

YALSA Board of Directors Meeting
ALA Annual Conference, New Orleans
June 22 – 26, 2018

Topic: Book Awards & Lists in Light of #MeToo

Background: In May 2018 an issue arose on the Odyssey Committee related to the #MeToo movement. One Odyssey member informed their chair that they were not going to listen to any titles from a particular author who had been accused of harassment. Given the gravity of the issue of sexual harassment and assault, YALSA’s Board may want to consider whether any action should be taken at this time, especially when considering this issue and how it interplays with the principles of intellectual freedom. Board member Sarah Hill offers this document for discussion.

Action Required: Discussion

The #MeToo movement exploded in Fall 2017, when women and some men collectively began to speak out against abusers and harassers. The movement carried over to the young adult publishing world in February 2018 via an article in *School Library Journal* that led to hundreds of comments to the article indicating certain authors and publisher representatives as harassers or abusers.

YALSA and its board extend their compassion to those harmed by abusers and harassers and commends those for speaking up, while at the same time also extending support to those who were also harmed but remain silent.

Publishers, agents and organizations are responding by canceling book deals, author visits, issuing statements, rescinding awards and more. In a *New York Times* interview, Stephen Rubin, the president of Holt, said, “The corporate stance is that it’s not our job to judge our authors.” However, other publishers are implementing ethics clauses into their author contracts.

In light of this movement, library staff now have books on their shelves that might make them and/or their patrons uncomfortable. Does having a book on a shelf indicate endorsement of the author? Does having the title of one of these authors on a recommended book list indicate endorsement of the author? In these situations, it’s important to look at relevant ALA documents that are often included in a library’s policies and procedures: the Library Bill of Rights, the Freedom to Read Statement, and the Code of Ethics. See below for pertinent portions.

ALA’s Library Bill of Rights:

- I. “Books and other library resources should be provided for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves. Materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation.”

ALA’s Freedom to Read Statement:

2. Publishers, librarians, and booksellers do not need to endorse every idea or presentation they make available. It would conflict with the public interest for them to establish their own political, moral, or aesthetic views as a standard for determining what should be published or circulated.

Publishers and librarians serve the educational process by helping to make available knowledge and ideas required for the growth of the mind and the increase of learning. They do not foster education by imposing as mentors the patterns of their own thought. The people should have the freedom to read and consider a broader range of ideas than those that may be held by any single librarian or publisher or government or church. It is wrong that what one can read should be confined to what another thinks proper.

3. It is contrary to the public interest for publishers or librarians to bar access to writings on the basis of the personal history or political affiliations of the author.

No art or literature can flourish if it is to be measured by the political views or private lives of its creators. No society of free people can flourish that draws up lists of writers to whom it will not listen, whatever they may have to say.

ALA’s Code of Ethics:

2. We uphold the principles of intellectual freedom and resist all efforts to censor library resources.

7. We distinguish between our personal convictions and professional duties and do not allow our personal beliefs to interfere with fair representation of the aims of our institutions or the provision of access to their information resources.

These same ALA policies and guidelines provide guidance about illegal, unethical, and inappropriate behavior of authors. Libraries address these concerns through materials selection and deselection policies. While YALSA isn’t a library, we, too, need to have clear policies and procedures regarding recommended reading lists and book/media awards. For the most part, via its lists and awards YALSA recognizes the work itself, and not the author. There are two notable exceptions:

- The Edwards Award recognizes an author and a specific body of their work
- The Odyssey Award recognizes an audiobook producer

In YALSA’s award committees and blogging teams, the policies and procedures never ask committee members or bloggers to examine the personal lives or beliefs of authors. The reviewed titles are evaluated strictly on the criteria listed in each award/list’s policies and procedures.

The criteria for the Edwards Award is as follows:

The committee making its selection of nominees must be aware of the entire range of books for young adults and will take into account the following:

- Does the book(s) help adolescents to become aware of themselves and to answer their questions about their role and importance in relationships, society and in the world?
- Is the book(s) of acceptable literary quality?
- Does the book(s) satisfy the curiosity of young adults and yet help them thoughtfully to build a philosophy of life?
- Is the book(s) currently popular with a wide range of young adults in many different parts of the country?
- Do the book(s) serve as a "window to the world" for young adults?

