

BOOKS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

A Milestone for Children's Books

By ZENA SUTHERLAND

YES, OF COURSE you all know by now that the National Book Committee has established an award for a children's book and that the first winner was Meindert DeJong for *Journey from Peppermint Street* (Harper & Row, \$4.50; SR, Nov. 9). It is a small news item to most readers, but to those of us who are in love with children's books it is a milestone.

For years there had been discussion of the possibility of a prize that would admit children's books as a part of the national literature, supplementing—rather than competing with—the distinction conferred by the Newbery and Caldecott awards. It was, therefore, with a shock of pleasure but not surprise that I learned of this addition to the National Book Awards. Along with the eminent poet John Ciardi and Virginia Haviland, head of the children's book section of the Library of Congress, I received an invitation to judge the candidates for the honor.

Our way was made smooth by the indefatigable organizational ability of the committee's executive director, Peter Jennison, and by the executive director of the Children's Book Council, John Donovan. The award was to be given for "a children's book by a U.S. citizen, originated in the U.S. and published in the calendar year 1968." The judges were to select a book whose distinctiveness of thought or spirit was reflected in its literary expression; there were no limitations of genre or of reading level. Publishers submitted titles, although we were free to choose others, and a prolific correspondence ensued, of which the Xerox Corporation was the immediate beneficiary. By the time Virginia Haviland and I met in Washington in January for a conference call with John Ciardi, we were ready to pick the finalists—not without rueful thoughts about other books.

Came the dawn. Like the other NBA judges, we met in New York to arrive at a final choice, and were asked to compose a citation for the winner. Deep thinking, furious scribbling. Each of us made the same comments, we discovered, but there was no question about whose version to use. (Maybe writers write better?) John Ciardi said, in part, "Mr. DeJong has the gift of summoning child-marvelous experiences to his narrative, yet of containing them in his sure sense of childhood."

The citation was read by John Lorenz, Deputy Librarian of Congress and master of ceremonies for the occasion, on March 12, as Meindert DeJong joined the six other NBA winners on the stage of Philharmonic Hall. He didn't say so, but when he went to Europe to receive the Hans Christian Andersen Medal, an international award, it was a visit to Wierum, his birthplace in the Netherlands, that inspired *Journey from Peppermint Street*. What Mr. DeJong did say was, "Certainly, in terms of adult experience, the child's world and the world of children's literature are limited worlds. But it is in that very limitation that the writer for children finds his joy and his challenge and his untrammelled creativity." Quoting Braque, he added, "Limitation of means determines style, engenders form and new form, and gives impulse to creativity."

NOW that children's literature has gained a new kind of national recognition and has received long-merited status, one hopes that someday there may be a prize for children's poetry or for biography for young people. It was gratifying to see the cordiality with which the other finalists (Lloyd Alexander, Patricia Clapp, Esther Hautzig, and Milton Meltzer) congratulated Meindert DeJong and to recognize the pride expressed by many editors both in the establishment of the award and in its first recipient.

"What's left?" Maurice Sendak, who has illustrated many of DeJong's books, teased the winner. "Poor man, you've already won this, and the Newbery, and the Andersen." "Happens every seven years," said the ebullient DeJong, and shoved a paper napkin over. "Give me my first drawing lesson—there's still the Caldecott."

The Birth of Sunset's Kittens. By Carla Stevens. Photographs by Leonard Stevens. Scott. 44 pp. \$3.95. Especially good for the child who has never seen the wonderful process of animal birth, this simple, accurate book depicts the beginning of life for four wet, bedraggled kittens. The illustrations show the mother cat tenderly caring for her litter, while the text explains with neither sentimentality nor coyness what is happening; the young have been in the uterus, they emerge in the amniotic sac, the cat grooms them and disposes of the after-birth. In some of the photographs an absorbed child is watching, but the pictures are unposed. An excellent job of straightforward treatment. Ages 5-8.

The Fish from Japan. By Elizabeth K. Cooper. Illustrated by Beth and Joe Krush. Harcourt, Brace & World. 32 pp. \$3.75. Disbelief needn't be suspended here, but a small sagging of the credulity barrier will help. Would a classroom full of children really think an empty glass jar had a fish in it? They do think so, because they convince themselves that the fish from Japan which Harvey had been promised by an uncle is in the jar. Harvey, who had expected a real fish and received a paper kite, calmly foists the fraud in a moment of inspiration; the teacher, with knowing eye and understanding heart, says nothing. The story has a bubbling humor, the children couldn't be more real, and the handling of an imaginative child's stretching of the truth is tactful. Ages 5-8.

