

Children's Book Committee Review Guidelines

The Children's Book Committee compiles a list of the best books published in English each year in the United States and Canada. To that end, members collectively read and review all books submitted by publishers for the year under consideration. They then finalize the list and edit and proofread the titles and annotations while following a defined set of criteria. The Committee also presents three book awards each year. (See "Guidelines for Book Award Selection," below.)

Guidelines for Evaluating Books Being Considered for Inclusion in *Best Books of the Year for Children and Young Adults*

I. For all books, consider the following:

- Literary quality (Is the text well written and understandable for the intended audience?)
- Art (Do illustrations support the text? In nonfiction, do the illustrations add information and enhance the text?)
- Presentation (What is the format of the book? Is it appropriate and relevant for the intended audience? Is it clear? Exciting? Unusual? Original?)
- Impact (What is the intended or unintended emotional impact on the child reader/listener? Does the story end on a positive note, with hope?)
- Absence of stereotypes and positive treatment of ethnic and religious differences

II. When reviewing books of fiction, also consider

- Credibility of characterization and plot
 - Do the characters grow or change?
 - Does the plot move at a reasonable pace?
- Authenticity of time and place
- Age relevance of content
- Originality of the story

III. Guidelines for Evaluating Poetry for Children

Poetry appreciation and evaluation is subjective. Not all poems will appeal to everyone; not everyone will respond the same way to the questions posed below. When examining books of poetry, there are many things to consider. These include:

SOUND—Is there a musical lilt to the poem? Does it sing to you through melodic devices (alliteration, assonance, onomatopoeia)? Is the poem enhanced by reading it aloud? Does it benefit from repeated readings?

LANGUAGE—Does the poem use language in an original and fresh way (e.g., with metaphors, similes, personification)? Are the words mood generating? Are the words used in a highly powerful manner? Does the poem use syntax artistically? Are words combined in a mixture that communicates both literal and suggested meaning (denotation and connotation)?

RHYTHM—Does the poem have regular distinctive rhythm? Does the rhythm reinforce and create the meaning of the poem? Does it evoke a visceral reaction, such as foot stamping, hand clapping, or verbal participation?

SENSORY IMAGES—Are the images sharp and clean? Do they hold a fast and compact sensory impact? Do they evoke pictures, sounds, smells, tastes, or touching sensations?

RHYME—If the poetry is rhymed, do the lines rhyme and scan well? Is there predictability to the rhyming words? Does the rhyme sound natural or contrived? For a story in rhyme, was this a good way to tell the story?

STRUCTURE AND FORM—Does the poem look good on the page? Is the length of the poem age appropriate? Does the poem conform to a chosen standard form (e.g., haiku, limerick)? Do the line length and line breaks enhance the meaning of the poem? Is the sequence of the stanzas logical? Do the patterns of the poem enhance the subject?

STYLE—Is there a positive match between the style and the idea of the poem? If the poem is written in free verse, does it have strong images and rhythm? Do the line breaks support the rhythm? (If you take away the line breaks and it reads like prose, it probably is prose.) If the story is told in more than one poem, does each poem move the story along in some way? Words, similes, metaphors, rhyme, meter, and rhythm should work together to support meaning.

EMOTIONAL INTENSITY—Do the words work to heighten the feelings conveyed? Do the emotions portrayed reflect the child's experiences? Does the poem relate directly to the child's experiences? Does the poem portray childhood nostalgically (appealing more to adults)?

SUBSTANCE—Is there an authenticity of voice? Are the theme and ideas within the child's grasp? Is the theme universal and timeless? Does its appeal transcend the barriers of ethnicity and culture? Does the language suggest or hint at an idea rather than tell or preach? Does it avoid patronizing children—talking down rather than encouraging children to expand their imagination, sensitivity to emotion, and knowledge? Does the poem have some of the following qualities:

Does the humor tickle the child's fancy?

Does it enhance the child's ego?

Does it evoke happy recollections?

Does it surprise?

If the book is illustrated, the illustrations should support the meaning and feeling of the poem or, if the poems have been published previously, offer a new interpretation.

When considering anthologies or the collected poetry of a single author, remember that the poems in collections may vary in quality; not every poem will be a gem.

Does the collection as a whole add something to the genre?

Are there indices of authors' names, poem titles, and first lines?

