



35th Annual Minnesota Book Awards Handbook for Final Round Judges

Document Purpose

The following guidelines describe the work judges are expected to do to prepare for Selection Saturday and how panels are to function in selecting the finalists.

Overview

THANK YOU for agreeing to be a final round judge for the 35th annual Minnesota Book Awards.

The responsibility of the Book Awards final round judges is to read the four finalist titles in their category (selected on Saturday, January 28 by the preliminary round judges), and then engage in thoughtful deliberation with the other judges on their panel to select one award winner. Each panel is made up of three judges. All final round judges must be available to attend the winner selection session on:

When: Saturday, March 11, 2023, 10:00 a.m.

Where: ONLINE (via Zoom)

(Panels will adjourn at varying times, but no later than 1:30 p.m.)

If you determine that there may be a potential conflict with attending the March 11 session, please contact David Katz (david@thefriends.org) right away.

The Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library loans each judge a set of their category's finalist books. Please do not make notes in any of the books you receive from The Friends. After the judging, the books will be made available for circulation within Minnesota libraries.

This handout outlines policies of the Minnesota Book Awards, the work judges are expected to do to prepare for the award winner selection session, and how panels are to function in selecting that winner.

Conflict of Interest

Minnesota Book Awards policy dictates that writers who have books submitted for award consideration in a given year may not serve as judges that same year. Furthermore, employees of publishers may only serve as judges or facilitators for categories in which the publisher in question does not have a book nominated. These policies are designed to avoid both actual and perceived conflicts of interest.

It is very possible that a final round judge will turn out to have an unanticipated personal connection to a book named as a finalist within his or her assigned category. **If it turns out that a book submitted in the category you're reviewing is the work of someone with whom you have a close relationship, and/or someone you feel otherwise unsuited to objectively evaluate, please contact David Katz as soon as you become aware of that situation.** Since the final round judges are evaluating only four books – and the stakes are high given the panel's charge of selecting just one award winner – a judge having a true conflict of interest situation will need to resign from his or her position. Their vacancy would be filled by another individual qualified to judge in that category.

If you have some connection to an author or work under consideration, but do not believe it presents a conflict of interest, this should still be brought to David's attention. If it is determined that your connection is indeed not a serious conflict of interest concern, you will maintain your judge position (though on Selection Saturday, you should also disclose that connection with the other judges on your panel before sharing your thoughts on the book in question). We appreciate everyone's commitment to the importance of full disclosure in this process.

Confidentiality

Participants in the Minnesota Book Awards process are asked to adhere to a basic professional code of conduct. Judges should not discuss the books under consideration with anyone except other award panelists, and that discussion should be limited to the winner selection session on Saturday, March 11. Judges and facilitators are also asked not to reveal sensitive details about the deliberation process (particularly before the public announcement early May). Abiding by the confidentiality policy is essential to demonstrating respect for the authors and publishers of titles submitted for award consideration, and to representing the awards process with integrity.

Contact with Other Judges

The panel process is designed to offer fair and thoughtful discussion of each title submitted for award consideration by a diverse group of individuals who are, in that process, on equal footing and given equal opportunity for input. Discussion of the books in advance of the award selection meeting can skew the panel discussion, even if this is unintended. Please hold your thoughts for March 11!

Since the preliminary round judges have carefully reviewed all of the finalist books, there should be no question about a book's eligibility or category suitability. Should you have questions about a particular finalist title or anything about your role as a judge, please direct your inquiries to David Katz.

As a reminder, the nine award categories are as follows:

Children's Picture Book – a picture book for young children, typically combining text and illustration in telling the story. (Minnesota authors and illustrators are both eligible in this category. Fiction, nonfiction, and poetry books are all eligible.)

General Nonfiction – a full-length book of nonfiction, including, but not limited to, history, biography, science, nature, and cookbooks

Genre Fiction – a book of fiction written in a popular genre or style, including mystery, detective, fantasy, romance, graphic novel, and science fiction

Memoir & Creative Nonfiction – a work of nonfiction which is primarily autobiographical in theme, or which includes a significant amount of personal material and/or imaginative reworking

Middle Grade Literature – a book written for a middle grade audience, generally ages 8-12. (Fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and graphic novels are eligible.)