So far this year, only one incident directly related to #MeToo has come up in a YALSA committee. One Odyssey member informed their chair that they were not going to listen to any titles from a particular author who had been accused of harassment. The chair reminded the member that the award is for the producer, not the author, and the issue went no further.

Action being taken in the literary and library communities relating to book awards and #MeToo

- ALSC is evaluating all their awards, and in particular the name of the Laura Ingalls Wilder Award
- The American Indian Library Association (AILA) rescinded the award they gave to Sherman Alexie
- The 2018 Nobel Prize for Literature has been cancelled after sexual misconduct on its award jury was called to light
- The Chair of the Pulitzer Prize Committee stepped down amid harassment allegations and the Pulitzer Prize Board will launch an investigation into the claims

Questions to consider

- Is there a clear benefit to YALSA creating a statement or policy that specifies under what circumstances YALSA would rescind an award?
 - A quick Internet search did not turn up any book award policies with this type of language; however, academic institutions have similar policies. Here's an example: www.regents.ac.uk/media/3490030/policy-on-rescinding-awards-and-academic-credit.pdf
 - The search did turn up an instance of an organization giving a book award to their CEO, which caused an uproar. If award policies are going to be revisited, it may also be beneficial to specify whether staff and members are eligible for YALSA's book awards
- In the short term, would it be beneficial to award committees and selected list blogging teams to receive some communication from the Board reminding them to work within the parameters of their group's stated eligibility criteria? Then, moving forward, this information could be embedded in training/orientation.
- Should a statement be developed and included with our awards and lists about how the award is given to titles and not to authors (with the exception of Edwards and Odyssey)?

- In light of what the library community is learning from the #MeToo environment, is it necessary to revisit the eligibility criteria for all lists and awards to explicitly state that the group is vetting the work, not the author?
- Since the Edwards Award is for a particular author, is there a need to revisit its eligibility criteria?
- What might our members need in terms of support with reconciling #MeToo and intellectual freedom principles?
- What might our members need in terms of support and awareness around sexual harassment in the workplace?

Additional Reading

- “YALSA President Paula Brehm-Heeger Responds to Edwards Award Criticism”
<http://www.ala.org/yalsa/booklistsawards/booklists/edwardsstatement>
- “When Cosby’s ‘Little Bill,’ Alexie and Asher on the Shelf: What Should a Librarian Do?” by Kara Yorio, *School Library Journal*, <https://www.slj.com/2018/05/collection-development/cosbys-little-bill-alexie-asher-shelf-librarian/>
- “American Indian Library Association Rescinds its 2008 Young Adult Literature Award from Sherman Alexie”
<https://americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com/2018/03/american-indian-library-association.html>
- “#MeToo and Children’s Services” by ALSC Intellectual Freedom Committee,
<http://www.alsc.ala.org/blog/2018/05/metoo-and-childrens-services/>
- “Statement from ALA PPO Regarding the Use of Sherman Alexie’s ‘Flight’ in the Great Stories Club” <http://www.ala.org/tools/programming/GSC/statement-flight-sherman-alexie>
- “Canceled Deals and Pulped Books, as the Publishing Industry Confronts Sexual Harassment” by Alexandra Alter in the *New York Times*,
<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/27/business/canceled-deals-and-pulped-books-as-the-publishing-industry-confronts-sexual-harassment.html>
- “Book Challenges and Authors Accused of Sexual Misconduct” by Rebecca Slocum; The Office for Intellectual Freedom of the American Library Association Intellectual Freedom Blog. <https://www.oif.ala.org/oif/?p=12736>

Resources

- ALA compilation of sexual harassment resources,
<http://www.ala.org/educationcareers/harassment-resources>
- Library Bill of Rights of the American Library Association,
<http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill>
- Freedom to Read Statement of the American Library Association and the Association of American Publishers, <http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/freedomreadstatement>
- Code of Ethics, American Library Association, <http://www.ala.org/tools/ethics>