The Children’s Book Council of Australia Book of the Year and the image problem

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Abstract

Despite the proliferation of literary awards, sometimes with a more extensive list of categories and often with more generous prize money, the Children’s Book Council of Australia Book of the Year is still the only award that has a significant impact on book sales in this country. Throughout the 65-year history of the CBC, both the judging criteria and the judges themselves have constantly been subjected to criticism and instead of acknowledging that, as English (2005) and Kidd (2007, 2009) argue, literary prizes are by their nature provocative and, therefore, welcoming any challenges, the CBC has responded repeatedly by asserting that it is a last bastion of literary standards.

This article argues that the desire to shore up its cultural capital in this way derives from an image problem related to its identification with primary school education and librarianship, and suggests that to do so is counterproductive.

Introduction

Over the 65-year history of the Children’s Book Council of Australia’s Book of the Year awards, an ongoing conversation about the integrity and competence of its judges reflects a general consciousness that those adults who work with children in our society, particularly young children — whether as librarians, educators, writers and illustrators, publishers or booksellers — are not regarded as being at the top of their profession.

Each state branch appoints a judge and the state that hosts the national executive on a two-year rotation has the right to appoint the whole judging panel for the information books category. In the early years, the probability that judges were not well known outside their home state or the CBC itself was not perceived as a problem. Rather than making personal judgements, they were seen as expressing consensus values for the organisation and the children’s book community — if not the literary community generally. However, when the judges failed to announce a winner in 11 of the first 14 years of the Picture Book of the Year category and made no award at all on nine occasions, the CBC responded to public criticism by emphasising the qualifications of individual judges. In 1970 for the first time their degrees andhonours were included, most notably at the head of the list for that year, ‘ACT Mrs L Rees MBE’ (CBCA 1970).

Teachers, academics, booksellers, publishers, writers, illustrators and designers have been committee members of the Children’s Book Council at both state and national level and, therefore, when it comes to the annual revision of the awards handbook, a range of professions have been involved in determining the judging criteria. But professions apart from teaching and librarianship have scarcely been represented on the actual judging panels. And both the teaching of young children and children’s librarianship for most of the 20th century suffered an image problem. The history of librarianship as a profession in both the United States and Australia is an important factor in any reading of the way literary awards for children's books have been used to shore up the cultural capital of those who administer them. It is a history inextricably linked with the subordination of women in the workforce. Just as military service was something for sons of the aristocracy to do while they waited on their inheritance, so at the end of the 19th century librarianship was regarded as a suitable pursuit for young women waiting on marriage.
Biskup's implication that men were displaced in his description of librarianship as a 'feminised profession' (Biskup 1994, p. 167) seems somewhat perverse, unless the phrase simply means that there were more women librarians than men. He himself acknowledges that by the 1920s 85 per cent of librarians were women. But he does take issue with Cass's assertion (1972) that, as employees, women were attractive to libraries at the end of the 19th century because they were willing to accept lower wages than men, and he argues that pay scales for men and women in the New South Wales public service were equal (Biskup 1994, p. 167). However, Schmidmaier and Doherty (2005, p. 2) argue that by the time of the Harvester Judgment in 1907, the male/female wage differential had become entrenched. In 1919, the basic female rate was just 54 per cent of the male and this was only increased to 75 per cent in 1943, due to labour shortages during World War 2. It was not until 1972 that equity was won.

In her survey of Library Literature 1921-1932, McReynolds notes no references to female librarians, but over 60 citations for male librarians, comparing their work with professions perceived as being more masculine. The librarian became the “surgeon of the mind” and the library an allegory for a bank or a detective agency’ (McReynolds 1985, p. 26). Advertisements were worded to attract ‘bright young men’ to positions in librarianship after World War 2 (Nelson 1980, p. 2033), and wage inequity for the female majority in the profession increasingly became the major factor behind its low status. Garrison identifies the sexism in the construction of librarianship as a natural occupation for women:

They could use their innate skills to make libraries more homelike and were temperamentally better suited for painstaking jobs like cataloguing. Furthermore, librarianship emphasized feminine qualities of serving, self-sacrifice and high-mindedness (Garrison 1972-73, p. 133).

