



All that glisters?

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Awards

Keith Barker surveys 50 years of the **Carnegie Medal**

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1936 was a significant year for British children's books. H. J. B. Woodfield began **Junior Bookshelf**, the first British journal devoted exclusively to the reviewing of children's books, both Dent and Oxford University Press appointed children's book editors for the first time and the Library Association's Carnegie Medal was born. Not that there was not a great deal of room for improvement at this time. Robert Leeson, in his book **Reading and Righting**, has called the thirties 'the age of brass' and the Library Association acknowledged the lack of quality of children's books at that period when it introduced the award. 'Quite frankly', it said, 'many of the books that are written for children are very poor; the field, however, is immense and so, too, should be its opportunities for good authors to distinguish themselves.'

Apart from highlighting new authors (such as Eve Garnett who won the second Carnegie Medal for **The Family from One End Street**, fighting off competition from **The Hobbit**), the medal's selection committee honoured previously eminent writers of children's books such as Walter de la Mare, Eleanor Farjeon and C. S. Lewis, although not always for their best work. This was a particular aspect of those books which were winners in the early years of the Carnegie Medal. However, although the Library Association felt these writers were worth honouring, the Association itself did little to promote the award. During the war years, Eleanor Graham complained bitterly of the parochialism surrounding the medal while Arthur Ransome, the first recipient for **Pigeon Post**, grumbled that 'it would have been better to send the blessed thing by post'.

Children's librarians, an expanding group at this time, were also upset that the selection committees which made the choices at the beginning of the Carnegie Medal's life were neither in the main conversant with children's libraries nor with children's books. At some of the selection meetings, few members bothered to turn up to make any selection, such as at the meeting where Noel Streatfeild's **The Circus is Coming** was chosen as the 1938 winner when only two members attended. The Library Association conceded to some of the requests of the children's librarians and in 1940 Eileen Colwell became a member of the committee, a position she was to hold for over twenty-five years. Other changes were made such as the introduction of criteria (albeit brief ones) for the first time.

The 1950s and early 1960s saw a pattern of award winning books which had distinctive literary features. Distinguished winners of this period include **Tom's Midnight Garden** and **The Borrowers** although the list also includes books largely unknown to today's children such as Sheena Porter's **Nordy Bank**. It was also an era dominated by a particular publishing house, Oxford University Press, which invariably had a large number of its titles either in the commended list or as winner. However, this became an increasing grumble against the Carnegie Medal, particularly at a time when authors of the calibre of Alan Garner were exciting the children's book world. The second British children's fiction award, the **Guardian** Award, was introduced in 1966, while Aidan Chambers' **The Reluctant Reader**, an innovative critical work, strongly criticised the selection of Philip Turner's **The Grange at High Force**, an O.U.P. book, as a Carnegie Medal winner. After a particularly virulent exchange in the correspondence columns of the **Times Literary Supplement** between Library Association worthies and Brian Alderson, children's book editor of **The Times**, it was decided that changes should be made to the method of selection of the award.

These changes meant that the selection became almost totally in the hands of members of the Youth Libraries Group which represents children's librarians throughout Great Britain. This is the system still in use at the present moment. Thirteen members of the Youth Libraries Group sit on the selection committee, the majority, apart from a few officers, being elected from each of the YLG's branches throughout the country.

In recent years, there has been criticism that the books which win the Carnegie Medal are not those that are of enormous appeal to children. 'The great unread' one librarian dubbed the winners and, writing of **Watership Down** (which also won the **Guardian** Award), one county librarian said 'what has now become quite obvious is that the chosen book need appeal only to more intelligent children and adults'. This meant that, particularly in the 1970s, selection committees often selected books which they felt had more appeal to children, such as **The Machine Gunners** and **The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tiler**. Although it has always been possible for an author to be given the medal more than once, it was only in 1980 that the Carnegie Medal was awarded to an author who had won one before but of the five winning authors of the 1980s four of them, Peter Dickinson, Robert Westall, Jan Mark and Margaret Mahy, have been previous winners. Does this denote a lack of imagination on the part of successive selection committees or a limited number of excellent children's writers during this decade? Foreign authors are also eligible for the award as long as the gap between publication in the country of origin and that in the United Kingdom is no more than three months. This ruling also affects British authors: for example, Jill Paton Walsh's **Gaffer Samson's Luck**, which was the winner of the first Smarties Prize and was a likely contender for this year's Carnegie Medal, was not eligible as it had been published in America five months before it was published in this country.

