

# The Carnegie Medal



Older people occasionally still refer to the 'Carnegie Library' in their town. They all look similar, with lots of terracotta and red brick and they were all paid for by the Scottish-born Andrew Carnegie. By his death in 1919, he had set up nearly 3,000 libraries in the English-speaking world and over half the library authorities in Great Britain had one. Having made his fortune in the USA, he had been able to keep his promise that "If ever wealth should come to me" that it should be used to establish free libraries.

It is therefore appropriate that when, in 1935, the Library Association (now CILIP, the Chartered Institute of Librarians and Information Professionals) decided to establish a medal to be awarded to "the best children's book published during the year by a British author" that they should call it the Carnegie Medal. It honours the authors and it honours the man who benefited from free libraries as a child and repaid his debt to them.

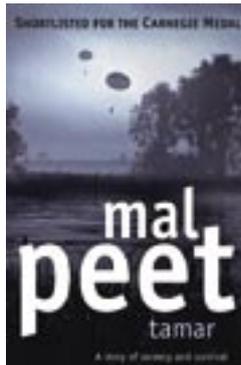
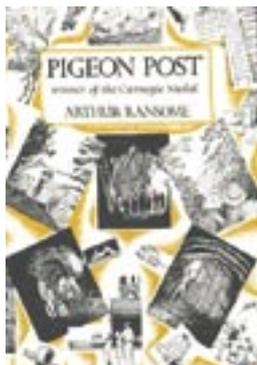
At 70 years old, the Carnegie is not likely to be the same award as it was in the beginning. A significant measure of change can be charted by comparing the first winner, Arthur Ransome's *Pigeon Post* (1936), with the 2005 winner, *Tamar* by Mal Peet. The first is about younger children, clearly written for children. The latter inhabits the extreme edge, looking towards the adult list. This year's short list seems likely to continue the pattern of preferring books for older readers. Except for *My Swordhand is Singing* by Marcus Sedgwick, which is a Transylvanian kind of adventure, they deal mainly with the most painful aspects of life. Once again, humour

does not find a place. It is almost as if tragedy provides a badge of respectability, a safe choice.

For the first fourteen years, the selectors clearly had their idea of what was suitable for children. It was an interesting mixture. From middle-class children in the Lake District, the next year took us to the East End of London with *The Family From One-End Street* (1937). Eve Garnett received as much criticism for writing about the underprivileged as Ransome has for writing about the privileged. She wrote it as a result of personally being made aware of how others lived when she came to London as an art student but the book suffered some fierce criticism from Frank Eyre. He used the words "snobbish" and "unreal," however the author clearly admired the warmth of the family relationships depicted and the way of life seems very like that experienced by some of our grandmothers. It was reissued after a gap, to further criticism, but remains in print. Ransome has been dismissed on the grounds of class and gender, (so hard luck all you folk who read it because you like boats,) but he too has survived the criticism.

During the war years, there were two books which reflected the times. *Visitors from London* (1940) by Kitty Barne dealt with the problem of evacuees. She seems to have been a serious writer who wanted to depict children in real situations. Unlike many authors of the time, she did not make an early disposal of the adults and showed them existing together. She was apparently a prolific writer at that time, but the medal winning book seems to have completely disappeared, along with all her others. More people have probably come across

*We Couldn't Leave Dinah* (1941) by Mary Treadgold, an animal story as well as depicting the Channel Islands in wartime. It is perhaps not surprising that the other two wartime books were fantasies: *The Little Grey Men* (1942) by "BB" and *The Wind on the Moon* (1944) by Eric Linklater. The first is essentially a nature book, written by a dedicated countryman and must have represented a respite from the other world readers inhabited in 1942. The second is a fantasy created for Linklater's own children who appear in the book. It seems extravagant in the way that writers who have had success with books for adults are allowed to be. No awards were given in 1943 and 1945.



