

‘An exceptional status as the backbone of children’s literature’

80 Years of the CILIP Carnegie Medal.

A personal reflection by Julia Eccleshare

From its inception in 1936 to the present day, the CILIP Carnegie Medal has provided an invaluable lens through which to view books for children. At first glance, it could be taken as a useful and fascinating list of the best books of each year as selected by the country’s children’s librarians. That would be important enough; after all, children’s librarians are uniquely well-qualified both to judge the books and to know their importance to young readers, and the list of winners certainly does that.

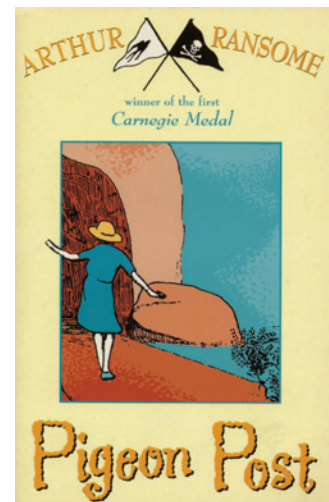
But the CILIP Carnegie Medal list is much more than that. Weaving your way through the roll call of winners gives an insight into how views and expectations of children and their childhood have changed. It raises the most interesting questions about the role of children’s books in disseminating those changes and, in doing so, shaping children’s views of the world.

It also poses questions about the purpose of children’s books. Are they to entertain or to inform? What are the responsibilities of the author? Should those who write for children raise difficult questions which parents, teachers and librarians may be criticised for airing? Or should they play safe, keeping childhood a space of protected innocence, which should not be shattered at any cost?

In other words, it gives a basis from which to consider the biggest and most interesting questions that any study of children’s books raises.

For now, these important issues can be put to one side. Instead, I will look at how the CILIP Carnegie Medal is viewed, and at the amazing list of books which have been selected to represent it through the years.

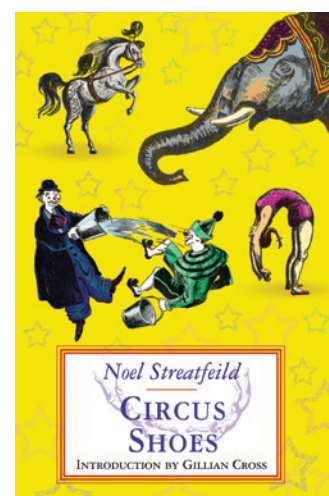
The list itself has an exceptional status as the backbone of children’s literature. Beyond the excitement and the instant celebration of being awarded the coveted medal, this means that CILIP Carnegie Medal winning titles are more likely than others to be reprinted and thus made available to more readers - included in reference books and ‘recommended reads’, stocked in libraries and bookshops,



Arthur Ransome (author and illustrator), *Pigeon Post*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1936; 383 pp (first edition); currently published by Red Fox, Penguin Random House.



Eve Garnett (author and illustrator), *The Family from One End Street*, Frederick Muller, London, 1937; 212 pp (first edition); currently published by Puffin, Penguin Random House.



Noel Streatfeild, *The Circus is Coming*, illustrated by Steven Spurrier, J M Dent & Sons, 1938; 314 pp (first edition); currently published by Puffin, Penguin Random House (last published by Puffin as *Circus Shoes*).

and promoted by teachers. All of these actions are the life-blood of any title in the increasingly crowded children's book market.

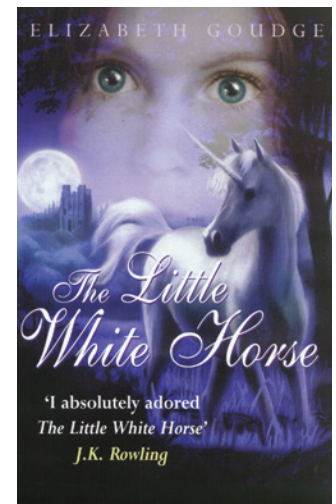
And what of the individual books themselves? What does the list tell us about the UK's vibrant tradition of publishing for children? Does it reflect the range of what is published? Are there certain kinds of books which look like 'Carnegie Winners'? And perhaps most importantly of all, of those that have won, which have best stood the test of time?

From its beginning in 1935 when it was established by the Library Association, partly to celebrate the centenary of Andrew Carnegie's birth, the CILIP Carnegie Medal has had considerable heft. Chosen by librarians, who always held in their minds the children who used the public library system every day, it was designed to celebrate and promote the best book of each year. The inaugural winning title, Arthur Ransome's *Pigeon Post*, would have been a popular choice. Ransome was already a well-established and respected author of many kinds of books. His series of titles about children and sailing, beginning in 1930 with *Swallows and Amazons*, was popular. The choice of *Pigeon Post* was uncontroversial and affirmative; it sent out a message that this prize was for 'literary' novels, and so confirmed the status of the CILIP Carnegie Medal.