Minnesota Nonfiction – a book of nonfiction with a topic on Minnesota history, nature, social customs, or nostalgia

Novel & Short Story – a novel, novella or short story collection by a single author or author team

Poetry – a book-length single poem or collection of poetry by a single author or author team

Young Adult Literature – a book written for a teen audience (*fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and graphic novels are eligible*)

Guidelines for Reviewing Books for the Minnesota Book Awards

I. Be Mindful of the Minnesota Book Awards Criteria at All Times

The three overarching criteria, for all categories of submissions, are:

1) Craft / Craftsmanship (50%)

Considerations include language use*, narrative tightness, thematic throughlines, and the overall quality of the writing. In addition, the illustration, editing, and layout involved in the book's creation may be important criteria in certain categories.

*Keep in mind that language is a fluid medium and can be used in ways that are different than what has been taught by the dominant culture. Do not overlook books that use language in ways that reflect multiple linguistic traditions.

2) Originality (30%)

Originality in concept and execution is a primary consideration in selecting winners. Winning titles should demonstrate innovative artistic qualities, which in many cases will be specific to their genre or category.

For example: Originality in Minnesota Nonfiction might be exemplified by the exploration of a little-known topic or an historically marginalized perspective. Originality in Children's Literature may take the form of novel narrative choices, an inventive approach to illustrations, or adept treatment of subject matter not typically represented in Children's Literature.

3) Resonance (20%)

Is the book likely to resonate with its intended audience(s)? Does the book succeed at reaching those readers on a variety of levels?

In cases where a book seems to be geared primarily towards a specific reader profile, does it leave room for readers outside that target audience to find value in the subject matter?

For example: If a nonfiction book is not written for academic insiders, does the author minimize jargon, offer sufficient background, and offer a consistently engaging narrative? In the case of a memoir, does that work of creative nonfiction open a door into a different life for the reader? Does it make the specific feel, in some way, universal?

In addition to the above criteria, please review the questions prepared by The Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library for your specific book category. These questions, which ask you to reflect on how well each book fulfills the special demands of its form or genre, are included at the end of this handbook.

Evaluation Forms

Included with your shipment of books will be a corresponding number of evaluation forms. The form is intended as an aid to keep these criteria top of mind as you read through each title. It contains both optional and required fields.

At a minimum, we ask that you consistently and fully fill out the quantitative rankings at the bottom of the page. Please remember to rate each book on its own merits – not in comparison to its competitors. Remember that not all nominees ranking “high” in Craft can be selected as finalists. Likewise, due to criteria weighting, a book with “moderate” Resonance might be selected as a finalist if it is deemed to have excellent Craft.

Note: While these 1-10 metrics may be of value to you in determining which finalist(s) you feel are the strongest contenders, you are in no way bound by these scores when you meet with your judging panel. In fact, table discussion routinely yields insights that may make you reevaluate entries.

For detailed instructions on how to use the form, which feedback can be used by the Minnesota Book Awards, and for what purposes, reference the detailed instructions on the back of the evaluation form. Direct any questions not covered there to Minnesota Book Awards Coordinator David Katz (david@thefriends.org).

II. Focus on the Book Itself

Knowledge of an author’s other works, awards or fame can predispose any reader to appreciate or to discount a given book. Try to approach each book free of expectations.

While it is laudable to want to honor new and lesser-known writers, the idea that it is someone’s “turn” to be set aside or to be acknowledged should be rejected in favor of an honest evaluation of the books in hand. The fact that an author has won previous awards shouldn’t count against him or her; by the same token, it shouldn’t automatically raise their book in the panel’s estimation.

Reading reviews in journals will be a part of some judges’ professional work, while other judges won’t come in automatic contact with such reviews. It is expected that you will not engage any material other than the book itself when judging its merit. If you read reviews of the books under consideration, remember that it is your perspective on the book that matters and that will be relevant in the discussion at the panel meeting – not the perspective of reviews or other readers.

