

**MEMO TO:** Survey Respondents  
**CC:** Independent Review Committee Members  
**FROM:** Virginia Dodge Fielder, Ph.D.  
**SUBJECT:** 2016 Judges Survey – Topline Results  
**DATE:** March 19, 2017 (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 earlier this month. As you know, at the GCLS conference last July, I agreed to chair an independent review committee to make recommendations for how the Goldie Awards process might be improved for 2018 and beyond. Seven other GCLS members also agreed to participate: 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 we judging books submitted for 2017 awards – thus fulfilling the requirement for an independent “external” review as sanctioned by the GCLS Board of Directors.

We are sending you this memo because you responded to the GCLS 2016 Judges Survey and provided your email address to receive a topline summary of results. Below, you will find a discussion of the methods employed and a summary of findings, including related open-ended comments. Please pay greatest attention to the quantitative results (i.e., percentages and averages), as they denote the “weight” of opinion among 2016 judges, while “selected comments” reflect the “range” of opinion.

You will note that this memo does not contain recommendations based on the findings, since committee members believe results from other key stakeholders should be considered prior to a final report. Also, we plan to ask the entire GCLS membership for reaction to proposed ideas and recommendations.

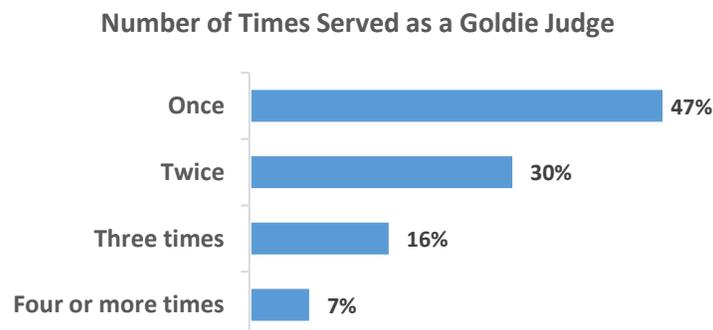
Thanks again for your help!

## **METHODS**

On March 5, 2017, this note was sent by the committee chair via email to 69 potential respondents:

*The reason I am writing today is because GCLS records show you were a volunteer judge for books competing for a 2016 Goldie Award. Given your participation, we are particularly interested in your opinions about the judging process and how it might be improved. Please help us by taking a few minutes to complete our 2016 JUDGES SURVEY at this link: <https://goo.gl/forms/eqe5eLcir19jCt7J3>. We hope to hear from you as soon as possible within the next few days. Please answer the questionnaire only once and specifically for 2016, even if you judged other years.*

By March 16, forty-three responses had been received, for a 62.3% response rate. Of those responding, twenty (47%) had judged only once, and twenty-three (53%) had judged multiple times. Here are the specifics:



## **FINDINGS: Overall Judging Experience**

For the most part, respondents had positive views about their experience as a judge for the 2016 Goldie Awards. More than eight in ten “strongly agreed” that they understood the rules and requirements for becoming a judge (88%) and found it easy to volunteer to be a judge (81%). Judges felt they received sufficient training on “what to consider as I judged books in my category” (88%) and, to a lesser extent, on “how to use the OpenWater awards software for judging books” (72%).

Awards administrators also got relatively high marks. About three-quarters of judges agreed strongly that they could call on administrators if they “had questions or comments” (77%) and that they received sufficient communications throughout the judging process (74%).

### **Percent Strongly Agree**

*(Rating of "4" on 1-to-4 scale, where "1" means "strongly disagree" and "4" means "strongly agree")*



### **Selected comments on the judging process, training and communication:**

- *My compliments to those now running the judging process. It cannot be easy to find, assign and train judges for the various categories and to make sure they are able to do a reasonable job of rating the entries and in a timely fashion. My exchanges with them (discovery of a conflict of interest in my assigned category) have been cordial and handled very professionally. Technology is being used to an impressive degree and appropriately. I thank them for their service.*
- *It was an interesting process that I was happy to be involved in. The instructions were clear, expectations were managed and workload explained. This year I didn't volunteer as while I received one email, a second would have confirmed me. The email received wasn't very engaging or encouraging to volunteer again. This is not a criticism, as I did receive an email and the responsibility was on me to volunteer.*
- *I believe the judging process to be well handled from the training through the continued updates until the review time has ended. It's been an incredible eye opener as to the work and effort that is needed.*
- *There were some glitches in the online “training” but once over that hump the “session” was fine though felt a little like being reprimanded even before beginning the process.*
- *I found it very difficult to find the judging website each time I wanted to judge a book. I had to use a sort of backdoor approach to find the login page each time. That was very frustrating.*

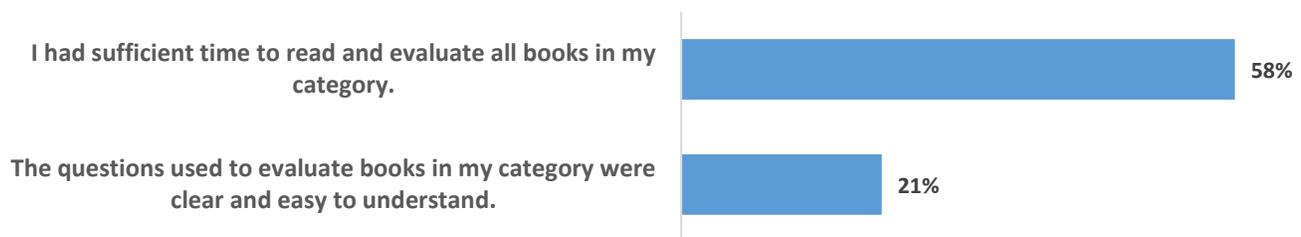
Judges were far less complimentary about two other aspects of the judging process. Only 58 percent strongly agreed – and 14 percent disagreed – that they had “sufficient time to read and evaluate all books in my category.” Considerably fewer strongly agreed (21%) that “the questions used to evaluate books in my category were clear and easy to understand,” while 28 percent disagreed.

