

**‘A BATTLE FOR CHILDREN’S MINDS’:
THE CHILDREN’S BOOK COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIA
BOOK OF THE YEAR AWARD FOR OLDER READERS**

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STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being made available for loan and photocopying subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

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SYNOPSIS

This study is an examination of one of Australia's most prestigious and influential literary prizes: the Children's Book Council of Australia Book of the Year Award. It aims to clarify the reasons the award was part of the brief when the Children's Book Council was created in 1945, and to determine the extent to which the award's subsequent development has continued to meet its stated objectives.

The study focuses on a single category: that of Older Readers. To be eligible for judging in this category, entries must be:

outstanding books of fiction, drama or poetry which require of the reader a degree of maturity to appreciate the topics, themes and scope of emotional involvement. Generally, books in this category will be appropriate in style and content for readers in their secondary years of schooling.

(CBCA 2009, p.4)

For the first ten years of the award's history, there was just one category, Book of the Year, and definition by the age of a book's implied readers only began in 1982, when Junior Book of the Year was introduced. In 1987, the two non-picture book categories were renamed Book of the Year: Older Readers and Book of the Year: Younger Readers.

Leaving aside the erratic development of the Picture Book of the Year category, which will be outlined in chapter 2, effectively for most of its history, the Older Readers category *is* the Book of the Year. The two remain practically synonymous today in media coverage of the awards and for those reasons alone, the restricting of this study to the Older Readers category would be valid. This is the Children's Book Council's flagship award. But because since the 1960s this category has been a highly contested site for defining 'childhood'

and ‘literature’, an examination of its development yields significant findings about the function of the Children’s Book Council (‘the CBC’) overall.

This study interrogates the CBC’s claim that the role of the Book of the Year is simply to uphold standards of literary excellence. The clear implication is that its judges have no agenda other than adherence to these standards and that they are universally agreed. By considering the evolution of the awards in both historical and cultural contexts, the study aims to define the agenda of the Book of the Year in greater detail. It then tests that agenda in individual case studies of six winning novels in the Older Readers category. Each of the texts for case study is by a writer who has been acknowledged in the awards more than once – in some cases many times. So the study aims to determine the ways in which the text in question and its writer’s work as a whole are aligned with the criteria the awards are based on.

The case studies cover a 20-year period of rapid growth in the Australian publishing industry and in the influence of the CBC. They focus on the following winners:

Bread and Honey by Ivan Southall (1971)

The Ice is Coming by Patricia Wrightson (1978)

So Much to Tell You by John Marsden (1988)

Beyond the Labyrinth by Gillian Rubinstein (1989)

Strange Objects by Gary Crew (1991)

Looking for Alibrandi by Melina Marchetta (1993)

The awards given to these novels represent significant moments in the ongoing conversation between the CBC and its constituents and within the organisation itself about the process of choosing books for young readers. Should a winning book focus on Australian subject matter? Should 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? Are young readers today interested in history? Do young Australians prefer realist narratives? Do they – or their adult carers – demand

narrative closure? Should the language of a Book of the Year be high-end literary, or accessible to readers with a wider range of abilities? 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? This study pursues such questions in order to clarify the CBC's role in directing the conversation and its objectives in doing so.

There is, of course, a parallel conversation about the kinds of book young readers themselves choose, 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.

An endorsement from the Children's Book Council can have a direct influence on the income of all those involved in the production and distribution of a book, as well as a less tangible, but potentially more important, influence on the reading experience of thousands of children. And because the influence is frequently negative, there have been objections to it throughout the organisation's history. There has been little sustained and reasoned analysis of that influence, however, perhaps due to a fear of diminishing its positive aspects while exposing the negative. Close scrutiny may also have been delayed by the fact that the CBC's members are an enthusiastic band of volunteers who have had to fight against the subordination of children's literature – unless the delay itself is further proof of that subordination.

And although aspects of this study will not please the CBC, it is not intended as an attack. Indeed it should be read as an acknowledgment that the CBC has been extraordinarily successful in achieving the aims set out in its constitution. On the other hand, the study argues that one of its undisclosed concerns has been the shoring up of a narrowly defined and reactionary set of literary and

cultural values and its own power to ensure that they are maintained. The aim of this study is not to invalidate the considerable pleasure many have derived from the work of the CBC. Nor is it intended to fuel the resentment of the many producers and distributors who feel they have been burned over the years by the CBC judges' decisions.

Ironically by constructing itself as the last bastion of universally accepted values in the assessment of literature, the CBC may be undermining its ability to promote the enjoyment of books by children and threatening its own continued growth. So if the present writer may be allowed a personal wish, it is that the study may be read not just as a critical history of a remarkable cultural phenomenon, but also read by those who care about children and books and the Children's Book Council as a wake-up call.

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