III. Read Beyond Your Preferences and Tastes

There will likely be books in the mix that, because of their subject or genre, appeal to you more or less than others. Try to set aside your preferences as an individual reader and focus on how successfully the author has made all elements of the book work; how well the book stands up against other similar work; the book's craft/craftsmanship and originality; and its success at engaging its target audience.

For example: Consider the case of a memoir that incorporates novel-like writing conventions to explore the interior lives of characters other than the author/narrator. When evaluating that entry, look beyond your personal favor or dislike for that writing convention. Instead, ask yourself questions like: Is this approach helping the book to accomplish its artistic aim? Is it done in a way that is believable, in spite of the imaginative stretch required? Is the author "breaking the rules" in a way that feels consistent with book's style and themes?

IV. Honor Local/Regional Subjects Alongside "Global" Topics; Consistently Reward High Quality Content

In every category, there will be a range of projects in competition. It will be the natural tendency of some judges to prefer large-scale, impressive books from major publishers over more modest work from small, independent presses. Similarly, it may be natural for some judges to prefer local or particular subject matter to subjects of broader scope or appeal. It is important to evaluate each book on its own terms, and not penalize a book for taking on a subject that is modest in scope or "close to home"—or, on the other hand, to penalize books of larger scale with larger budgets.

V. Prepare for Discussion

Every judge comes into their panel discussion as a person with multiple identity lenses. Similarly, you are examining books written by people who are coming at their work with important identities, and those are likely to find some manner of expression in their book. It is important – especially if you hold a collection of identities that are traditionally considered part of the dominant culture – to take some time before engaging with a text to examine the way your social identities affect your opinions around a book. Those identities include, but are not limited to: race, ethnicity, religion, gender, and sexual orientation.

For example: A story may be told from inside a culture or tradition that employs different narrative rules than those most widely understood to be "correct" according to traditional publishing criteria, most school curricula, etc. As best as you are able, try to recognize and try to recognize if this might be the case and relate to the story with an altered lens.

*In order to better understand your several and intersecting identities, we encourage all judges to take a brief look at the attached “Identity Wheel” exercise. (This rubric comes from AMAZEworks, Minnesota-based consulting specialists in Diversity, Equity & Inclusion, and was shared with The Friends as part of staff DEI work.)

VI. Role of the Facilitator + Reaching Consensus

Each panel is assigned a facilitator who will be present throughout the discussion. Facilitators do not participate in the deliberations, nor express their opinions about any of the books under consideration, nor attempt to influence the panel’s choice of finalists in any way.

Instead, the facilitator role is intended to ensure discussions adhere to Minnesota Book Awards judging guidelines, help the panel move towards a consensus, and provide strategies to break an impasse if the discussion gets stuck. The facilitator also has the mandate to disrupt any behavior in the panel that is not respectful.

Each panel is encouraged to first try to reach a consensus via organic means. Please give each title thoughtful consideration and discuss its merits/flaws in a manner that is respectful both to the book and to the perspectives/opinions of your fellow judges. Where there are disagreements there must also be respect in order for the process to unfold as it should.

In some cases, agreement on the winner is reached with ease. However, if a panel gets stuck and is challenged by the agreement-making process, the facilitator may suggest a strategy to help the panel make its choice. One way that an impasse can be resolved is to apply a simple voting system, allowing each judge to rank the finalist books in order. Give each first choice title 4 points, second choice title 3 points, third choice title 2 points and fourth choice title 1 point. When these cumulative numbers are tallied, a telling result may emerge—or titles may be eliminated, bringing the panel a step closer to its choice.

VIII. Once a Decision Is Reached

Once your panel has selected the award winner, the facilitator is asked to write up a short rationale for the group’s decision. It can be brief and informal, but it should reflect what the panelists feel are the winning book’s special strengths and attributes. This rationale will not be published as written. Instead, it serves as a tool to help Book Awards staff in writing press releases and summary descriptions of winning titles. Individual comments will never be attributed back to specific judges.