# Seventy years of choosing the best



Two other features mark these early years: medals were given to significant literary authors for what must have been the body of work rather than the named book and non-fiction books received the award. When Walter De La Mare received his medal in 1947, it was for *Collected Stories for Children*. Not a novel but surely time he was acknowledged, one suspects. Similarly, C.S. Lewis did not receive a medal until *The Last Battle* in 1956 when the title might have nudged the selectors' collective elbow. Eleanor Farjeon, who won in 1956 for *The Little Book Room*, was by then moving towards the end of her writing life.



Above: Andrew Carnegie

No non-fiction title has won since 1960 when the winner was *The Making of Man* by Dr I.W. Cornwell. Until then, they turned up reasonably regularly though much less often than fiction. One understands the first, *Radium Woman* (1938) by Eleanor Dooryly, was decided over the heads of the selection panel by their superiors.

Who were these selectors? So much has happened since 1936, that accounts of the beginnings have a somewhat prehistoric feel. For the inside information, we are indebted to the late Keith Barker who researched the Medal's history for a college thesis and was given access to early minutes of meetings. In his subsequent book, *In the Realms of Gold*, he charts a move from what sounds like a headmasterly proclamation from on high of the winning title, to the hard-won involvement of Youth Librarians. The latter was a long time coming.

The first Selection Committee seems to have been made up of the Great and the Good at the head of the Library Association. They also invited six recommendations from what are called "many important libraries". The only involvement of children's librarians is that the Chief Librarians of the "many important libraries" are allowed to consult them. With all these important people presumably having much more important things to do, the first years were unpromising. Although awards were made in 1936 and 1937, no announcement was made. Neither did members always turn up for Committee meetings. When *The Circus is Coming* by Noel Streatfeild won in 1938, only two people were present. It took twenty-six years before the suggestion that the selection should be made primarily by librarians who worked with children was accepted.

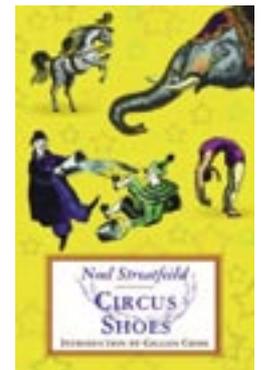
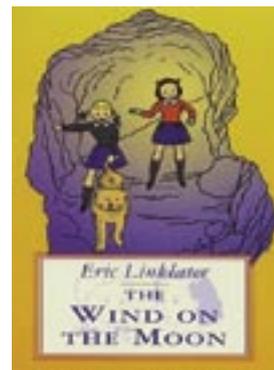
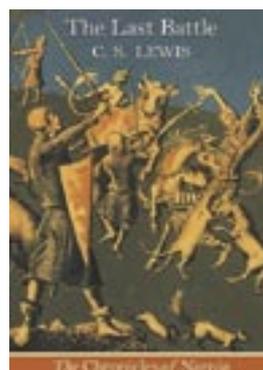
Although little changed internally during this

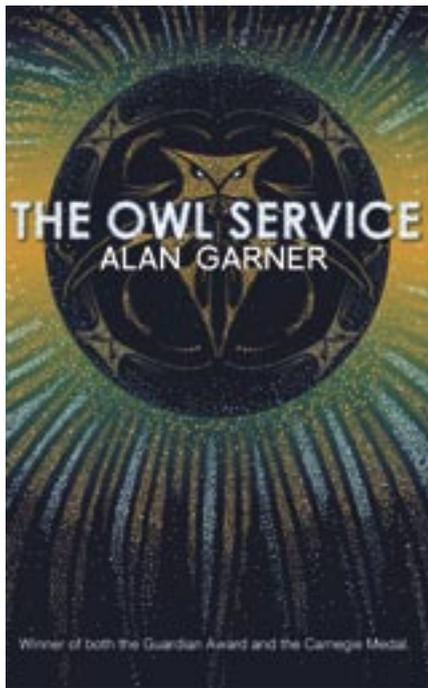
time, outside a great deal was happening. Children's librarianship was becoming a specialist field, serious reviewing of children's books was being done by people like Margaret Meek, Naomi Lewis and Margery Fisher and the first modern review magazine for children's books, *The Junior Bookshelf*, appeared. The fact that the prize was withheld in 1966 may have owed something to the controversy that was beginning to emerge. Luminaries like Brian Alderson and Aidan Chambers were asking uncomfortable questions. The discussion surfaced in the *Times Literary Supplement*.