But Nelson observes that ironically Garrison then goes on to attack women for conferring these qualities on their profession:

_How can librarianship hope to raise its status when most of its members hold such a low status in the society at large; when in fact women were recruited into librarianship precisely because of their low status? (Nelson 1980, p. 2032)._ Others advance a more positive view of the predominance of women among the rank and file, if not in positions of power. Kidd sees librarianship as a means of public service for educated middle class women at the time (2007, p. 171) and Lundin takes this further. She sees women using book-related professions to further ongoing social construction:

_The example of these authors, editors, educators, and librarians, who cleared the path for contemporary children's literature and services, subverts expectations of domestic women and suggests instead a dynamic image of powerful women working to construct a maternal paradigm of literature and service (Lundin 1996, p. 845)._ In the sometimes troubled relationship Book of the Year winners Ivan Southall, John Marsden and Gary Crew have had with the Children's Book Council it can be argued that this maternal paradigm may also be seen as repressive, and the contention that women judges of these awards don't fully understand books for boys echoes complaints about women controlling the Newbery Medal in the United States 60 years earlier, referred to by Jenkins (1996). Regardless of whether the nexus between women and librarianship is read positively or negatively, the potential of an awards system to increase the cultural capital of both the producers and the consumers of children's books is clear.

Although Kidd acknowledges that with hindsight it is still debatable whether awards produce outstanding literature and whether they have helped to counteract or contribute to the subordinate status of children's literature in particular (Kidd 2007, p. 167), he argues that over the past 85 years the Newbery Medal has been highly successful in inspiring a whole system of literary prize-giving and in the process 'ensuring that ALA librarians would continue to serve as tastemakers. With adult literary prize, by contrast, critics and authors are usually the credentialed authorities' (Kidd 2007, p. 169).

Like the weighty robes and chains of office, regulations can be used to confer status on those who devise them. So the complexity in the process of giving awards invests them with cultural capital and, once they are established, so does the decision to withhold them. By making a literary award one of its key strategies for encouraging publication and raising its quality, the CBC had learnt from the success of the American Library Association and the Library Association in the UK. Unlike those models, however, the CBC also learnt it could exploit the power to withhold an award and, as mentioned earlier, in its formative years of the 1950s and 60s, it did so with alarming frequency. The withholding is doubly ironic, because the decision to introduce a Picture Book of the Year category from 1955 was intended as a celebration of the CBC’s 10th anniversary. At first it appears that the enthusiasm of those

On a statistical average, the lifetime frequency of an award such as the Esther Glen Award is unremarkable, and comparable with biennial awards such as those presented at Australia’s Adelaide Festival. But long sequences in which there is no award, such as 1951 to 1958 for the Esther Glen and 1959 to 1964 for the CBC Picture Book of the Year, interrogate both the entries in those years and the judging process. To set up a new category and then announce no winner in its inaugural year simultaneously invalidates the books entered and validates the judging process — as long as the reading community endorses both the judges and their criteria.

In accord with the terms of the CBC’s constitution, the Book of the Year award was designed partly to encourage local publishing, so the absence of a winner during those early years may simply demonstrate the inferior nature of the books produced by a fledgling industry. By way of contrast, the Newbery Medal has never been withheld since its introduction in 1922. And the UK’s Carnegie Medal, introduced in 1936, has only been withheld on three occasions: in 1943, 1945 and 1966 — two of those occasions, of course, during World War 2. The smaller size of the respective populations — and therefore the markets — and the shorter history of publishing in Australia, Canada and New Zealand are significant factors. But equally significant is the desire for cultural capital in a postcolonial society as conscious as Australia was of what AA Phillips in 1950 called its ‘cultural cringe’.

Unlike the Newbery and Carnegie medals, the Book of the Year was one project of a special organisation created with a broader brief to promote children’s books. And because both state and national executives have included publishers such as Anne Ingram, Eddie Coffey, Stephen Dearnley, John Cody, Margaret Hamilton, Brian Cook, Sarah Foster and the present writer, and to a lesser extent booksellers, the use of the awards to shore up cultural capital is not due only to the respective status of women and librarianship. The reluctance of the CBC to extend the eligibility of judges beyond teachers, librarians and enthusiastic amateurs is due to the complexity of its ongoing conversation with commercialism.