IV. Guidelines for Evaluating Information Books

When evaluating information books , consider:

- Literary quality
 - Is the narrative or exposition presented logically?
 - How are unfamiliar or new vocabulary words explained? In context, in a glossary, or both? If there is a glossary, does the text make it obvious which words are included? (e.g., by use of bold type)
- Presentation
 - Is the format or design of the book appropriate for the intended audience?
 - Is the format confusing, dull, exciting, derivative, or unusual?
 - Is the type face clear enough and large enough to be read easily?
 - Are there visuals to break up the text? If so, are they informative or just decorative?
- Balance
 - If the topic is controversial, are opposing sides presented? If not, is it clear that the book presents the author's viewpoint, or is the material presented as fact?
- Supporting materials
 - For books for children eight and younger (up to the third grade) consider:
 - Accuracy of Information
 - Are sources for the information given?
 - If not, is the author knowledgeable in the field? (How do you know?)
 - If there is dialog (in quotes) is it sourced?
 - Are there suggestions for further reading, and are they age appropriate?
 - Clarity of presentation, including tone or voice of the author
 - Does the author talk down to children?
 - Is the format appropriate to age of audience?
 - Illustrations/art work
 - Do the illustrations enhance the text by adding something new?
 - Are illustrations placed in an appropriate relationship to the text (rather than on the preceding or following page)?
 - Do illustrations interrupt the flow of the text?

- Other supporting materials
 - Are they appropriate to the age of the reader and to the material being presented? For example, are there maps? If not, should there have been? If there are maps, are they easy to interpret? In a historical work, are there timelines?
 - For books for children nine and older (fourth grade and above), we consider the same criteria described above. In addition, for this age group we consider the following:
 - Inclusion of informative and accurate supporting materials. These might include maps (especially if the book is geographical in nature or involves a journey), charts, diagrams, a bibliography, suggestions for further reading, a glossary, and an index. More resources are expected to be provided than in books for younger children.
 - If there are quotes in the text, sources for the quotations **must** be provided. This can be by footnote, endnote, or clear author's note.
 - Supporting materials should be contained in the book rather than relegated to a website. (Keep in mind that some websites disappear after a time, particularly those that are book specific.)
 - If websites are referenced or suggested as further reading or supplemental material, they should be appropriate for the intended audience of the book.

It is incumbent upon the reviewers to do some fact-checking, even when numerous sources are cited. If web sources are given, at least two should be visited to determine reliability and age appropriateness. Facts in books for younger children should also be spot-checked.

V. Series books and movie/television tie-ins

- Each title must stand alone and not be dependent on the reader's having read earlier books.
- All books with continuing characters (Ramona, Alice, etc.) that are not part of a numbered series are read and considered independently.
- If the Committee has rejected the first three books in a numbered series, future titles in that series will not be considered.
- The Committee does not consider television or movie tie-ins.

VI. Guidelines for Book Award Selection

In addition to its annual list, the Committee awards three prizes each year:

1. *The Josette Frank Award* for a work of fiction of outstanding literary merit for young readers in which children or young people deal in a positive and realistic way with difficulties in their world and grow emotionally and morally
2. *The Claudia Lewis Award* for the best poetry book of the year for young readers

3. *The Flora Stieglitz Straus Award* for a nonfiction book that serves as an inspiration to young readers

Nomination: When members report on books they have read, they may suggest that a book be considered for one of these awards. Other members then volunteer to read the book to consider whether it merits discussion for the award.

Committee-wide consideration: If a consensus builds to consider the book (i.e., if four or more members report that the book is award worthy), additional copies are requested from the publisher. The nominator fills out a nomination form, which is placed in the awards book. Members sign out copies, read the book, and indicate in the awards book whether or not they think the book should be discussed at the award-selection meeting as a candidate for an award.

Selection meeting and voting: An award-selection meeting is scheduled to be held after the annual list has closed.

In order to participate in the voting for books in an award category, members **MUST**:

- Have attended the minimum number of meetings required during the year
- Have read **each** of the books under consideration for the award in that category.
- Be present for the entire discussion of the books in that category. (Members who arrive after the discussion has begun or depart before it has ended may not vote.)

Members who do not meet the above criteria may not vote, but they may participate in the discussion of books they have read.

Candidate presenters: A member is selected to present each nominated book. The presenter is generally the person who first proposed it as a candidate for that award. Each presenter is confirmed and sent an award criteria form that includes key questions to determine award worthiness.