

# The Best for Beginning Readers

## Geisel Award Celebrates Tenth Anniversary

CAROLE D. FIORE AND CARLA MORRIS



Art by Mo Willems

In 2016, the Theodor Seuss Geisel Award will celebrate its ten-year anniversary. The tenth award winner, *You Are (Not) Small*, written by Anna Kang and illustrated by Christopher Weyant, published by Two Lions, New York, was announced at the ALA Midwinter Meeting in February 2015.

This occasion provides librarians with an opportunity to look at the “best of the best” books for beginning readers for the past ten years. What trends, if any, have emerged? What is the impact of the award so far?

Author/illustrator Mo Willems, the most decorated Geisel winner (with two medals and four honors), perhaps says it best.

“For a decade, the Theodor Seuss Geisel Medal has shown a light on the most pragmatic and magical genre of literature in the world, the literature of becoming a reader. Becoming a reader is extra-ordinarily-empowering-fantastically-wonderfully cool. . . Early Readers have exact technical requirements; the vocabulary must be controlled, the syllables limited, the sentences must have forward thrust (and repeatability). One must master these technical things, [and] then make it *fun*.”<sup>1</sup>

Willems’s answer to “What is a beginning reader?” along with the awards criteria provides the parameters for this significant group of books for children.

### And the Winners Are . . .

The first-ever Geisel Award was presented in 2006 to author Cynthia Rylant and illustrator Suçie Stevenson for *Henry and Mudge and the Great Grandpas*, published by Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers in 2005.

“The simple sentence structure, along with a design that advances this well-told story, provides a satisfying celebration of family and friendship. . . This fresh and child-centered story . . . will immediately engage beginning readers,” wrote Committee Chair Caroline Ward.<sup>2</sup> The committee also selected four honor books, three of which fit the easy reader format: *Hi! Fly Guy*, by Tedd Arnold; *Cowgirl Kate and Cocoa*, by Erica Silverman, illustrated by Betsy Lewin; and *Amanda Pig and the Really Hot Day* by Jean Van Leeuwen, illustrated by



**Carole D. Fiore** is a past president of ALSC and has served on the Newbery, Caldecott Committees and twice on the Geisel Award Committee, once as chair. She is the author of *Summer Library Program Handbook* (Neal-Schuman) and many journal articles. Following her tenure at the State Library of Florida, she opened her own independent library consulting business and specializes in public library service to children and their teachers, parents, and caregivers as well as long range planning. **Carla Morris** is the children’s services manager, Provo City (Utah) Library. She served as chair of the 2013 Geisel Award Committee. In addition to being a member of the 2004 Caldecott Committee and serving on the Planning Committee for the ALSC Institute that was held in Salt Lake City, Morris is the author of *The Boy Who Was Raised by Librarians* (Peachtree).



2013 Geisel Award winner Ethan Long with Geisel Chair Carla Morris.

Ann Schweninger. The fourth honor book, *A Splendid Friend, Indeed*, by Suzanne Bloom is a picture book.

These selections helped cement the fact that books for emergent and beginning readers do not have to fit the mold of a traditional easy reader. These, and all the books selected as winners and honor books in the years following, were “carefully selected for formal recognition because they are real stories that children will be drawn to and call their own. No leveling. No labeling. No tests. These are books that children will want to read independently,” said Ginny Moore Kruse, chair of the 2007 Geisel Award Committee. “That’s actually what the Geisel Award is about. The excitement of reading an outstanding book—by themselves!”<sup>3</sup>

In the 2007 announcement of Laura McGee Kvasnosky’s winning for *Zelda and Ivy: The Runaways*, Kruse noted that the characters’ “escapades spark the imagination and make the reader want more. . . Karen Beaumont’s patterned text in honor book *Move Over, Rover!* is expanded by Jane Dyer’s watercolors containing context clues. . .”<sup>4</sup> Two additional books were named honor books that year.

Willems received his first Geisel Award in 2008 for *There Is a Bird on Your Head!* His success continued in 2009 with another medal for *Are You Ready to Play Outside?*, an honor in 2011 with *We Are in a Book!*, more honors in 2012, 2013, and 2014 for *I Broke My Trunk*, *Let’s Go for a Drive!* and *A Big Guy Took My Ball!* respectively.