To some extent the CBC’s success in encouraging an Australian children’s publishing industry eventually made several of the aims in its constitution redundant. The improvement of books for children, in whatever ways that was to be defined, the dissemination of information about children’s books to educators and parents, and the creating of events such as Children’s Book Week and the mounting of book exhibitions quickly became part of the publishing process, as marketing began to overtake publicity in the major publishing houses — the difference generally being defined by budget. Since publishers had the financial resources and increasingly the professional expertise to produce promotional material, import high-profile authors and create national tours for them and for local authors, buy advertising space and time in media outlets and offer discounts for volume sales to schools and bookselling chains, the CBC had to redefine its aims. As early as 1962, in his annual report, the president, NE Peard, laments the fact that ‘The major function of the Australian Council, despite all hopes to the contrary, seems to have become that of selecting the Book of the Year’ (4th Annual Report, AGM Minutes, CBCA 1962). Confusingly, the ‘Australian Council’ here is the group currently referred to as the ‘National Executive’.

Although long after the growth of publishers’ marketing departments in the 1980s, the CBC continued — and continues — to produce publicity material and merchandise, mount tours and events and lobby for publicity in the media, the amateur status of the organisation and its limited funding worked against it. This is clearly a factor in its reluctance to relax its control over the Book of the Year awards by broadening the criteria of eligibility for judging. So the CBC has increasingly defined itself as an educator and gatekeeper, defending against commercial interests its consensus standards of high quality in the production of the literary text and therefore excluding anyone but teachers, librarians and enthusiastic amateurs who have a recognised standing in the field.

Ironically, although it could be argued that teachers and librarians have a financial interest in creating a market for the kind of children’s books they will buy and promote, the awards handbook, the judges’ reports and the reviews journal Reading Time repeatedly attempt to define their
position as objective. The construction of teachers and librarians as the only stakeholders who can be trusted to decide on the best in books for children is a version of the 'cultural strut' that is often a response to the 'cultural cringe'. The observation that a postcolonial nation such as Australia is a community of 'early adopters' (Dale 2006) helps to explain why the CBC embraces new writers, but then expresses an almost parental disappointment when their writing or their personal appearances challenge tradition. Both the strut and the cringe derive from a sense of subordination. The healthy proliferation of new titles, set out as an aim of the CBC's constitution, is itself no indication of quality.

The sixth aim of the CBC's constitution emphasises education and librarianship in specifying attention to both 'subject matter' and 'format' of the best children's books. And the annual judges' reports underline these concerns in an unusual attention to detail and an often pedagogical tone. While no doubt well intentioned in its determination to practise what it preaches, at its most extreme the 'subject matter' and 'format' to both 'subject matter' and 'format' and an often pedagogical tone. While no doubt well intentioned in its determination to practise what it preaches, at its most extreme the 'subject matter' and 'format' to detail and an often pedagogical tone. While no doubt well intentioned in its determination to practise what it preaches, at its most extreme the 'subject matter' and 'format' to and therefore do not carry an apostrophe. Mr Eyre mentioned that the 'Commonwealth Government Style Manual' refers to this point (pp. 22 and 23) and that in the second printing 'Childrens Book Week' is in fact included as one of the examples, in order to make the distinction between 'Childrens Book Week' (a week about books for children) and, for example, 'the children's books were left very untidily in their classroom'.

It was decided that all State Councils should be asked their views on this, with the idea that they might decide to do as Victoria has already done and eliminate the apostrophe from their titles. It was also decided that the elimination of it from the Federal title should be put on the Agenda for the next meeting and that in the meantime members would do what they could to arouse public interest possibly by writing letters to the correspondence columns of such papers as 'The Australian'. Mrs Southwell suggested that it might be possible to introduce the subject in the journal 'English in Australia'.

As the occasional grammatical errors and typos in the judges' reports throughout the CBC's history suggest, there are risks involved in such attention to detail — regardless of the defence that these reports are produced to tight deadlines. Unfortunately, in this case 'Childrens Book Week' is not 'A Week of Books for Childrens'. At the same time, this example does demonstrate the CBC's desire to be seen as acknowledging current practice, and it may be significant that the proponent of change quoted is a publisher, Frank Eyre. That desire is in constant conversation with its mission to maintain existing standards.