What sort of books are likely to win the Carnegie Medal? For Janet Hill, who sat on the selection committee once, the selectors were 'bowing to the fashionable, the safe and the tasteful', while Lance Salway has described most winners as 'conventional, solemn, worthy and safe', and, more recently, Neil Philip has spoken of the 'sedate inoffensiveness' of the medal. It would be fair to say that, particularly in recent years, innovative children's books have been more likely to appear in the commended list rather than as medal winners. It should be remembered, however, that some outstanding books (and the purpose of the award is to honour an outstanding book not the best book of the year) have been Carnegie Medal winners, not the least among them **Tom's Midnight Garden** and **The Owl Service**. All children's book award lists contain some duds, books to which no child would give a second glance. It is a good party game to readjust any of these lists. However, as John Rowe Townsend has pointed out when speaking of the American Newbery Medal, even if it were possible to reshape the list by bringing in books that were somehow overlooked and removing weaker titles, 'no two people would agree on what books should be discarded or introduced'.

One of the most distinctive aspects of the Carnegie Medal is that any member of the Library Association can suggest up to three titles to the selection committee for consideration. This means that, theoretically at least, any of the several thousand titles published each year could be considered. This is in contrast to most children's book awards where the selectors rely on publishers to make submissions to them. In the event, each member of the selection committee will receive a list of around fifty titles (although a number of these are likely to have been strong contenders throughout the year). The committee members have to obtain (no free publisher's copies here!), read and assess these fifty titles in a couple of months, as well as the thirty or so titles on the list for the Kate Greenaway Medal, the Library Association's other children's book award, for illustration.

However, amid all this selection, how much are children involved or even considered? Children can be involved in the very early sifting of titles to be sent to the selection committee, either through individuals or through local authority librarians. The members of this committee are librarians who have daily contact with children and who are knowledgeable about children's books. Nevertheless, it has to be said that the criteria of the award, as stated each year in the Library Association's Year Book, are specifically literary and nowhere is popularity with children mentioned as being important. The guidelines, which the members of the selection committee are given each year, are based on a **Signal** article by Peter Hunt, the central argument of which states that any type of critical theory produced for children's literature will have little or nothing to do with children. Perhaps the administrators of the Carnegie Medal should take note of the changes made to the criteria of the Other Award in recent years. These were altered from their original, rather grim form so that the first of them became that any winning book would 'be accessible, in form and content, to

children and young people and will give pleasure and enjoyment'. And, indeed, is it possible to devise a children's book award which does not involve adults in some way, even if only in the administration and initial selection?

One aspect of the Carnegie Medal which has always been problematic has been publicity given to the award. Even today, fifty years after its first presentation, there are still large numbers of people knowledgeable about children's books who are unaware of the medal's existence. In some ways it will perhaps never make a big splash. For one thing, the award carries no monetary value and so is unlikely to be able to compete with big money spinners like the Booker McConnell prize. The type of book the Carnegie Medal generally recognises, hardback children's fiction, is not a large seller in ordinary bookshops and, apparently, according to the **Bookseller**, even the prize money given by Smarties to **Gaffer Sampson's Luck** made little difference to bookshop sales of that title in hardback. However, it would surely be possible to raise the awareness of teachers and librarians at least to the medal: the golden jubilee celebrations this year would seem an ideal way of doing this. Brian Alderson once described the Library Association's approach to publicity as primitive. Some might say this is a charitable way to describe the situation.

It has to be said in fairness to the Carnegie Medal that the criticisms described in this article are applicable to the majority of British children's book awards. The administrators of the medal have at least made attempts over the years to introduce new ideas, to alter the selection committee structure, to adapt the criteria. What are the criteria of the **Guardian**, Whitbread or Smarties awards? Do awards where publishers submit their own selection of books miss some masterpieces? Are the children's writers who make up the selection committees of a number of awards the most impartial judges of their peers' work? And is the Federation of Children's Book Groups Award chosen solely by children? Battered and bruised the Carnegie Medal may be but it is still, in its fiftieth year, relatively healthy.

Keith Barker is Deputy Librarian at Westhill College, Birmingham. He has a special interest in children's literature and his most recent work **In the Realms of Gold: the story of the Carnegie Medal** is a history of the medal to mark its 50th anniversary. **In the Realms of Gold** (0 86203 260 1, £4.95) is published by Julia MacRae in association with the Youth Libraries Group of the Library Association.

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