In 2008, Committee Chair Cindy Woodruff wrote, “In a book that is both contemporary and universal, Willems captures the hearts of readers while inspiring young children to embrace the joy of independent reading.”<sup>5</sup> In describing Willems’s 2009 winner, Committee Chair Joan Atkinson said, “Willems’s easily approachable text, captured in dialogue balloons and bold,



2014 Geisel Award winner Greg Pizzoli with Geisel Chair Penny Peck.

expressive drawings of friends Piggie and Gerald experiencing the ups and downs of a rainy day, deliver laughter and love of story to beginning readers.”<sup>6</sup>

With more than forty books to his credit, Geoffrey Hayes won the 2010 Geisel Award for *Benny and Penny in the Big No-No!* According to Committee Chair Susan Veltfort, this book is “a perfect example of a graphic novel designed just for young readers. . . The characters’ emotions are revealed in the rich artwork within each panel. Children will connect with the realistic dialogue and page-turning appeal of the story.”<sup>7</sup>

Multi-award winner Kate DiCamillo along with co-author Alison McGhee and illustrator Tony Fucile were the recipients of the 2011 medal for *Bink and Gollie*. Fucile’s humorous illustrations “propel the reader through a story sprinkled with challenging vocabulary.” In an “effervescent blend of picture book, reader, and graphic novel, text and illustration unite the real and imaginary . . . ‘Covering a range of emotional territory to engage and challenge developing readers, fresh and creative text and powerful visuals generate a special chemistry between two friends,’ said Geisel Award Committee Chair Julie F. Roach.”<sup>8</sup>

In addition to Willems’ *We Are in a Book!*, Grace Lin’s *Ling & Ting: Not Exactly the Same!* was also named a 2011 Geisel Honor Book. Both books show life from the viewpoint of a young child with humor and understanding.

Josh Schneider’s book *Tales for Very Picky Eaters* received the Geisel Medal in 2012. “The dialogue presents some preposterous situations but even the most challenging words are presented in context so beginning readers can easily discern their meaning. The touches of humor make this book an engaging page turner,” wrote Committee Chair Carole Fiore. Willems makes another appearance on the honor list, this time with *I Broke My Trunk*. Willems uses “meticulously chosen words and sparingly

drawn illustrations to convey the humorous situation. The pacing is masterful and will keep young readers turning the pages until they reach the surprising yet satisfying conclusion. . . . The big, bold font, easy-to-read color coded speech balloons and repetition make this a perfect book for beginning readers.”<sup>9</sup>

The humorous drawings and interactive story of Ethan Long’s *Up! Tall! and High!* earned him the 2013 Geisel Medal. This lift-the-flap book provides beginning readers the opportunity to raise flaps and read “their first words with confidence and delight. . . . The large font, word repetition, occasional rhyming, and simple but clever illustration support the very beginning reader’s efforts to read independently.”<sup>10</sup>

The 2014 award was presented to Greg Pizzoli for his picture book *The Watermelon Seed*. Wondering if the watermelon seed he swallowed will grow inside of him, the crocodile protagonist faces a childhood fear. Committee Chair Penny Peck said the style “is innovative but with a retro quality that will embrace the emergent reader in this satisfying treat.”<sup>11</sup>

## All Shapes and Sizes

Geisel winners are as varied as their creators. As can be expected, most of the books honored fit the format of a traditional easy reader. Eighteen of the thirty-nine Geisel winners can be classified as easy readers. The vocabulary is limited, the sentences short, and there is much white space on the page, with lots of context and visual clues that assist beginning readers decode the words.

Another format that was expected is that of early chapter book. These books are slightly longer, sometimes pushing the upper page limit for this award. As per the award criteria in the Geisel Award manual, the maximum number of pages for a book to be considered is ninety-six; the minimum twenty-four. While the longer length and additional chapters are more demanding, they still contain the same short sentences and have child appeal as do their easier counterparts.

But the unexpected entry into the books for beginning reader category is the picture book. Twelve of the thirty-nine winners are picture books—two include die-cuts and one has flaps.

