



The CILIP Carnegie Medal 2016. And the winner is ?

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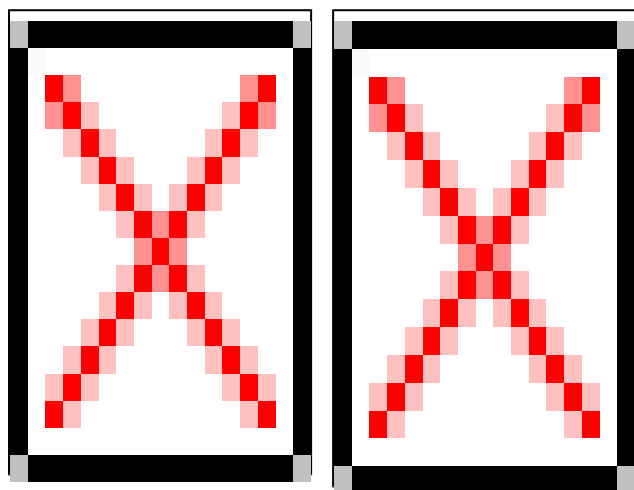
[Nicholas Tucker](#) [1]

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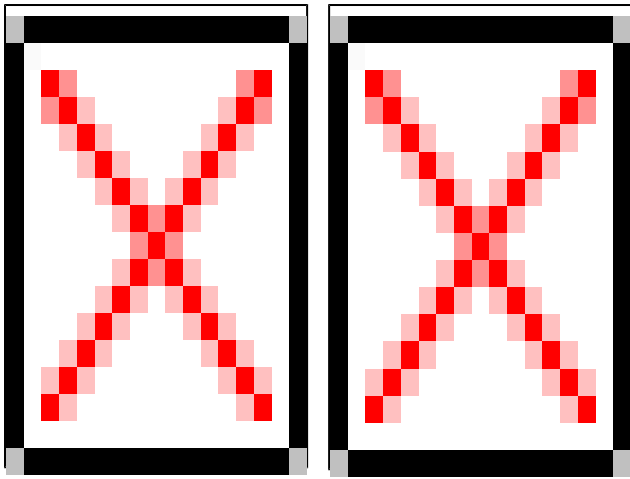
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The Carnegie Medal shortlist appraised by Nicholas Tucker

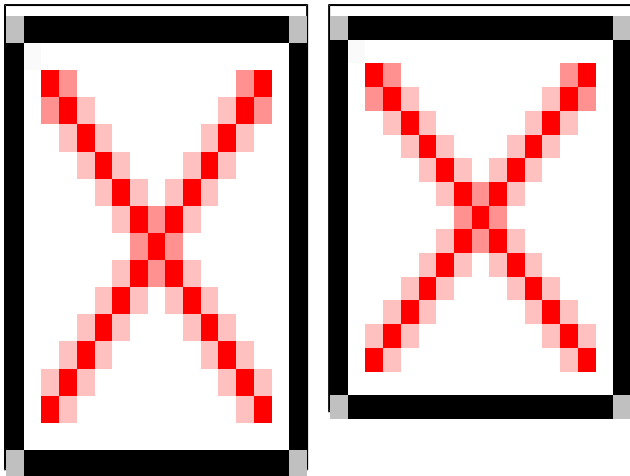
It's Carnegie time again, children's literature's nearest equivalent to the Booker Prize. And while the final result makes smaller headlines, there is still enough public interest to ensure some media coverage afterwards, particularly if a whiff of controversy is also involved. So what are the books this time and who has written them? **Nicholas Tucker** assesses the shortlist.



The first of three titles all involving lies, Nick Lake's [There Will Be Lies](#) [3] (Bloomsbury) describes a fraught journey taken across modern America by 17-year-old Shelby and her criminally insane mother. Robin Talley's [Lies We Tell Ourselves](#) [4] (Harlequin) is the heart-rending account of what it was like for some of the first black children to attend a previously all-white school in Virginia, USA, in 1959. Frances Hardinge's [The Lie Tree](#) [5] (Macmillan) tells the story of a bright 19th century girl struggling with the discovery that her scientist father had been faking things. Kate Saunders' [Five Children on the Western Front](#) [6] (Faber) takes the child characters from E. Nesbit's stories featuring the psammead, that enigmatic sand fairy as old as time, on into youth and maturity as experienced during the First World War and beyond.



Sarah Crossan's [One](#) [7] (Bloomsbury) describes what happens after conjoined twins are forced by poverty to abandon the safety of home education in favour of attending a state school. Jenny Valentine's [Fire Colour One](#) [8] (HarperCollins) tells of how young Iris comes to Britain to meet her dying rich father after a long absence from him engineered by her venal mother and step-father. Marcus Sedgwick's [The Ghosts of Heaven](#) [9] (Indigo) consists of four stories set in different periods of time and linked together by a mysterious spiral shape that seems to hold the key to existence itself. And finally, Patrick Ness comes up with [The Rest of Us Just Live Here](#) [10] (Walker), a story set in the future where intriguingly most of the main action takes place off the page.