Peggy Heeks, Chair of what was by now the Youth Libraries Group, wrote an article about how *The Owl Service* (1967) by Alan Garner had been chosen and emphasising

that the award was not for a popular or socially useful book. Brian Alderson responded by asking what the qualifications of the Selection Committee were and for "an intelligent, critical account" of the choices made. Heeks replied by seeming to question Alderson's right to his stance as he "was not a member". Another participant recorded her experience at this time. Janet Hill, a children's librarian joined the Committee in 1967 and said she was dismayed to find she had only seven days to examine twenty-seven titles. She describes the first meeting as surprisingly brief and noted that at the last meeting, only two members of the Publications Committee, who were by now in control of the Selection Committee, attended. There were also other, practical, questions still to consider. Could an author win more than once? Should there be a separate award for non-fiction?

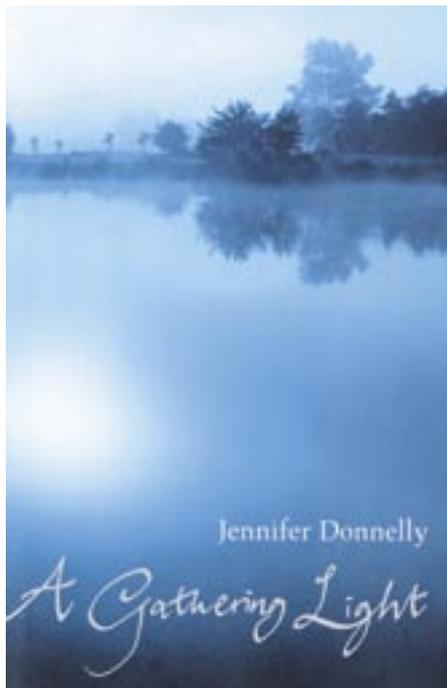
According to Keith Barker, the LA stepped in at that point and conceded that the YLG should be "virtually responsible" for the recommendations - but it took two more years before they were no longer subject to the Publications committee. Since then, selection has been in the hands of those librarians who are closest to children and young people.





*The Owl Service* by Alan Garner was about, and for, adolescents. It was an encounter of a more challenging kind, though it can be read without understanding the undercurrents which relate it to the Welsh myth Garner is drawing upon. It continues to intrigue adult readers, too. Maybe this was the beginning of the rise of the 'young adult' book among the winners.

Earlier, there had been adult references in the historical novels but these seem to have disturbed people less. Hester Burton's *Time of Trial* (1963) set in the Napoleonic period, acknowledged the feelings of a girl growing up. One of the earliest contemporary books to depict young people on the edge of adulthood was *The Lark on the Wing* (1950) by Elfrida Vipont. The story shows Kit's first days in the grown up world. The heroine is a Quaker and her faith is important. She has an essential 'goodness' in her life. It seems light years away from *Junk* (1996) by Melvin Burgess or *Dear Nobody* (1991) by Berlie Doherty. These later books for older readers have main characters who are teenagers and who deal with problems which such characters can and do encounter. The books are not the problem, rather there has been a consistent objection that a prize for "children and young people", seems often to prefer young adults. The 2003 winner, *A Gathering Light* by Jennifer Donnelly, acknowledges its status by being marketed equally to adults. The most common complaint has been from those who regard the medal



as an award for children's books and are disappointed on this score.

