the complete body of work judged to 'have made a lasting contribution to literature for children and young people'.

The 60-something member countries of IBBY submit their nominations. (This year there were 23 authors nominated and 24 illustrators.) At the same time, a jury of eight is selected from similar international nominations. I was honoured to be one of the eight.

Our first task, as a jury, was to set out our criteria for the job ahead of us. The chairman of the jury, Peter Schneck from Austria, circulated all our replies. I was fascinated - firstly by the way that it seemed possible to judge writing and illustration under very similar headings; and secondly, by the way judges more experienced than I admitted openly that 'gut reaction' was a potent factor.

Determined to approach my judging with some degree of logic, I scanned through my fellow jurors' criteria and settled on five main points:

- **Aesthetic quality:** the sheer skill involved in the writing or illustrating.
- **Worthwhile themes:** that there was something beyond just enjoyment or adventure.
- **Child appeal:** too many award-winning books are accused of being suited to adult judges rather than young readers.
- **National importance:** the author or illustrator nominated must clearly have been highly honoured in her or his

own country.

- **Originality:** it seemed important that something new, fresh, and progressive was on offer.

Then the boxes of books started arriving - five or more titles to represent each contender, together with a folder containing the Motivation for that person's proposal. I have to say that many doubtless excellent nominations faltered at this stage, as their country had not supplied enough background material. For the authors, I set out to find readers in as many of the languages involved as possible. I contacted universities, embassies, schools, and put letters in the newspapers. I asked all my readers, including more than 100 children, for their 'gut reactions'. Did this author grab them? If so, could they explain why? Believe me: the reactions of many 'ordinary parents' proved to be almost identical to those of supposed experts. The way that child and parent react to a book *is* the best way of judging it.

Armed with all these opinions, together with my own, I arrived in Basel in April 1996. We deliberated for two solid days. The actual voting was done by the eight jurors, with the Chairman and the President of IBBY (Carmen Diana Dearden from Venezuela) there with a voice but not a vote. In turn, each author was 'presented' by a juror sympathetic to that country, after which each person round the table offered a free opinion. In the first round of voting, seven of my own eight choices won through. As we narrowed down the voting, the discussion turned from 'Good, but not really up to Andersen standard?', towards 'Very good, but still young - not a sufficient body of work yet?'. Decisions were swayed by the fact that, though clearly excellent, some writers did not have books in translation in sufficient languages for the jury to have read them personally. (And the jury's collective linguistic coverage was considerable.)

Our final decision, the Israeli author, Uri Orlev, was agreed upon warmly. His writing has humour and adventure, is full of realism, yet contains a deeper message of a loving, accepting attitude towards others. His boyhood experience inside the Warsaw ghetto in war-torn Poland forms the background of some of his stories; so does his new country, Israel; and he tells simple tales in skilled Hebrew as well. He writes at a high literary level in a way which is never sentimental. **The Island on Bird Street** and **Lydia, Queen of Palestine** are two of his best-known books.

Next day we tackled the illustrators. Before long the others were saying, 'Right, Jay, what do your 100 children think of *this* one?' (They hadn't done badly: their 'top 10' included five of the jury's final six.) What became clear to me was the obvious rift between east and west Europe (for there were very few contenders from outside this literary sphere). Eastern countries are used to harsher, more grotesque illustrative styles, more atmospheric, even caricatured or surreal. Children from the west are used to a more friendly, photographic style, with 'cute 'n cuddly' creatures and an accessible technique. It proved difficult (perhaps impossible) for the jurors to set aside their own personal artistic likes and dislikes.

We ended the long afternoon with Tomi Ungerer (France), Klaus Ensikat (Germany) and Anthony Browne (United Kingdom) as our final choices. For sheer child appeal, proven beyond doubt, Ungerer was supreme. But he'd not illustrated a children's book for 20 years. Why had France nominated him now? Was Ensikat's sophisticated humour and exquisite line truly 'child friendly'? Were Browne's surrealism and personified gorilla tales of lasting quality? We talked passionately. We voted. Klaus Ensikat was the winner. No doubt that he deserved this honour. Doubt only (in my mind) how clear we had all been on exactly *how* to choose between one artist and another.

In August 1996, at the IBBY Congress in Groningen (Netherlands), flash-bulbs will explode around Uri Orlev and Klaus Ensikat. They will join the ranks of such previous winners as Eleanor Farjeon (the first ever, in 1956), Astrid Lindgren, Erich Kästner, Meindert DeJong, Maurice Sendak, Scott O'Dell, Paula Fox, Mitsumasa Anno, Patricia Wrightson and Virginia Hamilton.

Neither Uri Orlev or Klaus Ensikat have books in print in this country.

**Jay Heale** was born in Great Britain and has lived in South Africa since 1968, where he edits **Bookchat**, the only

magazine in that country devoted to children's books. The author of several children's books, Jay also conducts ongoing research into South African children's literature and is the Liaison Officer for South Africa with IBBY.