Again, it is critical that all information regarding the award winner be kept strictly confidential. The identity of award winners (and any non-winner finalists, for that matter) must not be shared with anyone until the winners are announced the evening of May 2, 2023, at the awards ceremony. Please take this directive seriously. For some, it may be the hardest part of the process!

Minnesota Book Awards

Category Specific Guidelines and Questions for Evaluating Books

The following guidelines and questions are provided as further tools for judges to use in evaluating the submitted books within their specific category.

Children’s Picture Book – a picture book for young children, typically combining text and illustration in telling the story. (Minnesota authors and illustrators are both eligible in this category. Fiction, nonfiction, and poetry books are all eligible.)

Judges should ask the following questions:

- Is the book of outstanding quality? Does it stand out as an original effort?
- Will the text be compelling and engaging to children?
- Are representations of human characters authentic and affirming?
- Is the work memorable and distinctive? Does it invite rereading?
- If the book includes illustrations, are they of outstanding quality? Are they well-integrated with the book’s text and appropriate for the target audience?
- If the book is nonfiction, is it accurate and informative (and its material verifiable)? Are sources provided (if and where you feel they should be)?
- If the book is nonfiction, does it offer new information or take a fresh, appealing approach to traditional material?

A challenge with the Children’s Picture Book category is the range of subject matter and styles it includes. Panelists should prepare for a wide range of material, and take care not to undervalue the work aimed at an audience with specialized interests. The success of the book in serving its intended audience is the issue, not the size of that audience.

General Nonfiction – a full-length book of nonfiction, including, but not limited to, history, biography, science, nature, and cookbooks. Judges should ask the following questions, as applicable:

- Is the work well-researched and appropriately documented?
- Is the writing compelling and appealing?
- Does the work take a new, useful, and illuminating approach to its subject?
- Does the author seem knowledgeable about important and influential work in his/her subject area?
- Are the design and editing of the book appropriate to the book’s intended purpose? Are any non-text elements (drawings, photographs, maps, etc.) well-chosen and effectively integrated with the text?
- Are any resources provided to the reader for further reference or research (and if not, should there be)?

- Is there an index? If not, should there be one? If so, is it well organized? Does it include the main subjects, individuals and events relevant to the book's topic?

In asking all these questions, also take into account the targeted audience and probable audience appeal. A history book for a lay audience may not need extensive references, whereas one for a scholarly audience probably should include references and footnotes.

The General Nonfiction category includes a wide variety of work. Panelists should prepare for an “apples and oranges” situation and focus as best they can on how each individual book fulfills the criteria of outstanding craftsmanship, originality, and strong resonance with the intended audience. While respect for specialized audiences is important, the work should still be highly readable.

Since comparing books to one another can be challenging, it is important for judges to evaluate each book on its own terms. As an example, a cookbook that a judge recognizes as the best possible cookbook of its kind may therefore prevail over a parenting book that feels mostly successful, even if the judge is more drawn to the latter type of book. Use the evaluation form to track your observations and appraisals as you reach each book.

Genre Fiction – a book of fiction written in a popular genre or style, including mystery, detective, fantasy, graphic novel, romance, and science fiction. Judges should ask the following questions:

- Does the book reflect mastery of the conventions of its particular genre or popular style?
- Is the author adept at development of theme, plot, dialogue, setting, character?
- Does the book succeed in capturing the attention and interest of the reader by means of an innovative plot and interesting characters? Is it compelling and engaging?
- If the genre is known for hitting particular beats and tropes, does the author use those marks in fresh and appealing ways – or turn away from expectation in an original manner?

Wide reader appeal and command of the genre in question are key attributes of award-winning books in this category. Yet, quality of writing remains paramount.

Memoir & Creative Nonfiction – a work of nonfiction which is primarily autobiographical in theme, or which includes a significant amount of personal material and/or imaginative reworking.

