

The Edinburgh International Book Festival: Books That Win



If you're buying a book for a teenager, how do you know where to start? Are you sometimes taken aback by the content of Young Adult fiction? Do you ask a bookseller, read reviews, simply pick something by the picture on the cover or the blurb on the back – or do you look for a book that's been garlanded with awards? And just who gives those awards out anyway? In a session entitled **Books That Win at The Edinburgh International Book Festival** last week, authors **Theresa Breslin, William Sutcliffe, and Moira Young** gave the audience a fascinating insight into writing for young adults. Are the awards primarily there to help the writers or the readers – or is it a bit of both?

Breslin's first novel *Simon's Challenge* won the **Kathleen Fidler award** for new and unpublished writers; 'it was a life changer – without it I wouldn't be here today.' Six years later her *Whispers in the Graveyard* won the Carnegie Medal. William Sutcliffe had already written several celebrated novels for adults before publishing his first Young Adult book *The Wall* in 2013: it was shortlisted for the 2014 Carnegie Medal. Although the Carnegie is awarded by a judging panel on the strength of nominations from librarians, they also involve a '**shadowing scheme**' by which the shortlisted books are sent out to school groups, who post their reviews and comments on a dedicated website. The readers' favourite soon emerges, and although it may not always match the judges', Breslin won on both counts. Librarians from all over the UK nominate the books and fight for their choices. Both Sutcliffe and Breslin found the shadowing scheme highly rewarding; at a time when fewer and fewer papers are printing reviews, it creates dynamic communication between readers and

authors; the loop is closed. The reviews, says Sutcliffe, are also honest – children actually read the book, whereas all three writers feel that some journalists don't. Young readers pick up on particular points and quiz the authors about them; that's as uplifting as it is scary .



At the awards ceremony for the Carnegie, the late author **Jan Marks** poked Breslin in the arm saying 'Now the next book had better be just as good.' For Moira Young, whose debut novel *Blood Red Road* won the Costa Children's Award, things were even more terrifying. The book was the first in a trilogy; now she had to deliver two more masterpieces, 'I was frozen with fear.' Young questions whether the major prizes raise an author's public profile; like Breslin and Sutcliffe she finds most joy in awards actively involving readers, and especially delighted in her nomination for a French award that included email correspondence with them. Children as far away as the island of **Reunion** were reading *Blood Red Road* and sending her thoughtful, well-informed questions. 'You start to be knit into this community of readers, writers and librarians.'



There is no prize money attached to the Carnegie Medal. Although he needs to eat as much as the next person, Sutcliffe feels that this is a good thing, 'Publishing is a business, and adult book awards sometimes feel like a part of that...Children's awards are about getting your book read...librarians, teachers and young readers think about reading not selling.' **Joy Court**, who chairs not only this panel but also the working parties for the Carnegie and the Kate Greenaway Medals, says that the awards do increase sales. Young has found this particularly true for foreign editions of her books; Breslin points out that all the shadowing groups receive copies, and that being shortlisted also aids a book's longevity. Most children's books, says Sutcliffe, 'have the

shelf life of a tomato' – awards keep a book in print, though word of mouth recommendations can give a huge boost to sales. Breslin suggests that an award persuades people that a book is worth a try. Court agrees, 'It gives your book a quality label.'

There is unanimous agreement that librarians 'the best gatekeepers.' Working at the grass roots, they know what children and young people really want to read. The **United Kingdom Literacy Association (UKLA)**, of which Court is Library Representative, makes great efforts to get more books into schools to encourage teachers and students to read new and different writers.

So if awards matter to writers, do they matter to children and young people? Young sees value in letting readers see that their opinions count, but feels that allowing them to choose the winners can make the results too predictable, as they do tend to choose the names they know. Sutcliffe agrees; he feels there's still a lot to be said for adults directing children's reading – professionals can encourage them to make an effort with something challenging. The Carnegie shadowing scheme does encourage young readers to read books they wouldn't normally choose; Court explains that its judges particularly look for a book that has impact, one that lets readers live through a real but vicarious experience, 'not just a quick fix.'

The winners of the **RED Book Awards** in **Falkirk** (Young's *Blood Red Road* was nominated for one in 2013), are chosen by pupils, but they certainly don't get away with ticking a box on a form – the young people have to work to champion their choices, not only giving presentations to persuade their audience, but even singing, dancing, performing dramas and dressing up in costume. Young had a great time on the day and was hugely impressed with the process. Now in their eighth year, the RED (Read, Enjoy, Debate) awards are the brainchild of **Principal Librarian Yvonne Manning**, and long may they continue.

None of the authors set out to write for young adults. Young says she just wrote 'the book that was burning within me' although she has stayed with YA because the books that she read as a teenager are the ones that stayed with her, 'They have formed who I am.' Sutcliffe's *The Wall* was originally published as 'cross-over' fiction – it's been far more successful as a YA book. Adults, he says, don't want to read about what they perceive to be complicated issues – in fact, the issues in the book are simple, and he was heartened to see younger readers taking them on.

✘ YA did not exist as a genre when these writers were teenagers; **Ian McEwen's** *Cement Garden* – then seen as adult fiction – turned a 16 year old Sutcliffe onto reading; now it would be classified as YA. As many as 50% of YA readers are adults, but Breslin says publishers have to be careful – some books with teenage protagonists are *not* children's books; she cites *Angela's Ashes* and *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* as examples. None of the authors, however, think YA should shy away from 'dark' issues. *Blood Red Road* features plenty of death but Young was careful how she wrote about it. A book, she says, is a place where readers can rehearse what might happen to them one day; they see how someone deals with a crisis and (perhaps) comes through it. 'I do not have the right to end a book without leaving a flickering candle of hope.' Breslin agrees; her *Divided City* is about sectarianism and the nature of friendship in Glasgow, but it allowed many children on both sides of the Irish border to look at the issues from a safe distance. 'This is the power of literature. Reading creates emotional literacy.' Teenagers, says Sutcliffe, start to think for themselves and question whether their parents may sometimes be wrong; it's an essential re-evaluation and at best both sides emerge with some kind of compromise.

Awards, Court concludes, are important because they seek out honest and powerful writing that will stand the test of time. Young people are not afraid to think about the big issues;

these books encourage them to do so while they still can.

This was an excellent and thought-provoking discussion, especially enjoyable for its real exchange of ideas and the generosity and openness of its participants.

The Edinburgh International Book Festival continues until 25th August 2014 in Charlotte Square. There are lots of children's and YA authors' event still to come – have a look at the [website](#) for more details.