

MEMO TO: GCLS Awards Administrators and Board Liaisons
CC: Independent Review Committee Members
FROM: Virginia Dodge Fielder, Ph.D.
SUBJECT: Topline Survey Results – GCLS Awards Administrators and Board Liaisons
DATE: August 15, 2016 (Revised on 6/6/2017 to include only summary results)

First, let me thank each of you for responding to our survey, sent via email on July 28, 2016. As you know, at the recent GCLS conference, I agreed to chair an independent review committee to make recommendations for how the awards process might be improved. Seven other GCLS members agreed to participate as well: Donna Brown, Jane Chen, MJ Lowe, Elaine Lynch, Leigh Howell, Rosa Moran and Sharon Owens. None of us is currently on the GCLS board, nor are any of us participating in the judging process for books published in 2016 – thus fulfilling the requirement for an independent “external” review as sanctioned by the GCLS Board of Directors.

As awards administrators and/or board liaisons, you were thought to be important stakeholders in the GCLS awards process – a point of view borne out by your extremely helpful responses. Indeed, our committee wisely determined that asking for your opinions should be the first step in our quest to help ensure the quality of the awards process. We are so thankful that seven of the eight awards administrators surveyed and all four board liaisons responded by the August 12th deadline. Your comments will provide crucial direction for how we focus committee efforts in coming weeks and months.

As promised, this memo contains highlights of your perceptions of the primary strengths and weaknesses of the GCLS awards process, as well as your suggestions for improvement. But first, a few caveats:

- ✓ I have excluded in the highlights comments related to the GCLS awards ceremony and to the Trailblazer and Lee Lynch Classic awards, as well as suggestions for other “non-category” awards not voted on by the membership.
- ✓ Inclusion of highlights does not constitute an endorsement of those points of view by our committee. Rather, our concern at this juncture is to identify the *range* of opinion you and other stakeholders have to offer, not the statistical *weight* of those opinions.
- ✓ No effort has been made here to “balance” comments – such as including reasons for Board of Director decisions as reflected in minutes of monthly meetings – though this will be necessary as the independent review committee continues its work. Note that certain assumptions, such as those about the OpenWater software, have yet to be validated independently by the committee.

So, with these caveats in mind, here are the topline results of opinions expressed about the GCLS awards process by awards administrators and board liaisons:

Primary Strengths

- The Goldie Awards provide a vital service to the lesbian community by shining a spotlight on books thought to be of high quality. Readers, authors and publishers are believed to benefit in a variety of ways.
- Involvement by GCLS members in the awards process is considered vital to its success – particularly by members who serve as judges, awards administrators and board members – and some respondents give the organization high marks for listening to member concerns.
- Recent changes are thought to have improved the awards process in important ways: encouraging authors to submit their work as e-books saves time and money; using OpenWater to receive nominations, communicate with judges and record Goldie ratings simplifies the administrative process; and investing in training for judges via webinars and other outreach helps make judging more consistent and objective.
- The GCLS awards process is dependent on the willingness of its diverse membership to serve as judges. Such participation has allowed the number of judges in each category to increase from three to five, a move that, along with anonymous judging, is thought to have resulted in fairer evaluations.
- GCLS leadership appears committed to taking additional steps to ensure the integrity and objectivity of the awards process.

Primary Weaknesses

- In the opinion of some, status of the Goldie Awards has been devalued by too many entries unworthy of an award, and by too many finalists and winners, especially in small categories. Unrealistic and arbitrary rules on the number of finalists and winners are thought to be a culprit. Reading unworthy entries is believed to be a drain on judges' time and attention. Books should meet minimum standards to be judged worthy of a Goldie, some argue, while others say the concept of recognizing and rewarding many writers must be maintained.
- The Goldies are hampered by having as many as 70+ entries in some categories and six or fewer entries in others, according to several respondents. This leads to inequitable status in terms of being shortlisted or a winner in one category versus another, a difficulty exacerbated by an expanding awards program. The Traditional Contemporary Romance and Debut Author categories – each with 50+ books – are viewed as especially problematic. In some cases, questions are thought to be too detailed and insufficiently retooled to reflect crucial category differences.
- Quality of Goldie judges is described as varying from year to year and from category to category. This is thought to cause a lack of uniformity in judging, thus undermining member confidence in the GCLS awards process. The criteria for selecting judges are considered murky, as are the processes for vetting and assigning judges to specific categories.
- Integrity and transparency of the GCLS awards process – both actual and perceived – are absolutely essential to the organization's reputation and the confidence of its members. Unfortunately, integrity of the process has been called into question numerous times during recent years, some respondents say, and the process isn't as transparent as it should be.

Suggestions for Improvement

- Find ways for GCLS to lift the quality of books that achieve recognition for being shortlisted as a Goldie finalist and, especially, for winning an award. Assuring that all books meet minimum requirements that transcend categories – such as correct spelling, grammar and formatting – would be a good start, some argue.
- Consider carefully a plethora of changes suggested by respondents for improving the quality of judges and the judging process. These suggestions include written guidelines for reviewing applications to become a judge; new requirements for composition of the panel of judges in given categories; a two-step process whereby entries are first screened for minimum standards, then judged on essential elements of quality work; and beefing up required training for judges.
- Focus on categories and category definitions that make sense to entrants and best reflect the reading interests of GCLS members. Some believe GCLS should consider splitting overlarge categories, such as Traditional Contemporary Romance, into more manageable yet still relevant categories, e.g., Romantic Comedy versus Romantic Drama. Others recommend having two or more sets of judges read a portion of the books, generate their shortlist, and then read all finalists to determine winners. Several mentioned the need for more explicit category definitions and an annual review of questions in each category.
- Consider changing the number of shortlisted finalists, especially for small categories, and perhaps the number of Goldies awarded in that category. Formulas for doing so might be based on the number of category entries in a given year or some other method. One respondent argued for restricting an author to one entry per category in any given year “in the spirit of fairness to other authors.”
- Look into changing the requirements for certain awards and how they are judged. Poetry and anthologies are fundamentally different from other categories, some argue, and should be treated as such. Judging Debut Author is considered problematic, since the current process for doing so is unwieldy and pits widely divergent genre and styles against each other. Consider reinstating the prohibition against a given author winning the Ann Bannon award and a given cover artist winning the Tee Corrine award two years in a row.
- Consider administrative changes that give the awards administrator more autonomy, yet make the process more transparent. One idea suggests forming an oversight committee to recommend policies and procedures to the board and also to support the awards administrator throughout the process. Some say interaction with board members should be restricted to clarification on existing policies. Consider making the awards administrator a paid position and extending her term from two to four years.
- Renew efforts to educate the GCLS membership about the awards process and to encourage them to participate. Listen to member suggestions with an open mind.

Other Observations

- The GCLS awards process has evolved mostly for the better, but respondents still perceive problems that must be addressed. Several recommend restructuring various procedures to make the awards process more rigorous, more transparent and less prone to criticism.
- Some suggestions for next steps: Encourage the independent review committee to look at more and better use of the OpenWater system, including whether or not the process for nominating and judging books meets expectations. Survey other stakeholders (e.g., publishers, authors, and judges) for their thoughts on the awards process. Look at other book awards to identify best practices. Share the findings of the review committee with the GCLS membership, “warts and all.”