

**ALSC Awards Program Review Task Force Recommendation:  
Laura Ingalls Wilder Award  
May 15, 2018**

**Introduction**

Our task force was charged with making a recommendation regarding, what, if any, changes should be made to the ALSC award that bears Laura Ingalls Wilder's name. Our role was not to debate the merits of Wilder's works but to address the inconsistency between Wilder's legacy and ALSC's core values, which include inclusiveness, integrity and respect, and responsiveness.

The complexity of this issue is undeniable. So, too, is the emotion surrounding it. We have read and listened to arguments from multiple perspectives, as well as to calls for transparency in any decision that is made.

**Recommendations**

After considering this input, and doing additional reading and research, we recommend that either the board change the name of the Laura Ingalls Wilder Award (Option 1, parts 1, 2 and 3) or that the board sunset the award and establish a new award (Option 2).

**Option 1, Part 1: Change the name of the Laura Ingalls Wilder Award.**

If this option is chosen, we recommend the name change take effect immediately with the 2018 award.

Changing the award name may allow for greater transparency and greater continuity moving forward. The disadvantage in changing the name is that the old name, which has painful associations for many, must continue to be referenced by ALSC in the interest of communication and transparency regarding the change. We recommend a statement be prepared and released offering a full explanation of the change. In the long-term, we would suggest a brief acknowledgment on the award web site of the name change that makes the lengthier statement available to those who request it (or makes it available on a separate page on the web). Past winners would be acknowledged as having received the award under the Laura Ingalls Wilder name.

Our recommendation to minimize references to the old award name on the ALSC web site is not to erase either the history of ALSC or of this award, which is why we believe it is critical to make a full explanation available initially, and to all who request it in the future.

**Option 1, Part 2: If the name of the award is changed, we recommended the award description be amended to include language that recognizes honorees for their "significant and lasting contribution to children's literature through books that demonstrate integrity and respect for all children's lives and experiences."**

**Option 1, Part 3: If the name of the award is changed, we recommend the board look into providing past recipients (prior to 2018) the option to be recognized under the new name, if a recipient wishes.**

We know there are numerous questions and considerations to this. Would only living recipients have the option to request the change, or could the estates of those who have passed away also make the request? Would new medals be issued to those who request the change? How would the honorees who request the change be acknowledged on the ALSC web site and in other materials from ALSC? Outside of ALSC, this has a potential impact on publishers and their promotional efforts as well; these and other references would be out of ALSC's sphere of control. We hope it will be logistically feasible to allow past winners who wish to do so to claim their honor under the new name.

**Option 2: Sunset the Laura Ingalls Wilder Award and establish a new award for significant and lasting contribution to children’s literature through books that demonstrate integrity and respect for all children’s lives and experiences.**

Ending the Laura Ingalls Wilder Award and establishing a new award allows for a cleaner break between past and future. The need for a statement explaining that the Wilder award has been ended would exist, and should be transparent. In the long term, an explanation could be handled in a similar manner to that noted above: a brief statement on the Wilder Award web site explaining the award has ended, with the lengthier explanation prepared and available to those who request it. Moving forward, however, there would not be a need to reference the Wilder Award in conjunction with the new award, which lessens ongoing references to an award whose name conjures painful associations for many.

The disadvantage to establishing a new award is that prolongs an award under the Wilder name through the 2019 awards cycle, because a 2019 Wilder Award Committee is currently at work.

**Potential Award Names**

A number of names were suggested for the award via the survey. They included names tied to many different noteworthy individuals and names reflective of the purpose and/or scope of the award. A number of respondents did not provide a specific suggestion but thought the award name should not be attached to an individual but reflect the purpose and/or scope of the award. We agree with this. Moving forward, we suggest the following names be considered (in priority order):

- ALSC Legacy Award
- ALSC Impact Award
- ALSC Lifetime Achievement Award
- ALSC Generations Award

for significant and lasting contributions to children’s literature through books that demonstrate integrity and respect for all children..

