

What it Takes to Succeed on a YA Book Committee: Three Veterans Speak Out
by Nancy M. Henkel, Susan Geye, and Kathie Fitch
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Librarians LOVE committees! Every time there's an issue to discuss, a booklist to compile, or a challenge to meet, we form a team, give ourselves a name, and then talk, talk, talk. And indeed, some of our committees are vitally important (think Intellectual Freedom). Some of our committees might be considered rather dreary (think Budget and Finance), while some look like pure, unadulterated fun (think Best Books for Young Adults).

Working on a national book committee like the Newbery or Quick Picks can truly be a thrill. Literally hundreds of books arrive from publishers, making every day seem like Christmas and making you the envy of your book-loving colleagues! Weeks before conferences, invitations galore start arriving to dinners at expensive restaurants and to cocktail parties at chic and trendy venues! Your name appears on the ALA web page! Your vote influences book purchasing as well as what teens will read all over the country!

But is working on a book committee just fun and games? Is it just a chance to get free books and build your resume? Unfortunately not. There is a tremendous amount of responsibility and dedication involved, but you will discover the hard work is a fair trade for the honor and the experience you gain. Here, three former national book committee members reveal how to maximize the benefits of your position and have a great time serving in one of these prestigious positions.

Pre Conference and Throughout Your Term

The Reading Commitment.

Often when book committee members talk about how much reading is required of them, colleagues and friends say things like, "Oh, I could do that. I already read at least a book a week!" Quick, do the math: that's only 52 books a year. BBYA nomination lists typically number well over 200 books—and that doesn't count the books committee folks read and don't nominate. Most BBYA-ers are reading over 300 books a year. That's 6 per week for those of you scoring at home. Meanwhile, on the Popular Paperbacks committee, members are assigned to read two booklists based on the year's nominated topics; each list can include anywhere from 50 to over 100 books.

If you want to be on a book committee, *you have to live it*. You'd better read during your lunch break, on the stair machine at the gym, waiting in line at the bank, and during pretty much every waking moment. Keep a book in the car for those long stoplights. Expect to stay up late reading and get up early to read some more. Watch, as friends and family engage in normal social behavior patterns such as TV-viewing and movie-going while you stay home and read. Watch laundry pile up and dust bunnies multiply as you sit on your couch surrounded by stacks of titles. This is the reality of volunteering for a book committee. Books don't read themselves, and you don't want to be caught with your pages down at voting time.

The Nomination Process

After the first weeks on the committee, nominations start rolling in and most members have to make a desperate decision. Each day new, beautiful books arrive with intriguing covers and enticing summaries, all crying to be read. Soon it is apparent that not all selections received from publishers are age appropriate or worthy of nomination to The List, but while reading them it is easy to fall behind in the required reading of already nominated titles. Skimming books is not successful since the reader is responsible not only for the plot but also for the voice and overall feel of a book. Each committee member must find the fine margin between being too far behind to catch up and reading widely, searching for books to nominate, since a big part of being on a book committee is using your professional judgment and putting forth books for consideration.

Each member must carefully choose which books deserve nominations. For example, a respected YA author's new book has earned the right to be read, but it may not stand up to the scrutiny of nomination, and the best book of the year could easily be written by a first time author, making it vital that each book be examined for its own merits. Each member must evaluate the books received from publishers while still scouring review journals, haunting book stores for new releases, interviewing colleagues about current favorites, and of course, talking to teen readers. The most conscientious committee members are those who nominate (and read) a great number of books and who read "beyond the publisher box," aggressively searching for new and popular titles. Further, these members bring their hard-to-get nominations to committee meetings to ensure that titles have enough readers to get proper consideration. Take your own nominating seriously, and show professional courtesy to your fellow committee members by reading the books they nominate.

Record Keeping & Note Taking.