While picture books are meant to be read aloud to young children, these titles meet the criteria of a beginning reader; they provide “a stimulating and successful reading experience” and have “the kind of plot, sensibility, and rhythm that can carry a child along from start to finish.”<sup>12</sup> Two nonfiction books and three graphic novels round out the final analysis of the Geisel winners.

## What Interests the Beginning Reader?

To provide a stimulating and successful reading experience, the authors and illustrators of the books have portrayed and expanded on childhood experiences. Most of the books (fifteen)

either have animal characters or are about animals and pets. Friendship (nine) is the second most frequently written about topic while books relating to family experiences come in third with six books on this theme.

Humor plays an important part in children’s lives and several of these books rely on humor to move the plot along. Children are interested in exploring their world; therefore, nature, weather, and gardening are subjects also included in these books for beginning readers. While there are many picture books in rhyme and books for beginning readers do have “rhythm,” there was only one book that had a Library of Congress subject of “Stories in rhyme.” Books also include concepts such as opposites and counting. Children’s feelings and emotions are validated or questioned in books that deal with empathy and morality.

## Impact on Authors and Illustrators

Without question, award books, with their metallic seals, are brought into the spotlight and may even ensure longevity on booklists and on store and library shelves. Even with strained budgets, public and school libraries usually purchase the major award winners. The Geisel award winners now demand attention, both intellectually and fiscally. And similar to the other ALA awards, Geisel authors and illustrators have experienced jumpstarts in their careers as well.

“It meant a lot to receive the Geisel Award,” said Long, winner of the 2013 Geisel for *Up! Tall! and High!* “It validated the kind of work I was creating and what I was trying to accomplish as far as brevity and simplicity in writing and art. Even if I felt deep down that I was doing good, the Geisel was just a little wink sent my way.”<sup>13</sup>

Tedd Arnold noted, “The Geisel Honor I have twice received for books in the Fly Guy series represents sweet validation. Sometimes you think you’ll try something and just hope for the best. But Geisel recognition has given me the ample assurance of knowing I’m on the right track, not just for my work, but for the many wonderful beginning-reader books that for so long had performed their good service without such formal endorsement, I say thank you!”<sup>14</sup>

Willems compares his emotions to those of the children he writes for. “Kids love the feeling when their school work is rewarded by a sticker. It’s a validation of their efforts that’s fun to look at. It’s so shiny! Perhaps it’s shallow, but that sticker is an incentive to work even harder on your next assignment. Oh, sorry, did I say kids? I meant ‘authors and illustrators’ . . .

“The Geisel medal is a mark of respect, not just to the books chosen for recognition, but for all early readers. It is the fuel that has allowed me to spend the last seven years creating the small jet-packs that I call Elephant and Piggie books. The Geisel has directly aided me in my life’s work and for that I am extraordinarily grateful.”

Willems continues, “That being said, there is a greater award than a Geisel medal or honor. When I hear that the very first book a young person has read by themselves is an *Elephant and Piggie* book, something inside of me shines brightly, happily, joyfully. It is magic.”<sup>15</sup>

## Committee Members Gain New Perspectives

Each committee member, committee chair, author, and illustrator gained various insights and knowledge about beginning readers with their involvement with the award. As the award matures, we are becoming more discriminating about what makes a good book for a beginning reader, and what works with that special audience.

Cynthia Woodruff, chair of the 2008 Geisel Award Committee, worked with beginning readers for many years in an independent school setting. “In my year [on the committee],” Woodruff said, “I would say that my view of the definition [of books for beginning readers] expanded as we looked at books that were *not* of the I Can Read flavor. Children who are learning to read are as diverse as adults who are selecting what [they want] to read.”<sup>16</sup>

Julie Roach, 2011 Geisel chair, modified and changed what she looked for when evaluating books for beginning readers as a result of serving on the committee.