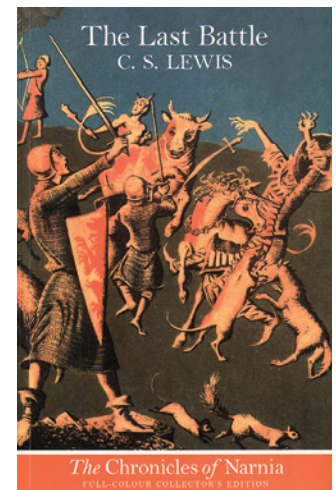
With hindsight, the following year's choice of Eve Garnett's *The Family from One End Street* might have come as something of a surprise. Often cited as the first twentieth century British children's book to describe a working class family, *The Family from One End Street* was highly praised at the time, although it has subsequently been viewed less favourably on the grounds that Garnett was patronising about the Ruggles family with their many children, their dustman father and their washerwoman mother. It certainly represented a completely different kind of childhood to that portrayed evocatively and somewhat lyrically by Arthur Ransome.

The third winner of the medal was Noel Streatfeild for *The Circus is Coming*, also known as *Circus Shoes* in line with her highly successful first novel, *Ballet Shoes*, and its sequel, *Tennis Shoes*. Streatfeild's social realism was 'researched'; she spent some time touring with Bertram Mills Circus so as to write accurately about her characters – two children who run away from their orphanage and end up with their uncle who is a circus clown. Although somewhat sentimentalised, *The Circus is Coming* was an author's serious attempt to tell a 'realistic' story about a very different kind of childhood. Like Eve Garnett, Noel Streatfeild was attempting to open up children's books to a wider audience and make sure that more children from different backgrounds were represented in fiction.

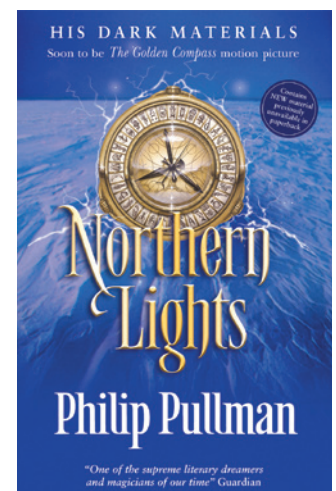
Of those first three medal winners, both Ransome and Garnett have sometimes flourished and sometimes waned in the almost eighty years since their books were



Elizabeth Goudge, *The Little White Horse*, illustrated by C. Walter Hodges, University of London Press, London, 1946; 286 pp (first edition); currently published by Lion Hudson, Oxford.



C.S. Lewis, *The Last Battle*, illustrated by Pauline Baynes, The Bodley Head, 1956; 184 pp (first edition); currently published by HarperCollins.



Philip Pullman, *Northern Lights*, Scholastic Point, London, 1995; 399 pp (first edition); currently published by Scholastics.

published. Streatfeild has also enjoyed enduring if fluctuating popularity, although not with *The Circus is Coming*. Instead, it is *Ballet Shoes*, also a sentimentalised ‘realist’ story, which has kept her reputation alive.

In the first three years, the seeds of the conversations about what kind of book should win the CILIP Carnegie Medal had already been sown. In looking for ‘the best’ book, children’s librarians then as now were also thinking about the importance of inclusion in stories. They knew what a powerful tool a great story can be and understood the urgency of getting that tool into every child’s hand.

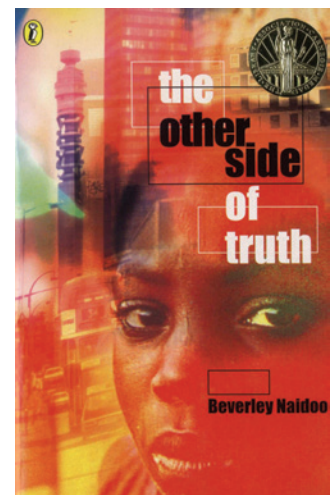
Other snapshots of the list of winners over the eighty years show a deep understanding of the reading needs of children on the part of the librarian judges. Realism, fantasy, history, mythology and even non-fiction have all been deemed eligible – if they are good enough books.