Because of the amount of books you may receive from publishers (550-700) and the amount of books you will read on many book committees (300-400), it is vitally important to keep accurate records and to take thorough notes on what you read. Use your favorite database or spreadsheet program and for each book you get from a publisher, record the title, author, price, if the book has been nominated, if you've read it, and what school or branch received the book if you donated it. Keeping track of the books you have received and read will become important as the deadline draws closer and you are scrambling to get hold of the books you have yet to read.

When you receive a nomination from the committee chair, print the e-mail and use it to take notes as you read. Keep in mind that you may discuss well over 200 books, and if you read a book in November, you may not discuss it until June. Making notes will help you speak intelligently, and it will help you remember which book has the alcoholic father and the best friend dying of cancer and which book has the alcoholic best friend and the father dying of cancer. Some of the things you might want to make a note of are:

1. Initial reaction and why you would or would not want this book on the list.
2. Time period, setting, genre, number of pages, and writing style.
3. Discrepancies in factual information or typographical errors.
4. Picture captions and photo quality.
5. Comments about characterization.

6. Notes on the ending and how it “works” with the story.

Finally, keep your nominations in a 3-hole binder and be sure to put re-enforcers around the holes—you’ll be turning those pages back and forth a lot during committee meetings.

Public Relations 101.

You will be doing an incredible amount of work on a book committee and you will be doing an incredible service to your school or library system. You must let other people know about it and here are some ways to spread the word:

1. Call the local paper and tell them about your appointment, then submit an article with a picture for publication.
2. If your school district or library publishes a newsletter, ask them to publish an article about the committee and your appointment.
3. If you are in a school, send a letter to your superintendent at the end of the term telling him the number of books you received and the dollar value of those books. This shows the financial benefits your district received as a result of your time and effort on the committee. If you are in a public library, send a note to your director, filling him in on your activities.
4. Make a presentation to the school board or board of directors to explain the purpose of your committee and its advantages to your district or system. Outline the impact your service has on the patrons/students, some of which include:
 - a. Newly published books donated to the schools/branches.
 - b. National name recognition for the district or system.
 - c. Local teens have a voice in recognizing the best books for teens across the country.
 - d. Knowledge the librarian gains from meeting with authors and publishers is passed on to students/patrons.
 - e. The reading required vastly improves the librarian’s ability to do reader’s advisory.

The Teen Voice.

Committee members must remember that although librarians, bookstore buyers, and parents use the book lists as purchasing guides, the books on the list are meant for teens. Therefore, teen comments must be heeded. Sometimes, all committee members agree that a book belongs on the list. However, this is not often the case. Many times the vote is split and agonizing discussions take place about the merits of quality versus popularity. It is for these books that teen comments become paramount in making the final decision, and to disregard them is a disservice to the very ones we serve. Also, heeding their input gives ownership over the final list to teens, adding credibility to the list. Most committee members use a short review guide for teens that read nominated books. This form guides the reader through questions about characterization, dialog, setting, theme, and cover art, and space is left for a recommendation and individual comments about why the book should or should not be on the book list. The comments from these review sheets are shared with the committee during discussions about the book and teens are usually

extremely blunt about their feelings on a book. In addition, local teens in conference cities are often invited to speak about books and their passionate pleas for books can really sway voting. Conscientious committee members take these teen views into consideration when casting their ballot.

Collaboration.

As fun and exciting as it is to have the UPS truck delivering boxes of books every day, it can be pretty daunting to try to read them all by yourself. In the age of computers and e-mail, we now have the ability to instantly communicate, so use this to your advantage. Your committee chair will create an e-mail group to which nominations will be sent. Use the group mail function to talk to your fellow committee members. If you are unsure about a title, ask other members if they've read the book. If you question teen appeal, ask if anyone has had teen readers. If you are feeling overwhelmed near the nomination deadline, split the alphabet with another member: you concentrate on reading non-nominated titles by authors whose last names begin with the letters A through L. Give M through Z to your partner and you've suddenly cut out half the books on your shelf and you are ensuring that more books are getting proper consideration. Remember, you are only one of an entire committee. Working together and conferring with your professional colleagues is one of the best parts of book committee work, so make sure you communicate with other members regularly. Besides, who else will really empathize with the compulsion to read at stoplights?