Ironically, at times more space in the judges' reports is devoted to condemnation of an award winner than to praise. In 1970, Colin Thiele's novel Blue Fin was runner-up for Book of the Year, an award at that stage called 'Highly Commended'. After praising the book's originality and vitality, the judges add a full paragraph on its weaknesses:

... the book is marred by faulty structure. The episodes in the first half of the book relate to but are not part of the struggle which ensues in the last part. Thiele takes too long to come to the point. Also he has a tendency to over-arrive where there is, in places, an over-abundance of imagery (Reading Time, no. 36, July 1970, p. 12).

In awarding a Commended citation to Ivan Souttah's novel Finn's Folly in that same year, the judges say:

The sheer professionalism of his writing is convincing and almost overcomes the somewhat hystirical atmosphere and contrived plot (Reading Time, no. 36, July 1970, p. 12).

This is an award-winning book. And in their 1972 report, the judges support their assertion that over-writing mars the Book of the Year, Hesba Brinsmead's Longtime Passing, by quoting one of the offending sentences and they use specific page numbers to point out stylistic faults in another two award winners.
Clearly positioning the CBC as the administrators of a sought-after award and, therefore, being careful not to sound too discouraging, the judges in 1973 write just a single paragraph of general commentary as an introduction to their notes on individual winners. In reports 20 years later, the preamble extends to several pages.

Half the books entered for the awards were considered in the final stages of the judging. This is both an indication of the general standard of the entries and of the task facing the judging panel. However, despite the overall competence of much of the writing, the judges found that few of the books could be regarded as outstanding achievements. Many entries lacked originality and vitality. The experimental writing entered, although it was welcome as an interesting development in Australian children’s literature, was considered to have failed in communicating effectively with children (Judges’ Report, CBCA 1973).

The general preamble in the report for the following year, 1974, asserts that there have been changes.

Many of the books entered for the Award this year were good in parts, but unsuccessful as a whole. There was some vigorous competent writing and sensitive illustration, but these were often marred by poor editing and a lack of awareness on the part of some publishers of what constitutes a good and attractive book for children. In view of the growing stature of the Awards and the increasing national and international interest in Australian children’s literature, the judges were disappointed at the general level of achievement in many of the books submitted (Judges’ Report, CBCA 1974).

Apart from the CBC’s attachment to the faint praise inherent in the notion of competence, apparent on a number of occasions, this statement is significant in its historical context. The arts community had responded enthusiastically to the change of government in 1972 and the government in turn had used funding for the Australia Council as a signifier of cultural change, most controversially in the 1973 purchase of Jackson Pollock’s painting Blue Poles. The 1974 annual report by the national president of the CBC claims that ‘The impact of Government assistance on Children’s Literature was beginning to be noticed in this year’s entries for the Book of the Year Awards’ (President’s Report, AGM Minutes, CBCA 1974). For the first time in 1974, Australian publishers had their own stand at the international children’s book fair in Bologna, the principal marketplace for rights sales (Sheahan-Bright 2004, p. 208) so in children’s publishing, as in other areas of the arts, particularly fiction, with the award of the 1973 Nobel Prize for Literature to Patrick White and in film, there was a sense that Australia was achieving international recognition.

Of more immediate concern to the CBC, however, was the awarding of the UK’s Carnegie Medal for 1971 to the novel Josh, by Ivan Southall. On the one hand, the first time an Australian novel had won a major international award was a cause for celebration, but the win interrogated the CBC’s own awards, since Josh had not even been short-listed for Book of the Year. This decision was clearly a watershed in the organisation’s relationship with Southall, who, during the 1960s was rarely absent from the pages of its official journal, but in the 1970s is reviewed repeatedly with a weariness and impatience that are obtrusive. At another time and in a different organisation, the apparent anomaly in the fate of Josh might simply have demonstrated that there is no universal aesthetic when it comes to literary awards. But the decision must be seen in the context of the controversy generated by Southall’s Finn’s Folly being Commended in 1970 and Bread and Honey winning Book of the Year in 1971. Given the ongoing questioning of the CBC’s ability to judge picture books, the vigour of the attack on both the creators and publishers of children’s books in the 1974 judges’ report attempts to strengthen the organisation’s own authority by indicating that others need to be taught.

