

The New Zealand Post Awards Picture Book of the Year Finalists, 2009

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The shortlisted picture books this year are a varied lot. Originally they were to be introduced by several speakers, but because of illness I am the only one left. I will speak at length on the first three, but only briefly mention the others.

My winner is ***Every Second Friday*** by Kiri Lightfoot & Ben Galbraith (illustrator).

This book is a "rich text". Both text and pictures provide many ideas to be explored by the young reader. That it is designed for young readers is suggested by the fact that the child characters are named and aged on the first page of the story. The story is told by the elder child, Margi, age 6½; her brother Totty is 4¾. This suggests a readership of 4-7 years, from the last year in an early childhood centre through to Year 2 or 3 at school, depending on the age range a school works within. The age range of the characters suggests that this is a story to be read to children, rather than one that they will read themselves. Few children of 6 ½ will be able to read it themselves. The all-over-the-page text emphasizes this. Text appears in lists, in boxes, on coloured backgrounds, in diagrammatic forms, in hand-writing, on labels, in capitals and on curves: modes which make it more difficult for a six year old to read by themselves. A reading age of around 8½+ is what I would guess is needed, and there is no reason why an eight year old would not enjoy the book, providing that they are happy to read about younger characters. Apart from the mention of the ages, there is nothing that would put off older children, and much that would interest them.

The cover gives author and illustrator double-billing, although the title page separates out author and illustrator. In this case, I think the cover is correct: they have contributed equally to the whole. Ben Galbraith is well known for his awarding winning picture book, *The Three Fishing Brothers Gruff*, and here he shows his versatility in working for a younger age group.

The end-papers (same front and back) anticipate the theme of the story, but it is not until the end that the reader will appreciate this. They depict art work by

the children and photos of the children, pinned and stuck and clipped on walls throughout Dad's house. I did wonder why there were no fridge magnets, but when I looked again, I found that it was sticky tape that held the pictures to the fridge. The postcard from Mum is pointedly addressed to the children, and the only mention of Dad is an instruction to be good for him. There is a reminder to brush their teeth, as if he might forget to tell them to do this.

Mum looks a bit grim-faced as she drives the children to Dad's place, and particularly as she arrives and he greets them. Perceptive readers might see that this has not been a happy break up, and there is still some antagonism between Mum and Dad.

Margi, the story teller, says nothing about the relationship between her parents. It is clear though, that the children are happy to be at Dad's place. Perhaps they are not allowed to "get magnificently muddy, worrying wet and mind-blowingly messy" at Mum's place, where they spend most of their time. Dad's place *is* a mess. There is stuff all over the place, and the illustrations show this very clearly. The text says it too, in "We always have to push hard against the door", "squeezed our way inside", and "sometimes hard to find the people", but it is the illustrations that show just how much of a mess there is. Dad is a collector, and his collections are not always logically organized. They are certainly not tidy.

The children also have an imaginative time at Dad's. Searching for treasures happens aboard a pirate ship built out of a sofa, but by the next page this has turned into a proper pirate ship, still with the same sugar bag sail. After a busy day, Dad reads to the children in bed. They know they are special to him because their artwork and their photographs are all over his walls, on the fridge, and next to his bed. That's how they know "that our Dad's house is our house too".

This is a reassuring book for children whose parents have separated, or who are about to, making it clear that it is the parents who have separated; the children still belong to and are loved by both of them.

I like the vigorous text and illustrations for this book, as well as the underlying message of security. This is my winner.

My runner-up is *Roadworks*, by Sally Sutton, illustrated by Brian Lovelock. Maybe this one ought to be in the non-fiction awards as well. It's an informative book about building a road, international in its scope. My English edition said it was first published in Newtown, NSW, Australia, and this fits with its lack of New Zealand character.

The poetry is fine, with a good consistent pattern throughout the book. The noises, such as "Ping! BANG! **TAPI!**" mark it out as a superb book for young children, particularly 2-3 year olds, with a slightly different usefulness again perhaps for 5 year olds at school who are being introduced to "shared books". The words are well chosen to go with the actions, and the action is the key to this story. It is strong on verbs and imperatives.

