



# Shadowing the Carnegie and Greenaway Medals

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**Clive Barnes** looks at the impact of funding on shadowing.

The National Year of Reading has begun! An opportunity, in the DfEE's words, to 'support and celebrate the excellent work already being undertaken to promote literacy in schools, colleges and libraries'. On the support side, there is not a lot of money to go with the fine words: and more projects chasing it than the National Year of Reading Team can afford. But celebration is in order and to mark the occasion **BfK** asks **Clive Barnes** to look at what happens when a national campaign gets behind the Library Association's Carnegie and Greenaway Medals.

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What the Year of Reading hopes to achieve 'to get everyone's head into a book, young and old, rich and poor' is something that children's librarians and teachers have been striving to do, in a variety of ever more ingenious ways and in the face of dwindling resources, for a long time and with some success. To see what can be done when a national campaign with media attention is backed up by local effort, you have to look only at the transformation in the public awareness of the Library Association's Carnegie and Greenaway Medals.

## No longer niche

Ten years ago, the awards were little known beyond a circle of children's book enthusiasts. But, in the last few years, their fame has spread. Now the winners have space in **The Times**, on the **Today** programme and **Newsnight**. Melvin Burgess's 1996 winner, **Junk**, was propelled into the best seller lists.

Some of this was brilliant marketing from the Library Association, helped by seven years' sponsorship from the library supplier, Peters Library Service, and by the judges' selection of one or two controversial titles. It was also the result of the enthusiasm of librarians and teachers who took the books to children themselves and asked their opinions.

## Shadowing

'Shadowing' of the medal selection process has been happening for some time: Jane Inglis wrote about it in **BfK** in 1993. It was last year, however, after **Junk**'s success, that the Library Association offered substantial encouragement, backed by a £6,500 grant from the Arts Council, in the form of a promotion pack. This was offered to teachers and librarians (and anyone else) who wanted to shadow the selection of the 1997 winners, which took place between May and July of this year. In the pack there were details of the shortlisted titles and hints on how the shadowing might be organised.

By March 1998, the LA had 300 applications for packs. On May 1, when the shortlists were announced, family reading

groups in Norfolk, teenage readers in Camberley and Dundee, secondary students in Bolton and adult students with learning difficulties at Melton Mowbray College, among many others, were waiting for their letters to arrive. By then, over a hundred shadowing schemes were registered with the Library Association, a quarter of them in primary schools. Some schools, like Bideford College, had already begun work with past winners; others had produced their own preliminary shortlists.

The Carnegie and Greenaway shortlists are amenable things. Students discussed the titles among themselves and with teachers and librarians; in class and out of class. They presented the books to each other, had debates, gave talks, wrote reviews, designed book jackets, made dramas and videos. Able readers worked with reluctant readers, secondary students with primary. Parents and children looked at the books together. The students at Melton Mowbray worked with the Greenaway list and a simplified set of 'tick the box' criteria. They were invited to think of a child they knew and decide which of the books they might recommend. Sometimes the shadowing was carried out as part of the school curriculum, sometimes not.

### **Different approaches**

The two schools I visited, Harrow Way Community School in Andover and Allfarthing Primary School in Wandsworth, illustrate the different approaches that are possible.

At Harrow Way, Christine Closier, the head of English, and Jo Ray, the school librarian, gathered a group of volunteers, mainly from Years 7, 8 and 9 (11-14 year-olds), that met at lunchtimes and passed around the books from both shortlists. The intention was that the students would be asked to talk about their final selections to the whole school.

At Allfarthing Primary, the initiative came from the local children's librarian, Ferelith Hordon of Alvering Library. Ferelith worked with year 6 (10/11 year-olds) class teachers, Sarah Knollys and Sue Chambers, to introduce the whole year group to the Carnegie and Greenaway books through the Literacy Hour. Both schools used a combination of written reviews and discussion.

As an interloper at one of Harrow Way's early sessions, when not everyone had looked at all the books, and at Allfarthing's group presentation, when it was time to listen to the verdicts on each book and count the votes, I was quickly drawn into serious and enthusiastic conversations. Both schools were already keen promoters of reading - Year 7s 'reading kites' dangled from the windows of Harrow Way's library, across from the World Cup display, and photos of Nick Sharratt's visit were up in Allfarthing's hall - but the Carnegie and Greenaway discussions were adding an extra dimension.

### **Books and the process of their selection**

It is partly the books themselves: written for contemporary children and chosen for their quality. Then, it is the selection process: an intensive period which invites participation, generates excitement, and connects children to the community of readers of children's literature. There are the parents who are drawn in at home; the teachers and librarians; the other schools and reading groups whose reviews can be called up on the Library Association's website; the Youth Library Group's judging panel who are often involved in shadowing; even the writers and illustrators themselves. Birmingham's 'Going for Gold' Carnegie bonanza brought over a hundred students together, with four authors from the shortlist and a former chair of the YLG selection panel.

