

The Carnegie Medal and Changing Attitudes to Children's Book Prize Culture in Britain (1936–1996)

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Abstract

This article argues that the Carnegie Medal evolved over sixty years from being an honorary agent of literary quality to an architect of cultural commerce; that the prize, though inherently still seeking to reward “outstanding” children’s fiction, has shifted to a less conscientious outlook, being unafraid to recognise innovation in children’s publishing, harnessing controversy as a means of beneficial publicity and surviving due to the surprising fluidity of its initially vague prize-giving criteria.

Key Words

Publishing; Carnegie Medal; book prizes; prize culture; children’s publishing

Introduction

James F. English has argued that literary prizes have the capacity to turn “... cultural scandal and embarrassment ... into financial windfall [and] cultural prestige” (English 2005, 164), and since its inception in 1936, the Carnegie Medal has learned to harness this power to its advantage. From the honorary nature of the first Carnegie win (Arthur Ransome’s *Pigeon Post* in 1936) to the intrepid endorsements of Robert Swindell’s *Stone Cold* in 1993 and Melvin Burgess’ *Junk* in 1996, the Carnegie Medal has become secure in its iconic status to not only honour, but bestow “literary capital” (English 2005, 164) to the children’s fiction it rewards. Coming under fire for a “staid, fusty” (Barker 1998, 48) image during the 1970s and 80s, the Carnegie Medal was critiqued for rewarding fiction out of keeping with the sorts of books children truly liked to read, accused of being behind the times compared to other emergent children’s book prizes. Yet the Medal responded by establishing itself firmly as a dominant figure of literary children’s book prize culture, with the weight of historical prestige on side and conscious of its own newfound power to facilitate “cultural prestige”.

The Carnegie Medal and the Creation of Children’s Capital

From its beginning, the Carnegie Medal aspired to create a bank of children’s literary capital. Book prize culture, in the context of Pierre Bourdieu’s “Market for Symbolic Goods”, has the capacity to distinguish the longevity of literary works from “opportunistic compromises” taken by publishers, which by contrast cannot be converted back into symbolic capital; Bourdieu argues that “... the opposition is total between bestsellers with no tomorrow and the classics ... which owe to the education system their consecration” (Bourdieu 1996, 146–

147). Yet *prize-giving* is another vital means of consecration in Bourdieu's market, as a forerunner that later impacts the education system in which children receive classic literary material. However, beyond the classroom, and depending on age, children will not necessarily choose fiction with prior knowledge (i.e. through newspaper reviews) of what is considered "good" or "bad", but will approach the contemporary market as it is presented to them. As Julia Eccleshare noted, it is prize-winning books that "... command attention in shops and libraries" (Eccleshare 1995, 34) where children typically find and choose books. Furthermore, in a child's communications circuit, where booksellers and libraries can truly function as "... middleman [mediating] between supply and demand at their key point of contact" (Darnton 2002, 20), marketing prize-winning fiction makes perfect sense: appealing to the decisions of gatekeepers who guide children's reading selections so that children's prize culture becomes neatly profitable for everyone.

Before the Carnegie Medal, however, scant regard was given to children's literature. Children's books were generally perceived as lacking considerably in quality, acknowledged at the Carnegie's creation: "One of its purposes was to [improve] standards" (Barker 1998, 43). Established in 1936, the Carnegie Medal claimed it would honour "... an outstanding book for children" (Allen 1998, 46). It would be judged by children's librarians of the Library Association to bring specialist insight, objectivity and expertise. Leading figures in children's publishing hoped that the Medal would bring "value [to children's books] ... [publishers] will feel there is some honour in publishing the best children's book [leading to] ... competition for quality ... general raising of the average" (Woodfield 1937, 21). From its early stages, the

Carnegie was presented with the unique opportunity to award children's books with "symbolic capital" (Bourdieu 1996, 142) and establish itself in the literary prize field.

Appraising Early Success of the Carnegie Medal

The question of whether or not the Carnegie Medal did honour the "best book of the year" is debatable, since the nature of prize-giving is a subjective process. As John Rowe Townsend would later observe: "Everyone would agree that, with the benefit of hindsight, it would be pleasant ... to reshape [a prize] list" (Townsend 1975, 152). The Carnegie Medal choice of 1937 is indicative of the problem of singling out and objectifying one "outstanding" book; there were concerns at the time and "heated discussions" later that "a modern classic" had been passed over (Barker 1998, 43–44), when J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* lost to Eve Garnett's *The Family from One End Street*. The Carnegie Medal would also subtly honour series fiction, through "... opportunities to recognise the 'quality' authors of the day before they stopped writing" (Allen 1998, 46–47), which was understandable: children's book prize culture in Britain had to catch up with itself before it had begun. Honouring Arthur Ransome's *Pigeon Post* as the first Carnegie Medal winner, for instance, was "... recognition of long-term achievement ... Ransome is himself on record as saying that this title was not as good as the others ... [and] it is generally recognised as the weakest in the *Swallows and Amazons* series" (Allen 1998, 46). It was the collective whole, then, which was being granted the "consecration"; the same would happen when C.S. Lewis' *The Last Battle* was rewarded in 1956, since these were Carnegie accolades for the *Swallows and Amazons* and *The Chronicles of Narnia* series as a running set of "capital".