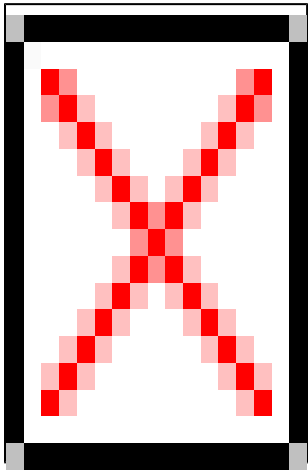


Last year, when undertaking a similar survey of the Carnegie short list for **Books for Keeps**, I mentioned how often its juvenile characters were required to maintain a high level of resilience throughout sometimes against appalling odds. The same is true in this year's selection. In a fictional world where parents may sometimes be not so much neglectful as positively dangerous, their offspring must learn very soon how best to look after themselves. To this end they often have to rely upon selected friends or siblings, who on the whole offer more reliable support. A few more satisfactory parents still remain this year, notably in the novels by Saunders and Talley. But some of the others are real shockers, given to drink, dishonesty or worse. That their children just about make it by the end is often despite rather than because of the parenting they have experienced.

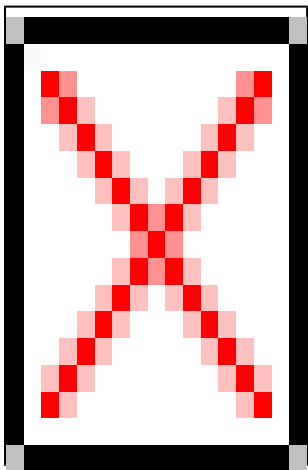
And that's not all. Emerging from such homes young characters then frequently have to put up with a peer group that is sometimes hostile to the point of outright cruelty. In Talley's novel, the daily persecution suffered by the black children from other pupils while corrupt teachers merely look on is sickening. In Crossan's story, ignorant curiosity among their peers about what it might be like to be conjoined twins is accompanied by gross insensitivity. In any of the stories, if a leading child character has a personal secret, very often these days to do with their sexual orientation, then they reveal this to anyone else at their peril. This has nothing to do with online bullying, given that these stories are set in different time zones often involving different countries. While close friends can be a life-line, the rest of the peer group often comes over as something never to be trusted.

Leading characters must therefore once again develop and rely upon their own personal strengths. On their side they

generally have superior intelligence, although this is often something their parents remain ignorant about. They also have the long-term support of their creator-authors who still make sure, give or take a few rogue titles, that everything always ultimately more or less works out for them. The final few pages of every one of these stories all generally allow for a cautious re-affirmation that life is still worth living despite personal obstacles and tragedies. For this relief, much thanks, because if the convention that children's or young adult fiction should still on the whole end on a moderately positive note were ever regularly breached, future stories getting into similarly deep emotional water could risk becoming just too depressing for words.



Any one of these eight novels could be worthy winners. Hardinge starts brilliantly but falls away half way through. Talley writes unforgettably but also at times repetitively about American state schools in their darkest hours. Valentine is wonderfully caustic about the characters she does not like but a little too easy on those she does, and Crossan too cannot quite keep off sentimentality after previous writing that comes over as unerringly honest and painfully true. Saunders' story is clever and often moving, but her seamless re-creation of cosy familial Edwardian dialogue has its occasional longeurs for modern readers who are not also fans of E. Nesbit.



My short list therefore would consist of the books by Lake, Ness and Sedgwick. Lake is a powerful writer, and this road story with its hint of the supernatural is supremely readable, as are all his other novels. This would surely be the most straightforwardly readable choice. Ness has had the most original idea, contrasting the daily lives of fairly affluent teenagers living in a fantasy but still recognisable world with the horrors suffered by other occupants of the same age. Could this be a parable for our own times, with children in developing countries only partially interested in the hardships suffered by their contemporaries in the third world? Perhaps, but because the main idea is never quite spelled out, this story fails in the end to work as well as it might while still possessing many major qualities.

This leaves me with Sedgwick's strange and at time mystical story in four separate parts with settings stretching from the Stone Age to space travel. These sections can be read in any order the reader chooses. Like his other novels, including his unforgettable **She Is Not Invisible**, this is a an overall story of occasionally quite complex ideas. Discussion on the page of the Fibonacci spiral and its possible links with the Phi co-efficient, the measure of two binary

variables, can be tough at times. But there should always be room for stories that ask more rather than less of their readers, and this is one of them. The Carnegie judges will now have some difficult questions of their own to ponder before the final award is made public.

Nicholas Tucker is honorary senior lecturer in Cultural and Community Studies at Sussex University.

One, Sarah Crossan, Bloomsbury, 978-1-4088-7234-5, £7.99 pbk

The Lie Tree, Frances Hardinge, Macmillan, 978-1-4472-6410-1, £7.99 pbk

There Will Be Lies Nick Lake, Bloomsbury, 978-1-4088-5383-2, £7.99

The Rest of Us Just Live Here Patrick Ness, Walker Books, 978-1-4063-6556-6, £7.99 pbk

Five Children on the Western Front Kate Saunders, Faber, 978-0-5713-2318-0, £6.99 pbk

The Ghosts of Heaven Marcus Sedgwick, Indigo, 978-1-7806-2221-7, £7.99 pbk

Lies We Tell Ourselves Robin Talley, MiraInk, 978-1-8484-5292-3, £7.99 pbk

Fire Colour One Jenny Valentine, HarperCollins, 978-0-0075-1236-2, £7.99 pbk

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