Jake. By Tamara Kitt. Illustrated by Brinton Turkle. Abelard-Schuman. 40 pp. \$3.75. Although the more familiar versions of the Epaminondas story are in a flowing style that is better for reading aloud and for storytelling, this adaptation for the beginning reader is not without appeal. Aided by the engaging illustrations, the book has a sprightly humor, and the rhyming text is shown in balloons. Jake, sent by his mother on various errands to his granny, takes literally every instruction that mother gives. Scolded for squashing a cake and told he should have carried it on his head, the agreeable little animal, a skunk brings back some butter the next time. On his head, and completely melted. This can be read aloud to very young children, but is primarily for ages 6-7.

George Washington's Breakfast. By Jean Fritz. Illustrated by Paul Galdone. Coward-McCann. 44 pp. \$3.75. You wouldn't think it was possible to make a story about the problems of historical research interesting, much less funny, but Jean Fritz does it. As Washington's namesake, George is bent on acquiring all the information he can about his hero. He asks his grandmother what G.W. ate for breakfast. "Search me," says that sprightly lady. "That was before my time." But she agrees to cook a Washingtonian breakfast if George can find out what it comprised. The whole family and the local librarian get involved, and eventually Grandma gets stuck with making a reasonable facsimile of hoecakes—in the fireplace. The historical details are precise, the style is yeasty, the illustrations are lively, and Grandma is a living doll. Ages 7-10.

A Girl Called Al. By Constance C. Greene. Illustrated by Byron Barton. Viking. 127 pp. \$3.95. "Al is a little on the fat side, which is why I didn't like her at first . . . Al says she doesn't love her mother that much . . . She has a very high I.Q., she says . . . She's not my mother's cup of tea, whatever that means." The friendship between two seventh-grade girls is cemented by their common admiration for Mr. Richards, the assistant superintendent of the building and a man to add to your list of Unforgettable Characters. Blossoming in the warmth of Mr. Richards's grandfatherly kindness, Al begins to relax the rigid defenses she has erected. The writing style is delightful, the characterization deft, and the

story is permeated with an amused understanding of just exactly what it is that little girls are made of. Ages 8-10.

Plants That Eat Animals. By Linna Bentley. Illustrated by Colin Threadgall. McGraw-Hill. 32 pp. \$3.50. In the prolific and diversified plant world, there are only twelve carnivorous plants, and they are described in fascinating detail in a sturdy book that is simply written and neatly organized. The illustrations show, in dramatic detail, the functioning of the baited traps and the first steps in the plants' digestion of the insects or small animals that have been lured by color or nectar. A list of botanical gardens where such plants may be seen is appended. Ages 8-10.

The Roe Deer. By Astrid Bergman Sucksdorff. Translated from the Swedish by Alan Tapsell. Harcourt, Brace & World. 50 pp. \$3.50. Black-and-white photographs of the graceful roe deer capture important moments in the life cycle: the summer battling of the bucks, the courtship ritual, the birth of the fawns, and the mother's tender, watchful care of her young. The writing is straightforward and factual, but the pictures of dappled woodlands and charming fawns, stilt-legged, gentle, and luminous of eye, make this a poem in prose. Ages 8-10.

One to Grow On. By Jean Little. Illustrated by Jerry Lazare. Little, Brown. 140 pp. \$4.50. The trouble with Janie Chisholm was that she told lies. She resented the fact that the members of her family doubted her word even though she knew they had a right to do so. It wasn't till she met another girl who was a habitual liar that Janie realized how unhappy Lisa made those around her, and she tried to change her own ways. Janie's big step towards maturity came, however, while she was on vacation and her hostess brought Lisa for a surprise birthday visit. Facing the necessity to accept the flaws in another person, Janie displayed a new understanding and charity. The story flows easily, and the characterization and relationships are especially vivid in the depiction of shifting allegiance in Janie's circle of friends and in the warm, realistic family scenes. Ages 9-11.

The Trojan Horse. By James Reeves. Illustrated by Krystyna Turska. Watts. 32 pp. \$4.95. What was the marvelous giant horse that the Greeks had left on the beach? Surely it was an offering to Athena, an exchange for a safe voyage home? The Greek spy, Sinon, convinces the Trojans that to have the horse within their walls will mean victory when the Greeks return. That is the way Iliad remembers the beginning of Troy's downfall, a tragedy that happened when he was ten. The personal narrative gives the familiar story an awful immediacy, and the author's rugged, spare, eloquent style accords with the tale. The illustrations are superb in the use of color, striking in composition, and powerful in mood. Ages 8-10.