Alternately, the award names could be stated as follows:

- Children’s Literature Legacy Award
- Children’s Literature Impact Award
- Children’s Literature Lifetime Achievement Award
- Children’s Literature Generations Award

for significant and lasting contributions through books that demonstrate integrity and respect for all children.

**Rationale**

In providing these options, we acknowledge that Wilder’s books not only hold a significant place in the history of children’s literature and continue to be read today, but that they have been and continue to be deeply meaningful to many readers on a personal level. We also acknowledge that they have been deeply painful to many readers, and have been across decades alongside their popularity. Both of these things are true. Neither the option to rename the award nor the option to sunset the award and establish a new award demands that anyone change their personal relationship with or feelings about Wilder’s books.

Additionally, changing the name of the award, or ending the award and establishing a new award, does not prohibit access to Wilder’s works or suppress discussion about them. Neither option asks or demands that anyone stop reading Wilder’s books, talking about them, or making them available to children. These recommendations do not amount to censorship, nor do they undermine intellectual freedom.

We also acknowledge that Wilder’s books are a product of her life, experience and perspective as an individual White woman of her era. Her works reflect mainstream, although certainly not universal, cultural attitudes toward Indigenous people and people of color during the times in which she lived and during the era in which the award was established.

Many who took our survey and argued against changing the name acknowledged the racism in such attitudes. Some, in recognizing that Wilder's books have painful racist content, point to the value of her books—and by extension an award in her name—in providing a teachable moment to discuss history, racism and stereotypes with children. This presumes that every association with or reference to the award could be attached to a context, to these “teachable moments.” But the primary visibility of this and other ALSC awards is through the name and seal, which are often seen or referenced without greater context. There are not opportunities for curriculum or caveats or justifications or explanations attached to every mention or appearance of the Wilder Award, while the desire to provide teachable moments underscores the very concern that ALSC is seeking to address in asking us to “propose what, if any, changes should be made to address the inconsistency between Wilder's legacy and ALSC's core values.”

Additionally, while we agree that adults should think critically about Wilder's books and the discussions that can take place with children around them, the purpose of the award is not to highlight or illuminate her works specifically (beyond the honor she received when the award was established), or to generate that critical discussion. Yet perceptions matter, along with the very real pain associated with her works for some, and year after year ALSC gives the impression of upholding Wilder's works through an award that bears her name.

We understand that some desire this process be slowed down. If our research and the input and feedback we received made us think more information was needed, or made us uncertain of a path forward, then we, too, would recommend taking more time. Although there may be value in allowing people to adjust to the idea of this change, the truth is that it will inevitably be uncomfortable and upsetting to some no matter when it takes place, while slowing the process down would prolong a decision that, in the eyes of many, is already too long in coming.

Finally, changing the name of the ALSC award for significant and lasting contribution to children's literature has no reflection on past winners or their achievements, and does not negate the honor they've received or their accomplishments. At the same time, it ensures future winners of such an award will not feel the need to weigh the honor of the recognition against concerns about having their name attached to Wilder's works, or to forgo the honor or recognition in order to distance themselves from Wilder's works.

That ALSC's core values have evolved and will continue to evolve over time is a given: ALSC operates within the context of our society as a whole, where the conversations taking place inform our work. But what also informs our work are the struggles and challenges and dreams and desires of children, teens and families that our members witness on a daily basis. We believe that this decision serves the best interests of our Association, its members, and all of those they serve, not only now, in 2018, but in the long-term.

## **Methodology**

Our task force conducted a survey promoted to ALSC members as well as members of ALA ethnic affiliates. Responses are summarized in Appendix A. In addition, we solicited specific feedback from members of the publishing community; scholars, critics and culturally relevant content experts; and winners of the award. Some of those responses were submitted via the survey; others wrote back to us directly. Quotes from some of these are provided in Appendix B. Additionally, we received feedback from ALSC members through conversations. We also received unsolicited feedback from those outside the typical sphere of ALSC (librarians and educators), most notably from those associated formally with Wilder's legacy, or who were notified of the issue through such organizations.