Nevertheless, despite efforts to honour “outstanding” fiction (standalone or series), in its early stages, the Carnegie Medal “... made little impact ... neither the 1937 nor the 1938 winner [the Carnegie’s second and third years of running] was even announced in the *Library Association Record*” (Barker 1998, 44). Eileen Colwell bemoaned the award’s lack of publicity – though book prize culture was typically “... confined to the literary world” (Todd 1996, 56). Unlike the publicity campaigns of today, Colwell saw that the Carnegie Medal needed “... to be written and talked about, advertised in all libraries and book shops” (Colwell 1944, 14). Indeed, the Medal seemed unaware of its untapped power for a considerable period; Lucy Boston, winning for *A Stranger at Green Knowe* in 1961, complained of receiving an award “... exactly like one I got swimming the mile when I was eleven ... of course the medals were only symbols, but of what ...” (Boston 1974, 121). Whatever its perceived successes or failures in its initial stages, the *raison d'être* of the Carnegie Medal certainly set out to improve the output and status of British children’s fiction in society; platform and profile would be tapped into later.

The Carnegie and Other Children’s Book Prizes

The emergence of other children’s fiction prizes in Britain during the latter half of the twentieth century – beginning with the Guardian Children’s Fiction Prize in 1967 – challenged the Carnegie Medal’s hitherto unparalleled position as new prizes promised more innovative and child-appropriate fiction choices. New prizes (excluding illustration awards) included the Guardian Prize, Whitbread Award (1972), Other Award (1975), Tir Na n-Og Award (1976), Arts Council National Book Award (1979), The Observer Teenage Fiction

Prize (1981) and the Smarties Prize (1985). As English has noted, "... [book] prizes have [proven a] cultural phenomenon that self-replicates like a virus" (English 2005, 163). Post-war children's fiction output was improving; post-war prizes reflected issues "circulating around juvenile publishing ... parental discord, social misery and delinquent behaviour" (Barker 1998, 42). Additionally, book prizes generally were growing in "symbolic" and "economic importance" (English 2005, 172) by the 1970s and 1980s. Yet the Carnegie Medal was generally perceived as behind the times, and "criticism of the Carnegie was common" (Barker 1998, 47). Vital questions arose: was the Carnegie creating children's book capital for children or children's book capital for adults? Was innovation in children's literature (i.e. Tolkien) being ignored in favour of more "correct" award choices (i.e. Garnett), and did that mean an award should – in Bourdieu's terms – cater to artistic criteria or to commercial demand?

"Inverse Logics" and the Carnegie Challenge

Bourdieu's "pure art" and "commercial" dichotomy highlights the problem of two "inverse logics" (Bourdieu 1996, 42) contending against one another in prize-giving, and the subjectivity of literary appeal – by nature an unquantifiable ideal – inevitably incited debate as to how and what the Carnegie should choose. Marcus Crouch suggested that "... a test of the good children's book, as of a book for adults, is that it receives the commendation of discriminating readers" (Crouch 1957, 2); others claimed that the Medal will "... often choose something that no 'ordinary' child will read" (Taylor 1981, 540), reflecting attitudes of "librarians who are so concerned with the elevation of literary taste that they are blind to

effective methods of raising it ... surely ... [winners] should be stimulating and enjoyable for children to read" (Bonfield and Hopkins 1981, 441). Should prize choices therefore be *discriminating* or *stimulating* choices for children? The trouble was that, from its inception, the Carnegie Medal had promised both; the Medal's initial announcement in the *Library Association Record* stressed that winners should be "literary" and with "universal appeal" (Berwick Sayers 1937, 218). It is therefore unsurprising the Carnegie Medal's list was accused of "sedate inoffensiveness" (Philip 1985, 35); Aidan Chambers dismissed the Carnegie's fiction as "... unremarkable for anything in the slightest 'questionable' ... [reflecting] an adult's rather sentimental view of childhood ... passionless, cautious ... conservative" (Chambers 1969, 67). Yet Carnegie wins were, from the outset, supposed to be "... in keeping with the generally accepted standards of good behaviour and right thinking" (Berwick Sayers 1937, 218), and this lingual focus on the "good" and "right" is notable, reflecting the typically "correct" choices that would come to characterise the Carnegie list. As such, the Carnegie Medal needed to adapt if it was to survive.