The Weathermonger. By Peter Dickinson. Atlantic-Little, Brown. 216 pp. \$4.95. Written, the author says, "for bright children who like adventures." *The Weathermonger* is, he notes, "a peculiar book." For bright children who like adventures, yes. Peculiar,

no. It's a deft mixture of fantasy and realism, written with flair; the characters come alive and the plot has suspense and originality. Geoffrey, sixteen, is a weathermonger who cannot understand his own power but finds that he is regarded as a witch in an England that has somehow, five years in the future, reverted to medieval times. He escapes to France and is returned with his younger sister, to trace the source of the mysterious force that controls the country. Smash ending. Ages 10-13.

Black Jack. By Leon Garfield. Illustrated by Antony Maitland. Pantheon. 243 pp. \$4.50. Once again Garfield brings back the rogues and rascalions of England in 1750, in a romantic, swashbuckling tale that has a wonderfully vivacious villain, a pure Billy Budd for a hero, and a fey, mad girl who recovers her sanity in the warmth of a boy's love. Rattling around the countryside with a kindly quack, young Tolly and his haunted Belle are trapped and bedeviled by Black Jack. The characters and the dialect of the period have a Dickensian rotundity without being imitative; the pace is brisk, and the rich, rolling style is perfectly suited to the fascinating excesses of the pure adventure tale. Ages 11-14.

Goal! My Life on Ice. By Rod Gilbert with Stan Fischler and Hal Bock. Hawthorn. 181 pp. \$4.95. In the average sports autobiography, the heavy hand of the professional co-author is usually evident in the style and the tone of the writing, but this one has an unassuming, low-keyed manner that is pleasant if not distinguished. Gilbert's story is more dramatic than most because of his injuries—few hockey players return to professional competition after suffering a broken back. The book is also more diverse than most because it includes so much material concerning other players. An appended section gives, in lengthy detail, information about the game; there are basic rules for new fans and more intricate discussions of strategy for veterans. Ages 11 up.

The Many Ways of Seeing: An Introduction to the Pleasures of Art. By Janet Gaylord Moore. World. 141 pp. \$7.95. An artist and staff member of the Cleveland Museum of Art, Janet Moore has produced a superlative book for young people and adults, describing with authoritative discernment the ways in which artists in all media use pattern, form, color, and line to interpret what they see and feel. She discusses techniques and media, art movements, the relationship

of art to the society in which it exists, and intersperses her sage comments with suggestions to the reader for experimenting and for visiting museums. The reproductions, which are well chosen and well placed, are identified in an appendix; the bibliography is diversified and extensive. Ages 13 up.

What a Way to Run the Tribe: Selected Articles 1948-67. By James Cameron. McGraw-Hill. 347 pp. \$6.95. Somehow or other, the author says, "these files do contrive to evoke a kind of snatched and crystallized impression of history leaking swiftly on..." And in his observations of the feats and follies of men and nations during a distinguished journalistic career James Cameron does indeed evoke a massive sense of history. The articles are grouped: the United Kingdom, Europe, the Americas, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East; the comments are candid, knowledgeable, acute, often bitter, almost always humorous. The book would be profitable and enjoyable even if it were not written with a delightful urbanity, but it is an added pleasure to come across such courtly barbs as, "The BBC is... about the last repository of this kind of old-world fustian in which royal occurrences of numbing banality are defined with the exalted admiration that anyone else would save for a successful Disarmament Conference." For young adults.

The FBI in Our Open Society. By Harry and Bonaro Overstreet. Norton. 400 pp. \$6.95. Objective in tone but passionate in conviction, this is an intensive and extensive defense of the FBI and of J. Edgar Hoover, a book for which the Overstreets have been collecting material and examining documents for more than a decade. Their contention that derogatory books and articles on the Bureau have been misleading is substantiated by a scrupulous examination of files, tapes and official documents from which statements have been quoted out of context or in which hearsay evidence has been repeated as fact. The role of the FBI in civil rights, organized crime, and KKK activity is discussed in minute detail, as are the structure and operation of the Bureau. Almost tedious by its very weight and solemnity, the book is lightened by an occasional moment of acid humor, such as a reference to Attorney General Palmer as a man who "combined within his own person an overdose of the spirit of the times and a will to propel himself into the limelight as the very model of a modern anti-radical." For young adults.



—From "Juke."