This category, which combines subcategories that are understood and defined differently by different readers, presents unique issues for panelists to consider. One way to think about the work in this category is in terms of the relative role that factual information plays in each:

- Autobiography has a factual through line. Its main substance is the chronological life of its subject. It bears the same responsibility to and has the same degree of dependence on verifiable, factual material as any biography—and has the added challenge of needing to be told in a compelling first-person voice.
- Memoir has greater freedom in its structure, the throughline of which is likely to be the intellectual, spiritual, or emotional development of the writer. Still, it bears the same burden of veracity that autobiography bears in relation to its nonfiction content. In other words, where a memoir deals with the subject’s inner life, it has much in common with fiction — its effectiveness being dependent on the imaginative pull of its narrative. But where it concerns itself with actual events and with the actions of named individuals, it is subject to the expectations and “rules” of nonfiction. Where fictionalizing has taken place, readers need to judge whether this has been done responsibly – especially in cases where the portrayal of actual persons is strongly or negatively drawn.
- Creative Nonfiction is a realm in which fact and fiction blend according to the author’s design, and in which the reader, for this reason, may not be able to untangle the two. The key is that this “blending” is acknowledged in the book’s title, in its introduction, or by other means, so that the reader is in essence agreeing to walk on uncertain ground. Note: work in this subcategory may or may not be written in the first person, but includes sufficient imaginative material or reflection on a question to be better placed here than in General Nonfiction.

To judge whether a work in the Memoir & Creative Nonfiction category is award-worthy, judges should ask the following questions:

- Is there a distinctive, memorable voice in the work?
- Is the work both timely and likely to have lasting interest?
- Does the work have integrity in relation to its claims of truth or fact?
- Does the book illuminate the writer’s experience as well as that of a broader community?
- Does it leave room for the reader, even if it is clearly a very personal reflection on events or a topic?

Middle Grade Literature – a book written for a middle grade audience, generally ages 8-12. (Fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and graphic novels are eligible.)

- Is the book of outstanding quality? Does it stand out as an original work?
- Will the book be compelling and engaging to middle grade readers?
- If the book is nonfiction, is it accurate and informative, its material verifiable and original? Are sources provided (if and where they should be)?

- Is the book memorable and distinctive – likely to change the way the reader views themselves or the world?
- Does the book take its audience seriously? Successful books for children in this age group should center the agency of their young protagonists.
- If the book contains illustrations or photos, do they enhance the experience of the book in a meaningful way?

This category, like Children’s Picture Book and Young Adult, is a genre-defying category. You will be asked to judge how-to guides about home science experiments alongside epic fantasy quests and realistic portrayals of everyday life. It is important to consider the impact and resonance of the book for a young reader, regardless of the book’s genre and content.

Minnesota Nonfiction – a book of nonfiction with a topic on Minnesota history, nature, social customs or nostalgia.

This panel should use the set of questions and guidelines outlined in the General Nonfiction category. Judges in this category should also ask:

- Does the book illuminate a previously unexplored aspect of Minnesota culture or heritage? If the book explores well-trodden ground, does it provide new context and depth?
- Does it contribute to a reader’s collective understanding of past and/or current life in Minnesota? Does it expand the notion of what being “Minnesotan” means? (i.e. Is it inclusive when it needs to be?)

Novel & Short Story – a novel, novella, or short story collection. Judges should ask the following questions:

- Is the author adept at development of theme, plot, dialogue, setting, and pacing? Do all the elements work together?
- Are the characters richly and respectfully drawn and authentic?
- Is the work innovative?
- Does it have a strong, memorable voice?
- If the book is a collection of short stories, are the selections of uniformly high quality?

Short story collections can suffer when compared with novels because they are often perceived to lack the sustained momentum, depth, and “heft” of longer works. Judges should make a concerted effort to give shorter fiction its due. Consider what editor Laurie Steed says makes for a good short story: “A good short story is a tone, a thought, a feeling,” but also contains all the elements of a good novel in a concise space.

Another problem that can occur with this category is work by very well-known authors casting a shadow over other entries. Because this is a category where there are often “stars,” special effort must be made to evaluate each work fairly and freshly. That said, it is not appropriate to set an outstanding work by a “star” author aside, simply to give a lesser-known writer exposure. (Again, the idea that it is someone’s “turn” to be set aside or to be acknowledged should be rejected in favor of honest evaluation of the books in hand.)