At Conferences

Comings and Goings.

When scheduling meetings during a conference, every effort is made to make sure times do not conflict with other ALA meetings or programs. Even the lavish dining invitations from publishers are considerately scheduled so as not to tempt a committee member to skip a meeting in favor of a calorie-laden lunch. Accepting an appointment to sit on a book committee means making a total commitment to be punctual to every meeting and remaining until the chairperson adjourns it. No one appreciates a member who is consistently late getting to meetings or who has excuses about needing to leave early. Committee member responsibility includes booking travel plans that allow one to arrive before the first meeting and stay through the final vote count and annotation writing session. On very rare occasions due to emergency, a person can send their final vote in by proxy, but, truthfully, after the amount of reading done during the year, to not be there in person for the final discussions and the outcome of the voting would be almost unbearable! And remember, the audience is watching. Many committee meetings are open to the public, which includes publishers, librarians from around the country, and even authors. Empty chairs at the committee table are noticed.

Conference Temptations.

About two months before each conference, expect to begin receiving invitations. Publishers with books to sell and authors to promote, vie for your presence at their events. And, it is very hard to resist. Attend conferences in cities like Washington DC, Chicago, and San Francisco, and you will be invited to dinner at places none of us can afford on a librarian's salary! Both ALA and the publishers will tempt you with parties and gatherings that often last well into the morning hours. However, when you stumble late into your 8am meeting bleary-eyed and incoherent for book discussion, expect some severe looks from your fellow committee members.

Conferences ARE fun, but first and foremost, they are the stage upon which you demonstrate your effectiveness as a committee member. Use the non-meeting hours to finish any books you have not read--most committee members hate to see books miss being on the list due to lack of readership. Or, use the time to organize the notes you took during group discussion or during the local teen comment period. You might also consider re-reading a few of those problematic titles or those that really deserve more examination. There is also the possibility of visiting the exhibits to scope out forthcoming titles to nominate; publisher booths often have galleys to give away and booths are staffed by knowledgeable folks who are also on the lookout for the year's best books. Remember, there are people from all over the country vying to get onto some of these prestigious book committees. Make sure you deserve your appointment and utilize your conference time wisely.

Monopoly.

As librarians love to talk and, for the most part, are a fairly opinionated bunch, monopolizing of book discussions is a constant threat to the harmony of meetings. It is very difficult to be passionate about a book, especially if the voting is close, and not interrupt, interject, or scream one's opinion. Reading is a personal and emotional experience. Giving each person an equal chance to voice his or her feelings about a title is a tricky task for a chairperson. The sighs, groans, and eye-rollings of committee members when a long-winded colleague gets started should help, but this is one table where respect, consideration, and resolve must rule. Keep in mind that everyone on the committee has read the books, everyone has teens who've read the books, and everyone wants to share their opinions and expertise. Closing your mouth and opening your ears can make you just as valuable to the committee as the person compelled to speak about every book.

Author Biographies:

Nancy Henkel is the Assistant Managing Librarian at the Maple Valley Library in King County, Washington. She served on the Best Books for Young Adults Committee from 2000-2002 and still keeps a close eye on what the committee is doing.

Susan Geye is the Library Media Specialist at the Crowley Ninth Grade Campus in Crowley, Texas. She served on the Best Books for Young Adults Committee from 1999-2001 and considers it the highlight of her professional career.

Kathie Fitch is the librarian at Rachel Carson Middle School in Herndon, Virginia, a 7th and 8th grade building with 1,100 students. She served on the Best Books for Young Adults Committee from 1999- 2001 and loved every second of it.