The list certainly reflects a robust tradition of publishing books for children in the UK. From 1935 onwards, with just a few years when no book was deemed suitable – a situation which is exceptionally hard to imagine – it is full of the most formative books of the decades. No single kind of story seems to have been especially likely to influence the librarian judges in their choice. After an understandably shaky spell during the Second World War, with no award in 1943 or 1945, the assembled judges must have been delighted to be able to give Elizabeth Goudge the medal for *The Little White Horse* in 1946. And, while they missed C.S Lewis’s *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* in 1950, they gave him his due for *The Last Battle* in 1956. Mary Norton’s *The Borrowers* in 1952, William Mayne’s *The Grass Rope* in 1957, Philippa Pearce’s *Tom’s Midnight Garden* in 1958 and Lucy Boston’s *A Stranger at Green Knowe* in 1961 all seem the most obvious of choices with the benefit of hindsight. They have certainly all lasted in their own right, as well as being of considerable influence on subsequent fantasy writing for children.

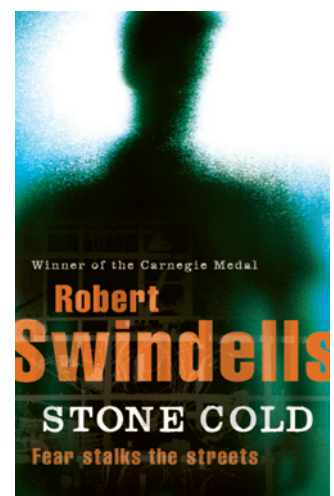
The lasting success of books such as these, and more recently of Philip Pullman’s *Northern Lights* in 1995, David Almond’s *Skellig* in 1998 and Patrick Ness’s *Monsters of Men* in 2011 (after the first two books in Ness’s *Chaos Waking Trilogy* had been shortlisted the previous two years, both missing out on the medal), endorses the general view that fantasy titles are more timeless and therefore more likely to stand the test of time. But the picture isn’t entirely one-sided. While there are some titles which accurately reflect contemporary concerns that have since somehow faded, others survive. Anne Fine’s *Flour Babies* won the Medal in 1992, and justifiably remains a relevant story about parenting for all teenagers, while Beverley Naidoo’s *The Other Side of Truth*, which won in 2000, sadly only marked the beginning of the story of lone child migration. As a result, it is no surprise that it is still widely used in schools today. Sometimes realist titles disappear because they seem to reflect a particular moment and are then deemed



Anne Fine, *Flour Babies*, Hamish Hamilton, 1992; 155 pp (first edition); currently published by Puffin, Penguin Random House.



Beverley Naidoo, *The Other Side of Truth*, Puffin Books, Penguin, 2000; 227 pp (first edition); currently published by Puffin, Penguin Random House.

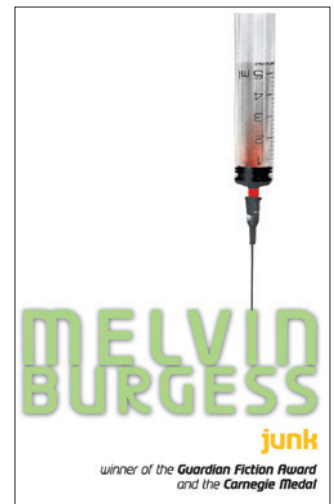


Robert Swindells, *Stone Cold*, Heinemann, London, 1993; 132 pp (first edition); currently published by Puffin, Penguin Random House.

no longer relevant. Robert Swindell's *Stone Cold*, a chilling thriller which won in 1993 and which uncovers the ever-present dangers for the homeless, was never adopted as it should have been. Now, as homelessness escalates, it appears prescient.

Melvin Burgess's *Junk*, which won in 1996, has certainly shown that realism can last. Twenty years on it is hard to remember how much controversy his story of a group of teenagers who openly take drugs caused when it was first published. At the time, it was 'brave' of the judges to select it as their book of the year. Now we know how right they were to do so. The CILIP Carnegie Medal would be a poorer resource if librarians had never stuck their necks out for what they knew young readers wanted and needed to read. In the same tradition is the recent medal success of Kevin Brooks' *The Bunker Diary*, which predictably raised something of a storm when it won in 2014 on the grounds that it was too dark for younger readers. *The Bunker Diary* was harrowing, but the young shadows reading the book had no problem with it; just as their peers had welcomed *Junk* almost twenty years earlier, they were perfectly able to read and enjoy Brooks's novel.

Fantasy, folk tales, historical fiction and realism – whatever the subject matter and whatever the form, the list of CILIP Carnegie Medal winning titles is an inspiration. For anyone interested in today's children's books, studying the list of winners is akin to checking a family tree. All the ancestors are there, and what a bunch to be proud of they are!



Melvin Burgess, *Junk*, Andersen Press, London, 1996; 278 pp (first edition); currently published by Andersen Press.



Kevin Brooks, *The Bunker Diary*, Penguin Random House, 2013; 272 pp (first edition); currently published by Penguin Random House.



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