## **Carping about the Carnegie**

**Nicholas Tucker** reports on his observation of how our premier award for children's literature is judged

Book prizes always involve disagreements, with no guarantee that history will necessarily agree with the final decision. Judging a children's book award is even more difficult, because panel members are arguing not just for themselves but also for the particular child reader they have in mind. This figure may be based on their own family, on a child they work with and even on the child the panel members themselves once were. Successfully pooling all these private agendas into a communal judging session has to be hard.

So it is with no spirit of condescension that I am now making a few mild criticisms of the judging session for the Carnegie Medal shortlist I was invited to observe this April. The judges in this search for the outstanding book written for children last year were experienced children's librarians drawn from all over Britain. They knew far more about what children read day to day than I did. They listened politely to each other, and good humour was maintained throughout. Everyone involved had their fair say; some voices were stronger than others, but that's inevitable in any group discussion.

What then could I possibly find to gripe about? Well, for starters, this was an all-women group - not by design, but simply because this year no male librarians were nominated. Since females dominate this profession, it is not surprising they were so well represented here. Yet imagine the concern if it was an all-male jury sitting in judgement on the best children's book of the year! The presence of even one male may not have materially altered the discussion, but it is still surely a mistake to allow such gender bias.

This is not just a matter of good public relations. Boys are not very persistent readers these days, nor have they been for some time. Both boys and girls often go for the same books, but sometimes each sex will opt for different ones. A male judge may not necessarily be better at looking after boys' reading interests but he might more easily remember his own former taste or that of his friends for the active, adventure-bound type of literature so rarely found in modern children's books, and particularly among those that win prizes. Should anyone ever endow a prize for the best boys' book of the year, it would be difficult to define nowadays what exactly was meant by that phrase... and then find enough titles to choose from!

By contrast, there's plenty of good fiction around that concentrates on the importance of feelings, sensitivity to others and maintaining wider emotional relationships. **In a Different Voice**, an influential book by the feminist psychologist Carol Gilligan, finds such values highly represented in current female priorities. Many males share these concerns too, but Gilligan suggests they often tend to place most value on individual achievement in a world of clear rights and wrongs. Someone should be speaking up for readers with these interests as well. Female librarians may do so, but male librarians surely deserve to be heard, too, on this topic when awarding national book prizes.

In fact, the judges on the occasion I was there talked about quite different issues. Persistent claims were made for a novel's veracity, sometimes as if non-fiction was being discussed rather than works of imagination. 'This wouldn't have happened in 1960.' 'Why didn't she take the road rather than going over the hill?' 'Surely the school inspector would have recommended computer studies?' Yet fiction is different from life. It has its own conventions and imaginative certainties. Constantly measuring it against reality in order to condemn contrived endings, unlikely coincidences and unreal conclusions is to close the door on some fine books that stay in the mind because of their emotional truth whatever their surface likelihood.

I was left wondering whether it's a good idea to have all judges from the same profession as well as from the same sex. They appeared to share very similar outlooks, fair and sensitive in themselves, but still somewhat exclusive as is the case with all of us with common values. Open disagreements tended to be muted rather than followed through, perhaps because to persevere would seem to be challenging other judges' competence as professionals in close touch with

children and literature. The literary criteria laid down by the Library Association for judging the Carnegie Medal are sensible enough, but they were not always consistently applied and room must still be left for those flawed writers who also possess giant merits. Two of my own awkward customers fell by the wayside this time; whether the ultimate winner is clearly better than the lot remains to be seen.

**Nicholas Tucker** is Lecturer in Developmental Psychology at the University of Sussex.

The winner of this year's Carnegie Medal will be announced on the 17th July at the Queen Elizabeth Hall in London.

**In a Different Voice** by Carol Gilligan is published by Harvard University Press, 0 674 44544 9, £6.95

*Editor's Note: Oh dear! My own doubts about the way the Carnegie Medal is judged are pretty well known (see **BfK 82**, Sept 1993, and **BfK 83**, Nov 1993) so I was a little alarmed, on receiving Nick Tucker's copy, that we might be thought to be conducting some sort of vendetta. Not so, let me assure our readers. Clearly, though, there's a substantive case to answer here. Would any librarians - male librarians in particular, perhaps - like to respond to Nick's comments?*

## AWARDS UPDATE

### The Mother Goose Award for 1995

has been awarded to **When Martha's Away** by Bruce Ingman, published by Methuen (hardback currently out of stock, with a Mandarin paperback due in September this year).

This award is sponsored by Books for Children and the 1995 judges were Jill Slotover, Sally Grindley, Ian Beck, Michael Foreman, Nicola Bayley, Tony Ross and Wendy Cooling.

### The Children's Book Award

has been won by Jacqueline Wilson for her book, **Double Act**, published by Doubleday and illustrated by Nick Sharratt and Sue Heap (0 385 405375, £8.99; Yearling, 0 440 86334 1, £3.50 pbk).

Jacqueline also won the award in 1993 for **The Suitcase Kid** (Doubleday, 0 385 401752, £8.99; Yearling, 0 440 86311 2, £2.99 pbk).

Page Number:

26

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