Most important, it is the nature of the selection process involved in shadowing. Children are invited to judge the books not just on the grounds of what they like and dislike but on grounds of literary and artistic merit. They may even be asked to consider how good a book might be for a different audience of children, as both Harrow Way and Allfarthing students found when they were looking at books on the Greenaway list, particularly **Ginger**, **Mucky Pup** and **Queenie the Bantam**.

### **Involving young readers**

In an article in **BfK** ('Going for Gold', **BfK 106**, September 1997), **The Times** children's book correspondent Brian Alderson moaned that one of the problems with the Medals was that they were selected by one group (librarians) for another (children), who had 'no say in the matter (and who may well not be able to articulate their say if they had)'. The shadowing process not only gives children a say, it also helps them to become articulate. Granted, their say is still at one remove. The medal winners still emerge from the secret deliberations of the thirteen members of the YLG's judging panel, without any direct child involvement.

Of course the dialogue between adult selectors and children has its difficulties. All of those involved in shadowing recognise the need both to encourage children to make their own judgements and to build bridges between the gut reactions that may be the children's initial response and the literary and artistic analysis that is implicit in the awards' selection criteria.

### **The right answer?**

Dorne Fraser, Senior Librarian for Young People's Services in Norfolk, and a former member of the YLG selection panel, has been involved for the last two years in award discussions where librarians and secondary students work in the same groups. She finds that the students need to feel secure enough to stand up for their own opinions and be reassured that they are not being required to find the 'right answer'. At Harrow Way, Christine Closier and Jo Ray prepared a review sheet which asked for the reviewer's emotional response, descriptions of the plot and whether the reviewer would recommend the title to friends: a basis on which more extensive analyses could be built.

### **Wider worries**

The reaction of librarians and teachers to the children's opinions and how this feeds back into the selection of the shortlists and the winners is also interesting. The wider worries about children's reading have always impinged on the Carnegie and Greenaway Medal awards, whether in terms of the need to make reading accessible to as wide a child audience as possible or to tackle issues of social importance. Is it coincidence that, in a year when boys' reading is on everyone's minds, **Scribbleboy**, **Pigheart-boy** and **River Boy** should all be on the Carnegie shortlist? Or that one focus of the shadowing groups should be 'Boys and Reading'?

The make up of the shortlist can also affect the shadowing. Another book for older teenagers like **Junk** (now marketed on Penguin's adult list as suitable for 14-16 year-olds) would have posed difficulties for primary and lower secondary students' involvement. As it was, the two titles on the Carnegie list this year which both Harrow Way and Allfarthing students found difficult were arguably the most sophisticated in approach: **Fire, Bed and Bone** and **Forever X**. A book with amore straightforward narrative and using a recognisable genre, like **Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone**, may have an easier appeal.

Curiously, at Allfarthing, the teachers discovered that, in general, the children found it more difficult to assess the titles on the Greenaway list than those on the Carnegie. Perhaps an indication that we are generally more at home talking about text rather than pictures.

As long as these difficulties are recognised and addressed, they can be strengths rather than weaknesses. They reflect the range of children's abilities and experiences, the variety of children's literature and illustration and the social and educational preoccupations of our time. It is not as tidy as Brian Alderson's dream of a 'culture of informed discussion', but it is an acceptance that at the heart of children's literature is a continuing dialogue between children and adults, which, confusing as it sometimes is, must be a part of the selection of the best of that literature.

Royal Mail have sponsored the Medals this year for the first time and, hopefully, there will be a sponsor for next year. Some of the children who have shadowed this year were able to attend the award announcement at the new British Library. Whatever happens, shadowing will continue. It will be, in the National Year of Reading as any other year, an opportunity to carry on talking about books: an activity, as Aidan Chambers has been reminding us for years, that is as important as reading itself.

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Further information about shadowing the Carnegie and Greenaway Medal selections is available from Karen Bedwell at the Library Association, 0171 636 7543, [www.la-hq.org.uk/](http://www.la-hq.org.uk/) [3]

### **Fire, Bed and Bone**

'I liked the fact that the story was told by the dog. There were more things observed by the dog than a human would have observed. Also, the dog did not really know the cause of all these problems, so the information was simply presented for you to make sense of with your own knowledge of that time.' (Rachel Stroud, Harrow Way School)

### **Scribbleboy**

'I ended up skipping nearly a paragraph of repeated speech. The storyline is very good, but many words are deliberately made up, which is as irritating as repeated speech. I wouldn't really recommend this book. If it was written differently, without repeats, I probably would.' (Karen Turner, Harrow Way School)

### **Forever X**

'There is a nice plot but it jumps around so much that you have to look very deep into the story to grasp what it's really about. This is definitely not a good Carnegie candidate.' (Ben Hunter, Allfarthing School)

### **River Boy**

'This book was touching, moving and melancholy but maybe a bit too depressing ... it describes the river a lot and in a way, you know the river better than the characters.' (Alice Wright, Allfarthing School)

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