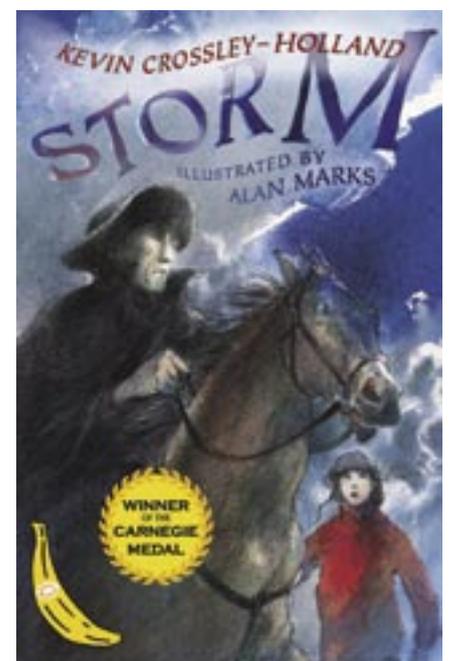
The only title for much younger children to have won the medal is *Storm* (1985) by Kevin Crossley-Holland. It was greeted with incredulous delight by many and that included librarians in the schools services. Until recently, most other titles could be described as for a 'middle' age range. It is unwise to put precise ages on books but under elevens will find most of the more recent winners will not be like *The Machine Gunners* (1975) by Robert Westall, *Thunder and Lightnings* (1976) by Jan Mark, and *The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tyler* (1977) by Gene Kemp. Things were different in the 1970s. *Millions* (2004) by Frank Cottrell Boyce was a return to the younger interest but *Tamar* brought us back to the powerful books which appeal to adults, young and old, an increasingly familiar genre.

There are always surprises, however. In the last ten or so years, we have had *Northern Lights* (1995) by Philip Pullman and *Skellig* (1998) by David Almond. These are examples of the kind of book that not all young readers can manage on their own but which can enthrall them when mediated by an adult. If you value children, read aloud. The selectors assuredly got it right with Philippa Pearce, Penelope Lively and Margaret Mahy but some years offered such riches that we can now see that some of the also-rans actually won the race. I personally value the Carnegie for

the treasures it sometimes offers us which do not fall into any well marked category. *The Ghost Drum* (1987) by Susan Price is one such treasure, quite unlike anything else. Readers are still discovering *A Pack of Lies* (1988) by Geraldine McCaughrean, a gleefully outrageous use of lies as fiction. ("Has she written anything else?" asks a recent blog.) Thanks to Jane Nissen, you can still read *The Twelve and the Genii* (1962) by Pauline Clarke about the Brontë children's toy soldiers, still pulsating with the life the Brontës gave them, and in a modern kind of danger. Would such a title win now? If it was up against something more adult?

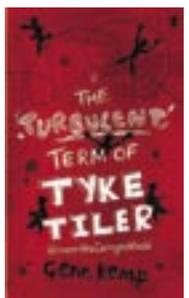
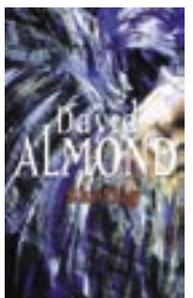
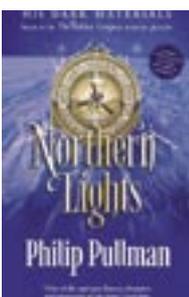
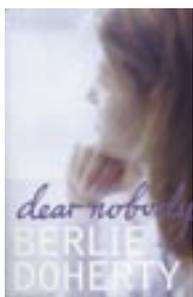
The Carnegie Medal, like the rest of us, has moved on. Nothing illuminates the difference better than Lucy Boston's aristocratic account of her award ceremony in 1961 for *A Stranger at Green Knowe*. It is recorded in her autobiography, *Memory in a House*.

Taking place on a stage in Llandudno, the scenery for a drawing room comedy still in place, she sat through the mayor's speech (vulgar), a meeting (interminable), and the presentation (brief). Her prepared speech was not required. At lunch, the LA official said, "I believe you have written a book" and turned to someone else. She records that the food was good.