“When looking for books for beginning readers now, I am more interested in pictures that work as clear clues to the text, the size of the font, the white space around the text, the length of the sentences and the paragraphs than whether the book comes labeled as a beginning reader,” said Roach. “I look for books that are engaging and well-designed to encourage, excite, and challenge developing readers. If a book done in a traditional picture book format (or any other format) provides support in those ways, than I like to have a copy of it in a place where beginning readers can find it.”<sup>17</sup>

When 2014 Geisel Chair Penny Peck was asked, “How did your definition of a beginning reader change as a result of serving on the Geisel Committee?” she replied, “Probably the most significant change happened when I looked more seriously at books with a text that contained (and repeated) just a few words. These books are vital to the child who is just beginning to read text. It opened me up to look at books with very minimal texts, and how those are often very useful for emergent readers, and are often quite artistic. To acquire literacy, ‘reading’ the pictures is as important as reading the text.”<sup>18</sup>

Serving on any award committee provides professionals the opportunity to refine their evaluation and interpersonal skills. Working within the committee structure can sometimes prove difficult, but all Geisel Committee chairs had nothing but positive comments to report.

As anyone who has served on any committee knows, it’s essential to be able to work with others, to listen to other people’s opinions, and to have the ability to change their opinion. As Woodruff said, “The art of compromise is paramount in any book award committee. The manual was very helpful as was the diverse makeup of the committee.”

She added that every member of the committee “. . . came away from our experience with more knowledge and a deep love for beginning readers and the kids who enjoy them.”<sup>19</sup>

Roach not only “loved every minute of my term chairing the 2011 Geisel Committee,” but also commented on the members of the committee. “I worked with an outstanding team of people. We looked at and discussed so many incredible books. I feel very passionate about this award and its charge and am so honored to have been part of its first decade.”<sup>20</sup>

Heather Hart, who served on the 2013 Geisel Committee, said, “Before serving on the Geisel, I tolerated beginning readers. I didn’t think there was much to them, except that my library customers were always looking for very early beginning readers and there were a few go-to series and authors that I always recommended. As a result of serving on the committee, I now look at beginning reader books with a whole new set of eyes. I look for quality writing, controlled vocabulary, white space, text size, and illustrations that provide clues to the text.”<sup>21</sup>

Committee member, Jackie Partch, School Corps Lead Worker, Multnomah County (Ore.) Library, says that her work on the 2012 Geisel Committee changed her professional life. “Everybody in my library system now views me as an expert on Early Readers. I have been very involved in a new reading initiative at our library, focused on kindergarten through third grade reading, and I helped to plan a Mock Geisel presentation for our state library association.

“There is such a need for this award, as the books kids use in school reading programs are often less than inspirational. It’s great to be able to offer kids quality readers at their level that they are excited to pick up.”<sup>22</sup>

Peck, who chaired the most recent committee, commented, “I know all the different committees say this, but serving on the Geisel might be the best committee. The amount of books one has to read is manageable, plus the emergent reader is such a wonderful age group to interact with. They are so open to books, reading, and they enjoy stories without being too jaded. So it can be a joyful experience!”<sup>23</sup>

## Geisel in the Future

The Theodor Seuss Geisel Award was established to recognize “the author(s) and illustrator(s) of a book for beginning readers who, through their literary and artistic achievements,

demonstrate creativity and imagination to engage children in reading.”<sup>24</sup> Ideally, it can inspire writers and illustrators and encourage publishers to produce quality books for beginning readers. These are the books that will spur the beginning reader on with page-turning dynamics and set young readers’ course for continued reading for the remainder of their lives.

In the ten years since its establishment, the award has become another jewel in the ALSC crown of book awards, taking its place on the literary stage along with the Newbery and Caldecott Medals, now being introduced immediately preceding these most prestigious awards during the ALA Youth Media Awards presentation. More people have become aware of the importance of these books and how they challenge, entertain, and delight.

And the award itself continues to mature. Authors and illustrators are creating truly inspiring and engaging books for children beginning the journey of learning how to read. More publishers are publishing outstanding and distinguished books for beginning readers. And, because of the award, more people are aware of what constitutes a beginning reader and the criteria that is used in determining appropriateness and distinction.

Parents who grew up with Dr. Seuss are discovering new books that sustain his spirit. By recognizing these books and getting them into the hands of children, we are keeping the spirit of Dr. Seuss alive and creating a new generation of readers. ☺

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