



How the medal was won

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Gill Johnson reports from this year's panel, **Chris Powling** reads the books and talks to the writers and **Keith Barker** looks back at 50 years of the Carnegie Medal.

Gill Johnson reveals the thinking behind the award of this year's Carnegie Medal.

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What is the definition of a children's book? When the Carnegie Medal was originally established it was thought to be 'a book for a child somewhere between the ages of nine to twelve' - although it was stressed that books considered need not to be absolutely between these age limits. As society has changed so librarianship has moved to accommodate these changes and librarians involved with work with young people now cover an age range from 0 to 16 or 18. The creation by the advertising media of 'the teenager' has led to special publishing and library provision for this age group.

Certainly there has been a tendency over the last twenty years for the Carnegie Medal to go to books which many would, by reason of their style and plot, consider more suitable for the 12+ age group. Those connected with the Medal would like to think that it has had some influence on the standard of publishing for those readers.

Alongside this trend there has been a plea for a similar improvement in standards of writing and publishing for the younger age group. Librarians are always looking for books which give the young reader who has recently achieved technical competence a real, imaginative reading experience which will demonstrate to them a good reason for having gone to the trouble of mastering the skills. However this poses difficulties for the selection panel. How can one assess such a book alongside one written for teenagers with the consequent increase in plot complexity, characterisation and stylistic devices. As adults a book more closely approximating adult literature is bound to make more of an impression and it is difficult to lay aside such subjective feelings.

The only analogy I can draw which might explain the thinking of this year's panel is that of a judge at Crufts Dog Show. How do they assess a Pekingese against a Great Dane? The answer is that they don't. Each is assessed against a breed standard and the dog which comes highest against that assessment is the winner. So the panel considering the 1985 shortlist had before them two books for teenagers; Janni Howker's **The Nature of the Beast** (Julia MacRae, 0 86203 194 X, 6.95) and Louise Lawrence's **Children of the Dust** (Bodley Head, 0 370 30679 1, £3.95). Then there were three for the 11+ age group; Betsy Byars' **Cracker Jackson** (Bodley Head, 0 370 30859 X, £4.95), David Line's **Screaming High** (Cape, 0 224 02313 6, £7.95) and William Mayne's **Drift** (Cape 0 224 02244 X, £6.95). Finally there was one book for the 7-9 age group: Kevin Crossley-Holland's **Storm** (Heinemann, 0 434 93032 6, £2.50). There is not space here to list the panel's thinking on each of these titles so perhaps I can confine my comments to the winner and the highly commended.

WINNER OF THE 1985 CARNEGIE MEDAL: Kevin Crossley-Holland Storm (Heinemann)

Turning to **Storm** the panel was faced with a very short book of only some 3000 words in the Banana Books Series aimed at young readers of approximately 7-9 years. The panel judged this to be an excellent book for its intended purpose. Perhaps because of the author's poetry experience it was thought that every word counted in his outstanding use of language. The description conveyed a strong sense of place and atmosphere; drama and suspense. In *Annie* there was a strong, female character who is naturally apprehensive about the task in front of her which only she can perform, but who overcomes her fears when it is needed. The book is part of a series which is recognised to be outstanding value for money with hardback covers, colour illustration and sewn binding. At first consideration doubts were expressed about whether the book was sufficiently memorable and some thought the surprise element might be lacking, but questioning young readers some of the panel members found that this was not the case. Children, it was true, did predict the ending but this did not distract from their enjoyment of the book, rather it gave them a feeling of confidence and superiority that they guessed, and guessed correctly, what was going to happen. Neither did it seem to detract from the drama of the story and children who had since read many other books could still remember the ghostly shiver down the spine on reading the last page.

So a decision was made to award the Medal to a book which was considered to be an outstanding piece of miniature writing, comparable to a miniature painting in its attention to fine detail and lasting impressions.

HIGHLY COMMENDED: Janni Howker's *The Nature of the Beast* (Julia MacRae Books)

Janni Howker's first collection of short stories **Badger on the Barge** was shortlisted for the 1984 Carnegie Medal and received much critical acclaim, marking her as an author to watch for the future. This, her first full-length novel, was thought by the panel to be a powerful and at times disturbing book for teenagers dealing with the realities of unemployment in a Pennine mill town. There was a strong sense of place and atmosphere and it was not too difficult to empathise with the main characters. The panel thought that the book benefited from more than one reading but accepted that it needed introducing and promoting to its intended audience. However some of the minor characters came over as rather stereotyped, for example, the portrayal of the social worker at the end of the book. On a second reading some of the author's obviously deeply held convictions seemed to sound a little didactic and there were some minor plot anomalies and stylistic devices which the panel thought could not be discounted. In the final analysis it was also agreed that the book jacket, very important in library terms, was less than totally successful.

That there is informed discussion and criticism of the panel's work is healthy and to be welcomed. It adds interest to the debate and hopefully produces more publicity for the Medals. It encourages more people to recognise the importance of children's books. This is a particular cause of concern at the moment as economic stringencies impose cuts in school and public library budgets and as children's editorial teams come under increasing pressure to consider the profit motive. A good children's book survives the fleeting popularity of newness and time will be the final arbiter of whether this year's panel have made wise decisions. Naturally we think we have and hope that this article in **Books for Keeps** will encourage discussion amongst readers of this journal.

Gill Johnson is the current chairperson of the Youth Libraries Group of the Library Association and chaired the panel of children's librarians who chose the winners of this year's Carnegie and Kate Greenaway Medals. She is Principal Librarian, Schools' and Children's Services, with Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Library Service.

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