Task force members read through the survey responses and feedback (both solicited and unsolicited), in addition to reading additional materials related to Wilder's books and the award. We considered all of this material, along with ALSC's core values and knowledge-based decision-making, in developing our recommendation.

We also consulted the ALSC fiscal officer for information on seal sales and other fiscal considerations. A breakdown of fiscal information regarding the Wilder is provided in Appendix C.

We thank everyone who took the time to thoughtfully and constructively respond to the survey or to direct email inquiries. This feedback provided us with a strong foundation for our considerations. We also thank ALSC Executive Director Aimee Strittmatter, our ALSC staff liaison, Elly Serrano, ALSC Membership Coordinator, and ALSC fiscal officer Paula Holmes, for their help with this phase of our work.

## **Appendix A: Summary of Survey Results**

### **Q1. Should the LIW Award name be changed?**

Yes: 305

No: 156

### **Q2. Why did you answer as you did?**

**Yes's** (repeated reasons noted in responses): racism in books; negative impact of LIW books on many child readers; books not relevant today; name/LIW books not aligned with ALSC core values

**Nos** (repeated reasons noted in responses): it's censorship, waste of ALSC's time, bowing to PC pressure, can't judge people from the past by today's standards, slippery slope: what's next?

### **Selected quotes:**

Below are quotes representing a range of responses to why people answered "yes" or "no."

#### **Sampling of Comments in Favor of Changing the Name:**

1. "We can no longer unthinkingly amplify the racism of these books through the honor of the name of the award."
2. "Even if no harm was intended, a book that makes children feel "less than" can still be harmful."
3. "The name of an award for lifetime achievement in American children's books should not carry baggage that excludes many American children."
4. "Although I still love the Laura Ingalls Wilder books for the picture they offer of day-to-day family life in settler days, I don't think the award should be named for books that I wouldn't put on a reading list. I suggest leaving the previous winners under her name since that's what they won, but move forward with a new name."
5. "The award was created in 1954 when an understanding of the message it sends to people of color, specifically American Indians and those of African descent, was not recognized. We now understand that the message is painful to others and goes against the message of equity and inclusion that we, as librarians advocating for children and their literature, stand for."
6. "I grew up loving Wilder's work. I am from Kansas, the descendant of homesteaders and my parents gave me the book with an idyllic story about how similar our family's story is. I now live far away and am married to a tribally enrolled Native man, raising tribally enrolled biracial Native children. These are hard legacies to reconcile. I have a lot of nostalgia and lingering positive feelings for Wilder, but I am more worried about what her legacy could mean for children like my daughters. And even for children like me who never stopped to consider that when my great-great-great grandparents "won" their land, from who did they win it?"
7. "I am an English teacher and a person of color, and I have kept books in my classroom library for years because they were classics and nostalgia or the status of the titles caused me not to think about them critically. As a veteran teacher now, I believe we have a responsibility to our students to share books with them that will help them see themselves or access the experiences of others with accurate representation. The Little House books are centered around a world-view that dehumanizes Native and African Americans, and unexamined, that is a damaging portrayal not only for children from those identities, but for white children who absorb those messages. An award is a powerful signal to parents, teachers, librarians and all those that read and pass books to children. It signals that the books awarded are to be held as a pinnacle of not just quality, but of values and messages for its readers. To have an award named after a book that is degrading to many signals that those voices don't matter, and are outweighed by the power of tradition. Our world has changed and the children we serve are more diverse. The books published and the awards given to those books should reflect that reality and the desire to always do better. That is why I believe the name for the Wilder Award should be changed."
8. "Wilder's books, while treasured and important, convey negative and harmful images and ideals about indigenous people. While this is not a call to remove her books from popular canon (they can and will spark important conversations about identifying problematic things in literature we love), another author's name might better represent a lasting positive impact on children's literature."