By 1974, Patricia Wrightson had been Commended or Highly Commended for three earlier novels, and it was announced that she had now won Book of the Year for The Nargun and the Stars. The judges’ report praises the win this way:

Several authors made ambitious and original excursions into the realm of fantasy, not all of which were successfully sustained. The fantastic element in some seemed to be merely superimposed upon the natural world in an arbitrary and artificial manner. Nevertheless it was a book from this category that finally won the judges’ approval. Even so, they had some reservations about the ending and thought that the Deus ex Machina clanked rather audibly (literally) and that the author was not at all times in full control of her difficult material. However, they were impressed with the originality and scope of the work, and considered that it deserved the award (Judges’ Report, CBCA 1974).

It is hard to envisage the judges of a literary award for adult fiction being so explicit about their reservations or using their reports to teach readers in a detailed way as the Book of the

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Year judges do. Most trade children’s books are sold through various channels in the education market, so this emphasis on evaluating the educational aspects of a book is not surprising. The judges’ 1969 report clearly implies that young readers may have to be ‘taught’ to enjoy the winning novels. Of Wrightson’s Highly Commended I Own the Racecourse, it says:

Unfortunately the cover does not attract and the theme may deter those readers for whom it is meant. It is a book that will have to be introduced to children, but the pleasing literary style, the humour and vitality of this entry should make it a book children will remember (Reading Time no. 33, July 1969, p. 7).

The remark that ‘the theme may deter those readers for whom it is meant’ makes the pedagogical use of such a book quite clear.

In the same report, however, there is an example of the note of weariness referred to earlier in the judges’ comments on the runner-up, Ivan Southall’s Let the Balloon Go:

The illustrations and dustjacket are not of a high standard. The format of the book indicates that it is intended for the 9–11 years, but the emotional content makes it more suited to older readers. It is another book that will have to be introduced to the reader (Reading Time, no. 33, July 1969, p. 8).

In a 1980 article that compares the Book of the Year awards with some of their major British and American counterparts, academic and publisher Walter McVitty says that, ‘The present prize is in danger of becoming a boring irrelevance — the same safe names winning too often.’ (McVitty 1980, p. 11) and he goes on to ask whether the process of selecting judges is rigorous enough and criticises them for their continuing obsession with design and format, pointing out that in the list of criteria for judging, ‘typography’ comes before ‘literary merit’.

McVitty is not, however, arguing for a more child-centred view of the book as entertainment. In arguing that the author should be judged on writing alone, he takes the concept ‘literature of quality’ as understood and opposes it to popularity. He says:

The cheap and nasty early edition of Storm Boy, for instance, has gone through a number of changes before arriving at its present elegance — but the author’s achievement is exactly the same as it was in the first place. Yet since ‘appeal to children’ is the first of the four criteria listed for the Australian judges to consider, the film tie-in paperback would now, given the chance, have to be preferred to the Ingen luxury edition!

The exclamation mark is revealing — the implication being that the children’s assumed preference should be discounted in favour of a quality art object produced for them with an award-winning illustrator’s embellishments.

To some extent the development of children’s choice awards from the 1980s relieved the CBC of any obligation to grapple with the issue of whether its awarded books were popular with young readers or not and aligned the Book of the Year awards even more closely with their use in schools. A marked divergence emerges between adults’ and children’s choices, for example, when it comes to humour. Writers such as Duncan Ball and Margaret Clark, who feature regularly in the children’s choice awards, have never been short-listed by the CBC. Andy Griffiths has only been short-listed for a minor work and none of Paul Jennings’ short story collections has been short-listed, although his reputation clearly rests on them. After ignoring Jennings for years, the judges almost perversely gave him an award for the joke book Duck for Cover, and bizarrely, the text of Jennings’s picture book, Grandad’s Gifts, short-listed in 1993 was drawn from Unbearable! (1990), one of the collections the judges had decided was not worth short-listing. When the present writer challenged one highly influential judge to defend the CBC’s repeated refusal to acknowledge Jennings’s short story collections, she replied, ‘But he doesn’t need a short listing.’ The educational function, if not the intention, of the short list is clearly implied by that response, along with the desire to position the CBC’s choices as far from the criterion of popularity with children as possible.

