

Making sense of a small world

The Aventis Junior Science Book Prize 2000 shortlist

Maxine Clarke

If you need to make a tricky decision quickly, co-opt a nine-year-old. With the unnerving decisiveness of youth, my co-reviewer took less than five minutes to select her winner among the six books on the shortlist for the under-14 category of the annual Aventis science book prize (see Box, below). The adult judges who chose the shortlist handed over to pupils aged 8–14 from 31 UK schools to select a winner. The professional help thus enlisted, from a population not only unaware of the concept of charging by the hour but temperamentally alien to it, coughed up a winner in short order, undoubtedly avoiding the hours of solemn deliberations that adults feel is necessary before making decisions.

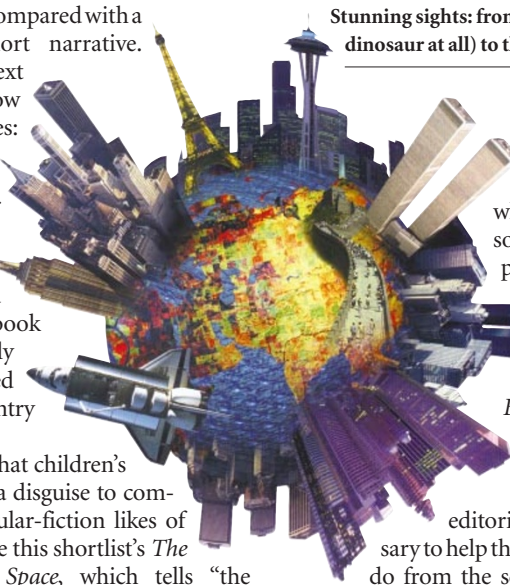
One of the finalists, *The Usborne First Encyclopaedia of Our World*, is comprehensible to a four-year old, whereas some of the others deal with concepts fairly challenging even for a secondary-school student, older than 11. The younger child loves being read almost anything by an adult, but the encyclopaedia format is probably not optimal

for this age-range compared with a sustained but short narrative. So my advice for next year is to narrow down the categories: the under-7, 8–11 and 12–14 age groups are different species. Older readers may well find the Usborne book too simplistically presented compared with Kingfisher's entry on a similar topic.

It's a tradition that children's non-fiction needs a disguise to compete with the popular-fiction likes of *Goosebumps*. Hence this shortlist's *The History News in Space*, which tells "the enthralling story of the Russian and American space race this century" as tabloid newspaper journalism in exciting bite-size portions — with boxes explaining concepts such as Newton's third law as well as (disappointingly, spoof) ads for souvenir flight badges and other merchandise. Although this might be rather fun to an adult, it is unclear how the young reader is supposed to distinguish the factual entries from the fictional ones.

Two other titles fall into the teaching-by-stealth category by packaging

Stunning sights: from the plesiosaur (not a dinosaur at all) to the modern world.



themselves as joke books: both are cheap, black-and-white paperbacks and so are instantly appealing to the target age-group. One is *Evolve or Die* (see Box). The other, *Brainwaves in the Bedroom*, purports to be about magic but is really about neuroscience. Far more editorial guidance is necessary to help the reader tell the pseudo from the science, a distinction difficult enough for many adults.

DK Guide to Space and *The Kingfisher Book of Planet Earth* are firmly in the traditional mould, both beautifully illustrated, large-format hardbacks with a new subject on each page. The Kingfisher book is a stunningly presented account of the history of our planet, full of wonderful colour drawings with photographs used relatively sparingly. The text is written with an attractive blend of fact and enthusiasm by Martin Redfern — the opening states "Five billion years ago, there was no planet Earth and no Sun. But the Universe was already in full swing". He continues in this vein with clear, engaging explanations of the history of the planet: volcanoes, earthquakes, geology, origins of life and, finally, a beguilingly didactic last page entitled "The end of the Earth", stating the four most likely ways in which annihilation will occur. A few pages of useful data and a glossary finish the book off neatly. This one is my favourite, for its accessible style and for getting to grips with topical problems such as anthropogenic climate change and declining biodiversity. Adults buying this book for their children won't be able to stop themselves reading (and learning from) it, too.

DK Guide to Space has big photographs and not many words on topics such as "star birth", "eclipses" and "man on the moon". The text is unambiguously informative: jokes and tricks have no place here. Peter Bond writes simple, clear, even poetic explanations: "A vast frozen ocean completely covers the moon Europa. When sunlight catches its icy face, Europa is a dazzling white." Only one page of data at the back, but this is bang up to date with a table of website addresses for the reader stimulated by the book to find out more. It clearly stimulated the young judges, since this was the one they chose as the winner.

Maxine Clarke is on the editorial staff of *Nature*.

The view from Year 4

Catherine Irving

Evolve or Die is my favourite. It is informative and makes people laugh because of all the silly jokes and pictures. The pictures are not always right, for example beetles are drawn like little men, but this is OK because the words are serious and it is a funny way of making the subject interesting. It asks questions to check you are reading it properly — a good idea.

Brainwaves in the Bedroom is good because it tells you that magic and science have a lot in common. You have to do lots of puzzles and it is fun working out the tricks. This book is trying to tell you how your brain understands things.

First Encyclopaedia of Our World is very scientific because it shows you what real scientists do, and things like where all the planets are in space, and how a storm begins and how people actually find fossils and dinosaur bones. The pictures show you a lot, so if you read the words it helps them make sense.

The History News in Space had the very good idea of putting it all as newspaper cuttings. I also thought it was good because it shows you how rockets are made and which famous people discovered things about space. I like the newspaper idea of explaining science because it is realistic and you don't know if the words in the

funny books are about real things or are just jokes.

DK Guide to Space is very realistic. It doesn't have any jokes and tells you in a very serious way about space. It has a page for each subject which I think is a good idea because you don't have too many different things on the same page. The pictures are real photos.

The Kingfisher Book of Planet Earth was my second favourite. You can see what is inside the Earth and it shows you how life began, and has really good pictures like skeletons of old creatures that have died out. I think it is very scientific: it doesn't have any jokes in it. Each page has a good title like "The Real Jurassic Park" that makes you stop and look. Then you look at the pictures and this makes you want to read the words.

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