#### **Sampling of Comments Against Changing the Name:**

1. "There has got to be a way to continue honoring a well loved author like Laura Ingalls Wilder while being up front and honest about the fact her books don't always reflect views and opinions of African and Native Americans in a way that is at all acceptable. If we remove her from this award I think it also means we are shutting down the conversation and that seems to be a step in the wrong direction."
2. "Laura Ingalls Wilder made a lasting contribution to American literature, period. Just as *Gone With the Wind* made an impact, despite characterizations that, from today's lens, might seem unrealistic or inappropriate. We CANNOT judge people from the past based upon our own beliefs; NO ONE will ever measure up because they were all people who made mistakes."
3. "The Wilder books are still seminal children's literature in the US. They had an impact on me personally in my youth and they helped me question and interrogate some of the treatment of Native Americans. The books are incredibly powerful in opening critical conversations."
4. "The fact that some of what Laura Ingalls Wilder wrote way back when is offensive to people now is not a logical reason to change it. If ALSC is concerned about 'core values,' consider the core value of intellectual freedom, which is obviously being undermined by factions representing extreme political correctness who prefer to bury or erase uncomfortable realities rather than educate people about them."

### **Q3: Possible names:**

Survey respondents suggested numerous individuals for whom the award might be named (or co-named with Wilder). Most respondents who suggested changing the name also preferred the award not be named after an individual.

### **Q4: Possible other courses of action for the Wilder.**

Suggestions included sunsetting the award, starting a new award, adding terms about diversity to the award, and renaming all ALSC awards for their role.

### **Q5: Other ALSC Awards:**

This part of the survey will be evaluated in phase 2 of our work.

### **Q6: ALA Affiliations:**

Survey respondents identified as follows in terms of their professional memberships (with a number of individuals indicating more than one affiliation):

ALSC:	297 (about 7.4 percent of ALSC membership)
AILA:	76
APALA:	29
BC:	21
CALA:	9
REFORMA:	59
CSK/EMIERT:	63
Other:	202 (includes AASL, state library associations, PLA, USBBY, NCTE, ILA, ABA, SCBWI, YALSA, GLBT-RT)

### **Q7: Self-identification of race/ethnicity:**

226 individuals chose to self-identify their race/ethnicity.

Approximately half of these identified as White or Caucasian. Approximately 40 identified as Native. Approximately 20 identified as African/African American/Black; approximately 25 identified as Latinx. Approximately 15 identified as Asian. (Specific heritage was often noted within these broad identifiers.) Many identified or also identified as mixed heritage. Others identified or also identified as Jewish, Arab, Romany.

Note: we did not align or compare this optional self-identification to responses to individual questions or to professional affiliations.



## **Appendix B: Feedback from Other Key Stakeholders**

We reached out to living winners of the award (7 individuals), representatives of the publishing community (10 individuals) and critics, scholars and cultural content experts (24 individuals).

We invited them to respond to specific questions and/or complete the survey, noting that the survey gave them the option of remaining completely anonymous. Below are selected quotes from among the direct responses we received:

### **Sampling of Comments in Favor of Changing the Name:**

1. “Keeping in mind the mission of ALA and ALSC and the weight of this prestigious award, it is our responsibility as voices of the publishing community to keep pace with cultural temperament. We have an obligation to make every effort to set our literary history right ... I also feel that, with open dialogue, the tension between Ms. Wilder’s more offensive passages and the national conversation will not diminish the contribution she has made to children’s literature, but rather bring her body of work into our present conversation, sparking new interest in contextualizing it.”
2. “Having a major book award honoring a white woman who perpetuates imperialism and white supremacy has me wondering about underlying convictions of an organization composed primarily of white women. The message does not correlate with stated core values, so which is true? If the values are those of inclusiveness and integrity (as I suspect they are) I would anticipate a quick and deliberate name change for this award.”
3. “It can be said (and certainly will be) that Wilder was a writer who reflected her own time and her own experiences. True, but there were other white writers of her generation who wrote empathetically and accurately about Native Americans in the context of the push west by non-Native people. I think for example, of Helen Hunt Jackson’s *A CENTURY OF DISHONOR* (1881) and *RAMONA* (1884). Being a person ‘of her time’ is not a reason to excuse the subtle and not-so-subtle messages of racism found throughout her novels.”
4. “...human beings will tell stories in ways that justify wrongs. As people who work with books, we have to become more aware of the power of stories to do good, and to do bad, too. We believe books can change our lives, and we usually speak those words in a positive way. They are life changing, but the reality is that they are life changing in negative ways, too.”
5. “I am torn about whether or not the Wilder Award....My general stance would be to retain the name. However, if American Indians and non-Indians oppose the name, especially those that are members of ALA and/or the Native American Library Association ... then I would defer to that groups perspective.”
6. “I am not in favor of censoring the books (as I’m sure most librarians would probably agree), but I do feel like their content is problematic enough that her name being associated with a major ALA award is not necessarily a good thing—particularly when authors of color receive it.”