All that has changed. Today, winners are pleased and feted and often use the opportunity to support the work of libraries and children's reading. "It was a library that was crucial in turning me into a writer," said David Almond. All awards are complicated and necessarily imperfect but they all draw attention to children's books and reading. We are in a period of anxiety about, and re-assessment of, childhood itself so maybe all awards will need to follow the development of that discussion and relate it to their criteria. We shall see. In the meantime, Happy Anniversary to the Carnegie Medal. Most of the winning titles, old and new, are cracking reads.

Pat Thomson



## 'Carnegie Medal Winners' referred to in Seventy Years of Choosing the Best

- Pigeon Post* – Arthur Ransome  
Jonathan Cape, 1983 (1936). ISBN: 978-0224021241
- Tamar* – Mal Peet Walker Books, 2006. ISBN:978-1406303940
- The Family from One End Street* – Eve Garnett  
Puffin Books, 2004 (1937). ISBN: 978-0141317168
- Visitors from London* – Kitty Barne Dent, 1940. out of print
- We Couldn't Leave Dinah* – Mary Treadgold Jonathan Cape, 1941. out of print
- The Little Grey Men: A Story for the Young in Heart* – 'BB'  
Oxford University Press, 2004. (1942) ISBN: 978-0192719461
- The Wind on the Moon* – Eric Linklater  
Jane Nissen Books, 2000. (1944) ISBN: 978-1903252024
- Collected Stories for Children* – Walter De La Mare (1947).
- The Last Battle* – C.S.Lewis  
HarperCollins, 2005 (1956). ISBN: 978-0007202324
- The Little Bookroom* – Eleanor Farjeon  
Oxford University Press, 2004 (1956). ISBN:- 978-0192718478
- The Making of Man* – Dr. I.W.Cornwall Phoenix House, 1960. out of print
- Radium Woman* – Eleanor Doorly Heinemann, 1939. out of print
- (Circus Shoes) The Circus is Coming* – Noel Streatfeild  
Jane Nissen Books, 2006 (1938). ISBN: 978-1903252253
- The Owl Service* – Alan Garner  
Harper Collins, 2007 (1967). ISBN: 978-0007254743
- Time of Trial* – Hester Burton Oxford University Press, 1963. out of print
- The Lark on the Wing* – Elfrida Vipont Oxford University Press, 1950. out of print
- Junk* – Melvin Burgess Puffin, 1996. ISBN: 978-0141315935
- Dear Nobody* – Berlie Doherty Puffin, 1991. ISBN: 978-0141311760
- A Gathering Light* – Jennifer Donnelly  
Bloomsbury, 2004 (2003). ISBN: 978-0747570639
- Storm* – Kevin Crossley Holland  
Egmont Books, 2001 (1985). ISBN: 978-0749746988
- The Machine Gunners* – Robert Westall  
Macmillan Children's Bks., 2002 (1975). ISBN: 978-0330397858
- Thunder and Lightnings* – Jan Mark Kestrel, 1976. out of print
- The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tiler* – Gene Kemp  
Faber, 2006 (1977). ISBN: 978-0571230945
- Millions* – Frank Cottrell Boyce  
Macmillan Children's Bks.,2004. ISBN: 978-0330433310
- Northern Lights* – Philip Pullman  
Scholastic, 2007 (1995). ISBN: 978-0439951784
- Skellig* – David Almond  
Hodder Children's Bks., 2000 (1998). ISBN:978-0340716007
- The Ghost Drum* – Susan Price Faber, 1989 (1987). ISBN: 978-0571153404
- A Pack of Lies* – Geraldine McCaughrean  
Oxford University Press, 2002 (1988). ISBN: 978-0192752031
- The Twelve and the Genii* – Pauline Clark  
Jane Nissen Books, 2001 (1962). ISBN: 978-1903252093
- A Stranger at Green Knowe* – Lucy Boston  
Faber, 2006 (1961). ISBN: 978-0571212491

*In the Realms of Gold* Keith Barker out of print

*Memories* (incorporating *Memories in a House*) Lucy Boston  
Oldknow Books £16.95 ISBN: 09523232X