Criteria and Creativity

Lack of specificity in prize-giving criteria has helped the Carnegie Medal to adapt, to reflect the times without being bracketed by them. The original announcement of the Carnegie Medal, with its focus on "good", "right" and "literary" winning fiction (Berwick Sayers 1937, 218), is vague enough to facilitate interpretation; as such, its own lack of specified criteria provided a route forward and the Medal tapped into its own capacity to draw upon its history, prestige and iconic name to reinvent itself. It was a lesson well learnt: one of the

contending children's book prizes to challenge the Carnegie was the Other Award (1975), which came with a list of specific criteria that included "... sympathetic depictions of blacks and other minorities" (Barker 1998, 50), among others. The Other Award was reactionary in nature, a self-professed "irritant and counter" to the Carnegie Medal, culminating with its co-founder Rosemary Stones bemoaning the "plethora" of children's book prizes, and the award terminating "... not because all the 'other' battles have been won, but because it's time to think of new and imaginative ways of winning them" (Stones 1988, 22). Though the Other Award did list worthy specifications for winning titles, the lack of criteria and the vaguer – or in Bourdieu's terms, perhaps purer – focus on literary capital that was merely "outstanding" came to work in the Carnegie Medal's favour. Competing prizes that flourished found the same: John Rowe Townsend, founder of the Guardian Children's Fiction Prize, admitted that "... no formal criteria for the Guardian Award were ever put down ... it is ... a literary award" (Townsend 1978, 15). The Whitbread Prize (1972) also aims to endorse "outstanding book[s] for children" and the Smarties Prize (1985) similarly specifies "high standards" (Allen 1998, 159). The arbitrary nature of literary standards and lack of defined criteria enabled a "facelift" for the Carnegie during the 1990s, reflected through its bolder, even controversial award choices.

Controversy and Control

James F. English has suggested that the best "... success available to a British book prize [is] *success de scandal*", and that the Booker had exemplified this with "... scandal building upon scandal, expectations not so much of triumph but of disgrace aroused and satisfied" (English

2005, 169). During the 1990s, the Carnegie Medal was to test this notion, beginning when it awarded the Medal to *Stone Cold* in 1993. It was a controversial choice; Robert Swindell's tale concerns a homeless teenage boy trying to get by on the streets of London, and a murderer determined to clear the city of its vagrants. Amidst the outcry, the Library Association considered introducing another Carnegie Medal for teenagers before deciding against it, stating that "... it is better not to be too restrictive" (Barker 1998, 57) and that, moreover, "... controversy ... [came] as healthy publicity ... the assumption that any publicity is better than none" (Allen 1998, 50). It could be reasonably supposed that the Carnegie Medal decided, as the Booker did, to centre itself "... at the very vortex of literary scandal, making it an irresistible magnet for national anxieties over literary value [and] cultural commerce" (English 2005, 167). Given Philip Pullman's win for *Northern Lights* in 1995 (a book that, as Pullman claims, is about killing God), and Melvin Burgess' *Junk* for 1996 (with its fourteen-year-olds involved in drugs), the conservative and "correct" days of the Carnegie Medal had gone. Sixty years on from 1936, the prize had renovated itself, no longer subservient to ideas of "literary" and "universal" appeal in fiction (since these are, as ideals, indefinable in themselves). Armed with backlist capital, and the advantage of longevity among children's fiction prizes, the Carnegie Medal has weathered criticism through its own dawning self-awareness: the realisation that, after decades of conscientiousness, it could afford controversy and utilise it to be a true contender and survivor in the British book prize culture.

Conclusion

From its first awarding of an established set of literary capital in 1936 (Arthur Ransome's *Swallows and Amazons*), to daring to select a book about drugs (Melvin Burgess' *Junk*) in 1996, there has been a change in the Carnegie Medal's approach to prize-giving over the sixty years since its inception. The Carnegie Medal was created to offer a seal of excellence to its winning books, but because its criteria were undefined from the start, this would ultimately work in its favour. The Carnegie was to discover that its own name carried a certain power: that it was not merely capable of *honouring* but of *bestowing* cultural prestige upon award-winning fiction. Whether or not the Medal has always succeeded in recognising the right title is debatable (as with any book prize), but as Ruth Allen has noted, "... many of the earlier winners are interesting ... but are not read with any degree of enjoyment by today's children. Others, such as ... *Swallows and Amazons* ... *Narnia* ... still offer as much to children as they always have" (Allen 1998, 54). The point is that the Carnegie prize list *lives on*, even as print runs end and copyrights expire. Critic Graham Huggan suggested that literature is in itself "... a site of contestation between different discursive *regimes*" (not dissimilar to the politics and concerns of selecting prize-winning fiction), and that "... literary texts ... have no intrinsic meaning or value" (Huggan 1998, 412), other than what we assign to them. Yet it is this *assumption* that authors, publishers, critics – and, ultimately, their reading audience – take note of. It has a significant impact upon the intellectual and publicity influences that feature in Darnton's "communications circuit" (Darnton 2002, 11) whereby books make their journeys into the hands of readers. James English has noted that being a winner "... guarantees the publication of ... future books ... [prizes are] in this respect an enduring and transferable credential" (English 2005, 174). This

idea addresses Lucy Boston's concern that her award held no further symbolic meaning; the Carnegie Medal has been a vital means of consecrating past and future children's classics, not because the Carnegie's contemporary choices were *critically correct*, but because the prize *deemed them to be so*. Neither was it because children or adult gatekeepers *will have heard of prize winners*, but because the books have *been selected as prize winners*. Children's book prizes are therefore capable of immortalising children's fiction through their prize lists. The evolution of the Carnegie Medal's attitude to prize-giving reflects growing awareness of their own potential leverage in children's book prize culture.

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