It follows that books short-listed for the Older Readers award are rarely funny. The authors of the controversial study of mental health issues in Australian adolescent literature, analysing all the Notable texts for 1996, 1997 and 1998, for example, point out that ‘only 4% of works were judged to be “funny”’ (Bokey, Walter & Rey 2000, p. 2). Placed alongside Nieuwenhuizen’s observation (2007, p. ix) that so many of the funny books in her selection of ‘500 Great Reads for Teenagers’ are Australian, and research since 1925 reporting consistently that ‘humour is children’s strongest preference for reading material’ (Munde 1997, p. 219), their analysis points to the clichéd assumption that seriousness of purpose and literary excellence are unlikely to be found in comedy. The CBC judges’ report for 2002 deprecates the scatological humour in books entered for the Younger Readers category (Reading Time, vol. 46, no. 3, Aug 2002, p. 3) and the report for the year 2000 praises the appearance of ‘subtle and understated’ humour (Reading Time, vol. 44, no. 3, August
Both comments indicate that the judges are considering humour from the adult’s, rather than the child’s, point of view.

A more controversial divergence between the two perspectives has focused, once again, on the Picture Book of the Year category. In 1969, the judges war against a growing sophistication in which Australians are ‘losing the freshness and simplicity which one looks for in a good picture book.’ (Reading Time, no.33, July 1969, p. 13). But 30 years later, by introducing the Book of the Year (Early Childhood) category, the judges effectively endorse narrative complexity and confronting subject matter — features that may be inferred as integral to their understanding of literary excellence, and that make the texts more attractive to teach.

At the same time as they reject the criterion of popularity with children, the judges’ reports become longer and more detailed in the 1990s and the judges warn against a growing commercialism generally.

Putting aside the issue of the organisation’s dependence on commercialism by means of publishers’ donations to the Awards Foundation and countless donations in kind over 65 years, if the CBC were to show greater interest in children’s choices and in the books they actually buy and borrow and in what professionals outside the education system know about those behavioural patterns, it could begin to answer a whole range of important questions that would raise significantly the standard of publishing for young readers as specified in its constitution. Should a winning book focus on Australian subject matter? Must it demonstrate inclusiveness of gender, sexuality, race, other physical differences and social class? Are city dwellers still interested in the bush and the outback? Will boys read novels about girls under any circumstances? Are young readers today interested in history? Do young Australians prefer realist narratives? Do they — or their adult carers — demand narrative closure? How frank can it be in its treatment of sex, drugs and violence? What effect does using books in the classroom have on young people’s enthusiasm for reading? And so on.

The inconsistency is remarkable. But the frequency with which these reports castigate the publishing industry becomes so great that what may seem at first a sympathetic attempt to gain leverage for editors, who have to contend with the budget cutbacks of ‘restructured’ multinationals, soon polarises into the easy us-and-them so familiar in Australian cultural commentary. It also positions the CBC further away from its involvement with publishing, which becomes metonymic for commercialism generally.

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There is, of course, a parallel conversation about the kinds of questions young readers themselves ask of the books they might read, but the CBC has never regarded this as its main concern. It is only due to public pressure in recent years that the Book of the Year awards handbook advises judges to ‘ensure that their evaluation takes into account the responses of children who have read the books’ (CBCA 2009, p. 9) and somewhat perfunctorily at that, so that the CBC cannot be accused of indifference to the issue of popularity. The organisation has generally left this conversation to the state-based children’s choice awards and to the growing number of websites that invite young readers to blog or post reviews.

Instead it has pursued, stridently at times, its concern with its own image as the lone arbiter of quality in children’s literature, indicated by the name it chose for both itself and its awards: The Children’s Book Council, The Book of the Year. In a society that has long challenged grand narratives and absolutes, that is clearly not good enough.

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