

One room, four days, eight judges

By Susan La Marca

When I was appointed as the CBCA Victorian judge for 2006-07, I looked forward to immersing myself in Australian books - thinking, writing and talking about them for the next two years. I am mid-way through my tenure in the position and now look back on one completed year and forward to the year to come. It is a good time to pause and review.

The judge's role is a time-consuming one. There were 312 titles entered in the Early Childhood, Picture Book, Younger Readers and Older Readers fiction categories during 2005. (A separate panel judges the non-fiction Eve Pownall award.) The books must meet the criteria of being created by an Australian and are entered in to the CBCA Awards by the publisher. Self-published titles are entered alongside those books produced by well known authors and supported by major publishing companies. An entry fee is paid and multiple copies of each book supplied.

The books start reaching the judges in April. A box of books arrives every three weeks containing, on average, 20 titles across all four categories. Before the next box arrives, these books need to be read and contemplated, with opinions sought from children and fellow readers. The judge writes a report on each book which is later collated by the judge's co-ordinator along with all other reports. This collation then comes back to all judges, making for very interesting

reading. I was amazed by the range of opinions a single title could create.

Generally, I enjoyed the reading as I read a lot anyway. What I found difficult was having to read books that did not appeal to me or, in some cases, seemed out of place as entries for an award based on literary merit. Writing a short report was also sometimes onerous. Like any child faced with a compulsory book report, I often found this part of the exercise painful!

In the early months of 2006, before the judges' conference, each of the eight judges (one from each state and territory) was asked to compile a list of their top ten books in each section. This signalled that we were getting to the business end of the judging. These top ten lists showed up very quickly the books with a lot of support from judges and were an initial indicator of titles that would later appear on the shortlists. A large number of notable titles also came from these top ten lists, but some surprises also came to light as discussion caused views to be changed at the judges' conference.

The judges' conference was held over four days in early April. There was no scope for procrastination as the shortlists and notable titles lists were announced the morning after the conference concluded. A day was allocated to each category and although we were able to finish up a little quicker than this, I can imagine

circumstances in which a day might not be enough time. The books in each category were revisited and everyone had a chance to speak about each title if they wished. A book needed the support of a majority of judges to be considered notable, and from these notable books, those with the highest number of 'votes' were moved into shortlist contention. Whittling the list down to the final six in each category was achieved through a series of voting rounds and the final shortlisted titles were determined through a secret ballot.

The process was long and exhaustive and although I could not say that my favourite title always won, or even that all of the books I wanted to achieve notable status did so, I still



Susan La Marca delights that she is already reading books for the 2007 CBCA awards.

think the process was fair and equitable. It is no mean feat getting eight people to come to consensus and, by its very nature, such a process means that not everyone can have what they want on every occasion.

While the meeting was a wonderful exchange of ideas in a professional and adult manner, it was also a place where people often felt great disappointment when they saw a book they loved fall by the wayside. I think each judge experienced this feeling to varying extents.

After experiencing the process, I have a great deal of sympathy for some of those books that either just missed the notable lists, or missed the shortlists for the lack of a vote. This comment is not meant to detract from the final lists of great titles. Rather, it acknowledges there are some wonderful books out there that almost made it! A great deal more notice should be paid to many of them.

At the moment I am doing official judge's talks and including the shortlist and notable titles list in various SLAV presentations. I'm enjoying getting feedback from everyone, but particularly relish the views of young people. In fulfilling this part of the role, I think the awards achieve one of their main aims: to create opportunities for people to talk about their favourite books and discuss the material that has been published in any given year. This, more than rewarding individual winners, is what the awards do best.

Even while participating in these discussions, I take delight in the fact that the first box of books for the 2007 awards has arrived. The process is beginning all over again!

Susan La Marca is the CBCA Victorian judge for 2006-7. She is the editor of Synergy, and the co-author with Pam Macintyre, of Knowing Readers: Unlocking the Pleasures of Reading.