

**YALSA Board of Directors Meeting
ALA Annual Conference, San Francisco
June 26 – 30, 2015**

Topic: Request for Board Action: Nonfiction Criteria

Background: YALSA member Marc Aronson has submitted the following proposal for the Board's consideration.

Action Required: Action

Request

Suggestion for public discussion of excellence in NF criteria

Rationale

YALSA currently awards a medal and honors for Excellence in YA Nonfiction and crafts a list of books that were seriously considered by the committee. While this is a start, I believe it is a long way from meeting YALSA members' needs in offering guidance on selecting nonfiction. There is an ever-increasing need for Young Adult librarians to understand how to evaluate nonfiction -- both because the forms of the field are changing and because in both Common Core and non-Common Core states, teenagers are reading more and more nonfiction. Thus a YA librarian must be recognized as knowing and understanding nonfiction -- which echoes one of the stated goals of the award, which is to establish YALSA's role as an "authority."

The prizes and list are not sufficient because they do not state nor establish the differing criteria for different types and varieties of nonfiction. There are some other resources for YALSA members, but they are very limited. Currently YALSA offers an online class in "reading with a critical eye" which includes nonfiction as well as fiction, and three MLIS programs: Rutgers, Simmons, and University of Illinois, teach classes devoted to nonfiction. The CCBC which often hosted discussions of nonfiction has discontinued its listserv. This leaves many working librarians without current information on how to evaluate the kinds of books called YA nonfiction now being published, such as memoir, memoirs by teenagers, YA versions of adult books that omit the adult backmatter, art and text in nonfiction graphic novels.

I understand that YALSA is crafting a handbook for evaluation that the chairs of award committees will pass along, and perhaps add to, from year to year. That is great. But that handbook is not crafted through public discussion, and may or may not be easily available to the public. Thus while award selections may improve, criteria for judgement by working librarians will hardly be more useful or visible.

Therefore I suggest that YALSA create a digital, and perhaps live at an ALA conference, discussion among members about what the criteria for evaluating YA nonfiction should be. This open forum would be the ideal way to educate the broadest possible membership on the issues to consider in evaluating books that claim the distinction of being nonfiction. What obligations to sourcing, citation, evidence, does a book need to have if it is termed nonfiction? What

adjustments need to be made for memoir -- whose claim is more the evocation of a recalled past than a transcript of verifiable events. What level of sourcing is required when a nonfiction book employs dialog? What license for showing emotion, feeling, expression does an artist have in a nonfiction graphic novel, where no record of those personal expressions exists? These are questions that must be aired, weighed, and then wrestled into criteria that can be disseminated to members.

If this request requires funding or other resources, please state how those will be obtained

A digital nationwide discussion of nonfiction would involve a minimal expense to be hosted and run. Either YALSA could charge a very small fee to attendees, or, if it is not perceived as a conflict of interest, it could seek out sponsorship from publishers or booksellers. Alternatively, a university or group of universities might agree to host the event as a service to librarians and graduate students.

Areas of the Strategic Plan the proposal directly supports

- Research and Documentation of Best Practices
- Continuous Learning and Professional Development

How the request benefits YALSA and its members

Open discussion of standards for nonfiction, and the resulting criteria, would greatly enhance YALSA members' ability to meet the critical need to evaluate, purchase, and share nonfiction with teenagers in both school and public libraries. It would be an ideal way of meeting one of the stated goals of the Excellence in Nonfiction award -- establishing YALSA's "authority" in this field.

Additional information

I will be an annual and would be happy to discuss this issue with the board there or, digitally, at any time. As background, I have a doctorate in US history, won the first Sibert as an author and edited the 10th Sibert; with my wife I was a finalist for the YALSA nonfiction prize for Sugar Changed the World; I was part of the team that wrote the rules for the Printz and then evaluated its success; I am an Assistant Teaching Professor in the MLIS program at Rutgers where I created the first course in Nonfiction and the Common Core in any MLIS program in the country. I believe I understand the needs of YALSA members and the particular challenges posed by evaluating YA nonfiction -- hence this suggestion.