Poetry – a book-length single poem or collection of poetry.

- Does the poet have a clear and compelling voice and vision?
- To what degree is mastery of figurative and formal technique in evidence?
- Do all the elements work together to form an integrated whole?
- Is language being played with and/or used in new and exciting ways? (Consider sound, rhythm, borrowing from other linguistic traditions, etc.)
- Is the work in some way groundbreaking?

Differences in opinion about poetic style can be intense, and it may be harder to find compromise or for opinions to be swayed in this category than on other panels. Anticipating this may be helpful. If individual panelists are able to articulate what “craft” and “originality” mean to them in poetry, they will be better able to defend their preferences. When addressing questions of “resonance and impact,” it is understood that each work may not have the same audience of poetry readers in mind. Consider and discuss what you understand to be the target audience of each book and how well each work reaches that audience.

Young Adult Literature – a book written for a teen audience (fiction, nonfiction, poetry, or graphic novels are eligible)

- Is the book of outstanding quality? Does it stand out as an original work?
- Will the book be compelling and engaging to teen readers?
- If the book is nonfiction, is it accurate and informative? Is its material verifiable, and are sources provided if/where they should be? Does the book offer up new information or take a fresh, appealing approach to traditional material?
- Is the book memorable and distinctive? How likely is it to change the way the reader views themselves or the world?
- Like literature for middle graders, Young Adult fiction should center the agency of its protagonists as they explore worlds or situations that help them establish their sense of self.

Contemporary literature for young adults can include mature language and subject matter (sexuality, drug use, etc.). Some readers will question the appropriateness of such material for young adults. Individual tastes and opinions may be aired freely, but the panel’s job is to decide if the author has introduced the themes effectively, integrated them into the plot, and addressed them with authenticity, sensitivity, and compassion.

APPENDIX

Social Identity Groups

Social identity refers to a person's identity related to group membership and the social groups to which they belong. Social identity groups are based on the physical, social, and mental characteristics of individuals. They are sometimes obvious and clear, sometimes not obvious and unclear, often self-claimed and frequently ascribed by others. Below are examples of social identity groupings.

<u>Social Identity Groups</u>	<u>Examples (Feel free to use your own language for your identities.)</u>
Gender	Woman, Man, Transgender, Gender non-binary
Sex	Intersex, Female, Male
Race	Asian, Native American, Latino/a/x, Black, White, Bi/Multiracial
Ethnicity	Irish, Chinese, Puerto Rican, Italian, Dakota, Jewish, Guatemalan, Lebanese
Sexual Orientation	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Pan-Sexual, Heterosexual, Queer, Questioning
Religion/Spirituality	Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, Jewish, Christian, Pagan, Agnostic, Faith/Meaning Atheist, Secular Humanist
Social Class	Poor, Working Class, Lower-Middle Class, Upper-Middle Class, Owning Class, Ruling Class
Age	Child, Young Adult, Middle-Age Adult, Elderly
(Dis)Ability	People with disabilities (cognitive, physical, emotional, etc.), Temporarily able-bodied, Temporarily disabled
Nation(s) of Origin and/or Citizenship	United States, Nigeria, Korea, Turkey, Argentina
Tribal or Indigenous Affiliation	Mohawk, Aboriginal, Navajo, Santal
First Language	Spanish, Anishinabe, Swahili, American English

Activity Directions:

- 1) Write your social identities for each group in the corresponding space on the wheel.
- 2) Fill in #1 - 5 in the center of the wheel.
- 3) Write **M**, **P**, or **M/P** in each space on the wheel to indicate whether this identity is more marginalized, privileged, or both depending on the context

Marginalized Group: Social identity groups that have been historically disenfranchised and exploited.

Privileged Group: Social identity groups that have been afforded certain social advantages, benefits, or degrees of prestige and respect that an individual has by virtue of belonging to certain social identity groups.

