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CHILDREN'S BOOKS IN TRANSLATION: THE MARSH AWARD

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The Arabian Nights, Pinocchio, Heidi, The Snow Queen - these classics of children's literature are so much a part of our culture and our childhood that we forget that we know them in translation from the original Arabic, Italian, German and Danish respectively.

Why then do we have a problem with contemporary children's books in translation? Since the 1970s there has been a steady decline in the number published in Britain.

Yet, as adult readers, we know how books from other cultures can afford insights and perspectives that are crucially important to us as citizens of a European country, let alone of a global society.

The launch of the **Marsh Award for Children's Literature in Translation** which is to be awarded biennially is then, much to be welcomed. Sponsored by the Marsh Christian Trust, subsidised by the Arts Council and administered by the Children's Literature Research Centre at Roehampton University, the award is intended to bring attention to the quality and diversity of translated fiction, encourage more translations and help young readers to overcome their reluctance to read translated books.

These are worthy aims, but **Books for Keeps** wonders how they can be realised unless a more stringent analysis of the role of books for children in translation is applied by the judges. What is the point of publishing such books unless, in the words of the National Curriculum, they represent ... 'distinctive voices and forms and offer varied perspectives and subject matter' - i.e. they could not have been written by a British author. If cultural otherness is not on offer, then surely something else must be? Perhaps the work is outstanding from a literary point of view? Perhaps it deals with significant issues not covered by British children's writers?

The winner of the first Marsh Award, **A Dog's Life**, by Austrian writer Christine Nostlinger and translated by Anthea Bell, does none of these things. This story of a dog past retirement age looking for a worthwhile job, it is not distinctively Austrian; it is well written but not greatly distinguished; there is no lack of anthropomorphic animal stories from British writers at this time. It is, then, difficult to see how this winning title will help young readers to overcome their reluctance to read translated fiction, let alone meet the Marsh Award's other criteria.

A Dog's Life was published by Andersen Press in 1990 but is now out of print.

NEWS IN BRIEF

Malorie Blackman who was interviewed for the July **BfK** Authorgraph, has won the **Young Telegraph 1996 Paperback of the Year Award** with her book **Thief!** (Corgi, 0 552 52808 0, £3.50 pbk). The award was judged by

children from 50 schools across the country.

The **Multi-Cultural Bookshop** has opened in Bradford at Rashid House, Westgate (tel: 01274 731908/726955). The shop will specialise in dual language and multi-faith books as well as picture books, fiction and poetry which reflect the diversity and vibrancy of cultural communities in Britain?

A snappy poster illustrated by Glasgow based illustrator Keith Brumpton which explains **How a Book is Made** is available from Book Trust Scotland, Scottish Book Centre, 137 Dundee Street, Edinburgh EH11 1BG for £2.50 (inc VAT and p&p).

The Big Guide to Irish Children's Books is a collection of articles and reviews on books for young people published in Ireland. Edited by Valerie Coghlan and Celia Keenan, this is an excellent source of information on the range of books produced in Ireland from myths and legends to information books, from poetry to animal stories. £8.00 including postage from Gill & Macmillan Ltd, Goldenbridge, Inchicore, Dublin 8, Ireland.

LETTERS

From Linda Saunders, Chair, National Youth Libraries Group, and Chair of the 1996 Carnegie judging panel:

Nicholas Tucker's comments about the judging of this year's Carnegie Medal (**BfK 99**, July 1996) should not go unchallenged. The prestige the Medal now enjoys has not been gained by accident - one of the key reasons for it is the fact that the nominating and judging of titles are entirely done by librarians whose integrity, expertise and knowledge of both books and children are called upon daily in the course of their work. The librarians on the judging panel also represent the entire UK, both rural and urban areas. I believe this knowledge of the national readership for children's books (whatever the cultural background or family situation) to be unique to the Carnegie panel and another reason why the Medal has gained the reputation it has. Perhaps Nicholas Tucker's difficulty is that the Carnegie judges are practising librarians and not part of the fairly small circle who normally sit on judging panels.

The judges may all have been female this year but this is a true reflection of work with children and unlikely to change until more men see working with children as a genuine career option. I cannot see that we would have chosen a wider or different range of books for the shortlist if we had had a male judge on the panel. Incidentally, there were far more books on the shortlist this year by male writers than by female so men were well represented at this level! Surely the key requirements for Carnegie judges are that they have frequent contact with children today and are well read in current children's literature.

From Clive Barnes, Divisional Children's Librarian, Southampton

It is frustrating to be a mere observer at a Carnegie Medal judging session. Nicholas Tucker sounds off like a striker relegated to the bench for the crucial game, having to watch the team playing like a bunch of girlies (all fair, sensitive and no follow through). He'd like to get out there and show them how it's really done.

I don't have a problem with an all female judging panel or with an all librarian judging panel but I'd like to pursue Nicholas Tucker's arguments about boys and books which run off in a number of interesting directions without getting a clear shot at the goal.

There probably are gender preferences in reading fiction. There are certainly gender preferences *for* reading fiction. More women read fiction than men (does that make them better judges?). But the way that Nicholas Tucker hedges his argument shows how difficult it is to establish what is a girl's book and what is a boy's book, or what different pleasures they might get from reading the same book.

How much weight does gender have in determining reading choice beside other factors like social and cultural background and emotional development? Nicholas Tucker quotes feminist psychologist, Carol Gilligan, as suggesting that males tend to place most value on individual achievements in a world of clear rights and wrongs while females find

feelings, sensitivity to others and maintaining wider emotional relationships important. This is a beguiling generalisation that would be sorely tested faced with real individual readers and books.

How do we revive boys' interest in fiction? Not by setting out to write boys' books, resurrecting dead genres or awarding medals for writing for boys. All of which strategies might be inferred from Nicholas Tucker's attempt to justify his appeal for male representation on the Carnegie panel. We have rather to find out what appeals to boys and promote it, a process which children's librarians are involved in day after day - and the majority of children's librarians are women.

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