Roll the tar. Roll the tar.
Make it form and flat.
Squash it down and press it out.
Squelch! SPLUCK! **SPLAT!**

It is a good, strong rhyme, but a prose text could have made it a more useful book for a broader age range. The glossary of vehicle types at the end is a very useful addition to the factual nature of the book. This alone may allow the book to be used by an older age group than the rhyming text suggests is the target group.

The illustrations follow the text well, and a good sequence of the actions involved in making the road is developed. The accuracy of the illustrations in depicting these actions is generally very good, except for one aspect; neither the people, the scenery, nor the surroundings indicate a New Zealand setting for the road-making. Anyone who has driven on a highway knows that road makers make a lot more surrounding mess than is evident in this road-making. On the earth-moving pages, and on the tipping stones pages, at least, there ought to be signs of the road maker's vehicles and the tracks that they make when building a road. There should be heaps of earth beside where the diggers have been working; there should be the tracks of caterpillar wheels and heavy machinery beside where the road making is taking place. And there should be cars driving on the new road at 30 kph to consolidate it. Without this, it is

difficult to accept it as authentic. It seems that the road-making process been smoothed and cleansed for an international audience. Am I wrong to want the winner of the New Zealand Post book awards to be a *New Zealand* book?

I see that the illustrator has been mindful of the need for inclusiveness in early childhood education, and that some of the road workers are women.

I would certainly recommend this as a book for young children. It will be a useful addition to any early childhood centre's collection, and in new entrant classes in schools.

The Were-Nana, by Melinda Szymanik, illustrated by Sarah Nelisiwe Anderson. Auckland: Scholastic, 2008.

Unfortunately this book and I started off on the wrong foot. I read the title as weh-reh na-na, and expected a Maori story. Instead, pakeha Stella Rosa's grandmother is visiting from Europe, and her brother frightens her with tales that their Nana is a were-wolf. When she arrives, Stella Rosa is quickly reassured, but Nana issues Simon a scary warning.

I'm not sure who this story is for. It is potentially too frightening for pre-schoolers, who, once introduced to the idea of were-wolves, are likely to have nightmares about them, particularly as the idea is not entirely scotched, but continued by Nana's scary remarks to Simon. And how would you explain the concept of were-wolves to preschoolers, or even to five year olds? But Stella Rosa is young enough to sit in a booster seat of the car, and her large head shape compared with her body mass suggests a pre-schooler (although her brother has a very large head too, so maybe this is just a characteristic of the illustrator). The most likely audience for such a scary story seems to be Year 3-4 children who have just learned to read a picture book by themselves. They might also be old enough to pick up the ambiguity of names like Nana Lupin, and its association with wolf. By Year 5 I think you would be too old for the book.

There are interesting aspects to the illustrations, which reflect the scariness of the brother's stories. The scene at the airport, with the tower, is particularly

erie. Anderson produces authentically fierce and miserable expressions on the children's faces. Good use is made of shadow and reflection.

To a New Zealand readership, there are things in the book that are recognizably New Zealand features, although to an international audience, these things will not intrude on their understanding. The airport, for example, can be seen as both local and international.

Although I find this a rather problematic book, it does hold the attention of the reader, and the illustrations are a good match for its scary theme. I recommend it for Years 2 (with care), 3 and 4 children (ages 6-9), and as a discussion starter for older children. I wouldn't be surprised if it won – this would just mean that the judges were not seeing the problems as I have seen them.

Duck's Stuck, by Karl Mewburn, Illustrated by Ali Teo & John O'Reilly.
Auckland: Scholastic, 2008.

I found this a fairly minor tale with not a particularly satisfying rhyme. The illustrations are amusing but not outstanding.

Piggity-Wiggity Jiggity Jig, by Diana Neild, illustrated by Philip Webb.
Auckland: Scholastic, 2008.

Although it has a good strong rhyme, this one didn't appeal either. I found the justification for saddling a child with a stupid name maddening and trivial. Marilyn didn't agree, and I will read out her comments on this. Scholastic might congratulate itself on getting three of its books shortlisted again this year.

So I recommend *Every Second Friday* as a winner, and *Roadworks* as a runner-up. *The Were-Nana* is also a commendable book, but to me there were too many problems in finding an age-appropriate audience for a tricky theme.

References

Lightfoot, K., & Galbraith, B. (2008). *Every second Friday*. London: Hodder Children's Books.

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Sutton, S., & Lovelock, B. (2008). *Roadworks*. London: Walker.