### **Sampling of Comments Against Changing the Name:**

1. “While I understand the motivation of and share many of the feelings with those who propose changing the name, the impulse to rid ourselves of, and protect our children from, anything that may offend feels like censorship. There’s something dangerous about that which moves individuals to erase unsettling aspects of our history. By removing Wilder’s name from the award, ALSC would be saying Laura Ingalls Wilder is no longer worthy of the Award named for her. I don’t believe this is true.”
2. “ALSC’s core values and priorities have evolved over generations because it is an organization made up of people who have evolve over decades and generations. I fundamentally do not believe it serves larger justice or advances any discussion to erase what has gone before. We run the risk of short circuiting the opportunity for deeper and more difficult discussions.”
3. “Today’s children actually may benefit more from reading Wilder than did past readers, who accepted the stereotypes as ‘normal’. Today’s readers are uncomfortable (myself included) because we recognize and acknowledge the wrongness of these attitudes. This discomfort is a good thing. It is healthy to face the reality of ugly times in our history, to consider works in the context of their time, to see the flaws in beloved characters and come to understand them and the influences that make them human.”

**Appendix C: Wilder Award Fiscal Information**

Below is the information provided by ALSC Fiscal Officer Paula Holmes:

Award	Seal Sales (in units)	Endowments and/or Financial Support	MOU, Legal Agreements, and/or Listed Sponsor	History and Purpose
Wilder	<b>19,000</b> (FY18) <b>18,000</b> (FY17) <b>15,000</b> (FY16) <b>27,500</b> (FY15)	Endowment NAB as of 12/30/17 was \$64,502 with funds available to spend of \$2,497. We have been monitoring this fund as one to consider increasing through a transfer. In planning for future endowment transfers for 2022 the budget committee has discussed moving funds into the Wilder to support more aspects of the Newbery-Caldecott Banquet and perhaps the Monday morning awards presentation.	None	Award established in 1954. A bronze medal, honors an author of illustrator whose books, published in the US, have made, over a period of years, a substantial and lasting contribution to literature for children. The Wilder Endowment was founded in 2000 with a Net Asset Balance transfer of \$25,000. The endowment purpose is to support the award. The tracking of this seal began in 2014. Seals have gone on books by Nikki Grimes (Bloomsbury), Ashley Bryan (Simon & Schuster), and Eric Carle (Penguin). The seal has not been ordered for any of Wilder's books. Bloomsbury has been the largest buyer for the Nikki Grimes books.

Note: Physical Seal Sales of the Wilder Award Seal in 2017 was .3184% of the total units sold for ALSC.

Note on the award medal costs: Based on documentation from establishing the Belpré award in 1998 we can estimate \$10,875 for creating a new medal. Design and sculpting of the medal est. \$4,000, die cut \$2,000, striking medals est. \$2,300 (\$150 each, typically a minimum of 15 plus shipping), cherry wood cases est. \$2,000 (15 cases plus shipping), engraving medals - \$75 annually, design of digital seal image for use in licensing \$500. Total including one of 15 medals engraved \$10,875. (This does not include staff time to carry out the work).