Selected comments on time to evaluate books and questions used:

- *There absolutely must be a way to decrease the number of books in the larger categories judges must read. Currently no one can be a judge for traditional romance unless they have the ability to dedicate most of their time to reading books instead of having actual jobs or families or commitments.*
- *It was difficult to read and evaluate the number of books in the time allotted.*
- *Far too many books are entered for consideration. The free for all of nominations could be pared down to a more reasonable number of books. Poorly formatted books should never make the final cut.*
- *Evaluation questions could be revised to reduce redundancy, streamline the evaluation process.*
- *Adapt the judging questions to better relate to the categories. Some questions as they are now are hard to apply to some categories.*
- *Ensure the judging questions are not so similar you feel like you are judging the same question, attribute twice.*
- *The judging process was fine, though some of the questions on the form felt repetitive and that was a drag. I judged in a small category so wonder if the onus in the large categories like romance to fully read books that from the start are not award material, and to fill out the form would be wieldy.*

**Percent Strongly Agree**

*(Rating of "4" on 1-to-4 scale, where "1" means "strongly disagree" and "4" means "strongly agree")*

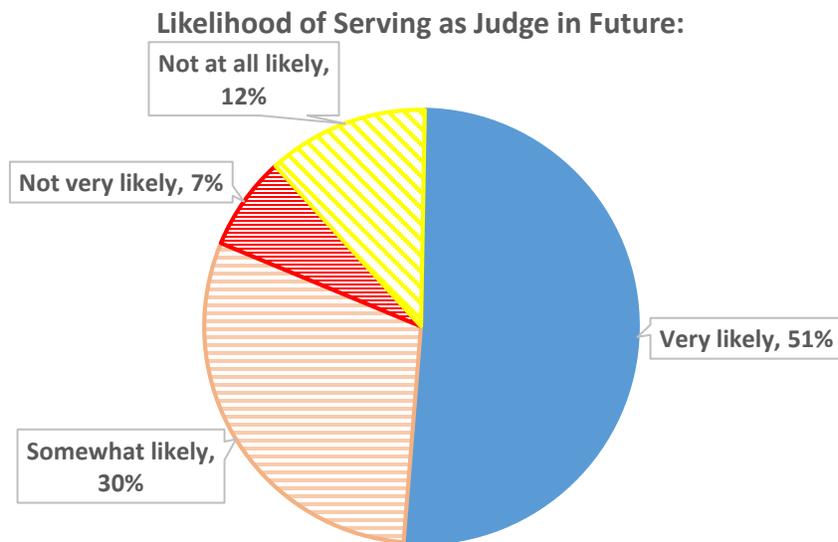


First-time judges, on average, rated their judging experience lower than did those who previously had served. This was especially true for “the questions used to evaluate books in my category were clear an easy to understand.” First timers posted an average rating of 2.35 on this item, versus 3.13 for multi-year judges. Here are the particulars:

<b>AVERAGE RATINGS BY NUMBER OF TIMES JUDGED</b> (1-to-4 scale, where 1 means “strongly disagree” and 4 means “strongly agree”)	<b>Total Results</b>	<b>Judged Once</b>	<b>Judged Two Plus Times</b>
Clearly understood rules, requirements for becoming judge	3.88	3.80	3.96
Easy to figure out how to volunteer to be a judge	3.74	3.50	3.96
Felt could call on awards administrators if had questions, comments	3.63	3.40	3.83
Received sufficient training on OpenWater awards software	3.56	3.15	3.91
Received sufficient communications from awards administrators	3.53	3.20	3.83
Received sufficient training on judging books	3.42	3.05	3.74
Had sufficient time to evaluate books	3.42	3.30	3.52
Questions to evaluate books clear, easy to understand	2.77	2.35	3.13
<b>AVERAGE OF ALL EIGHT ITEMS</b>	<b>3.49</b>	<b>3.22</b>	<b>3.73</b>

## **FINDINGS: Likelihood of Judging Again**

Respondents were asked: “Based on your experience as a judge in the 2016 awards competition, how likely are you to volunteer to be a Goldie judge in the future?” Despite high ratings overall, only five in ten (51%) said they were “very likely” to volunteer to be a judge in the future, while two in ten (19%) said they were unlikely to do so.



First-time judges were less likely to say they will serve again than were multi-year judges. Specifically, 25 percent of first-time judges said they are unlikely to serve again in the future vs. only four percent of multi-year judges.

### **Selected comments on judging experience and likelihood of repeating:**

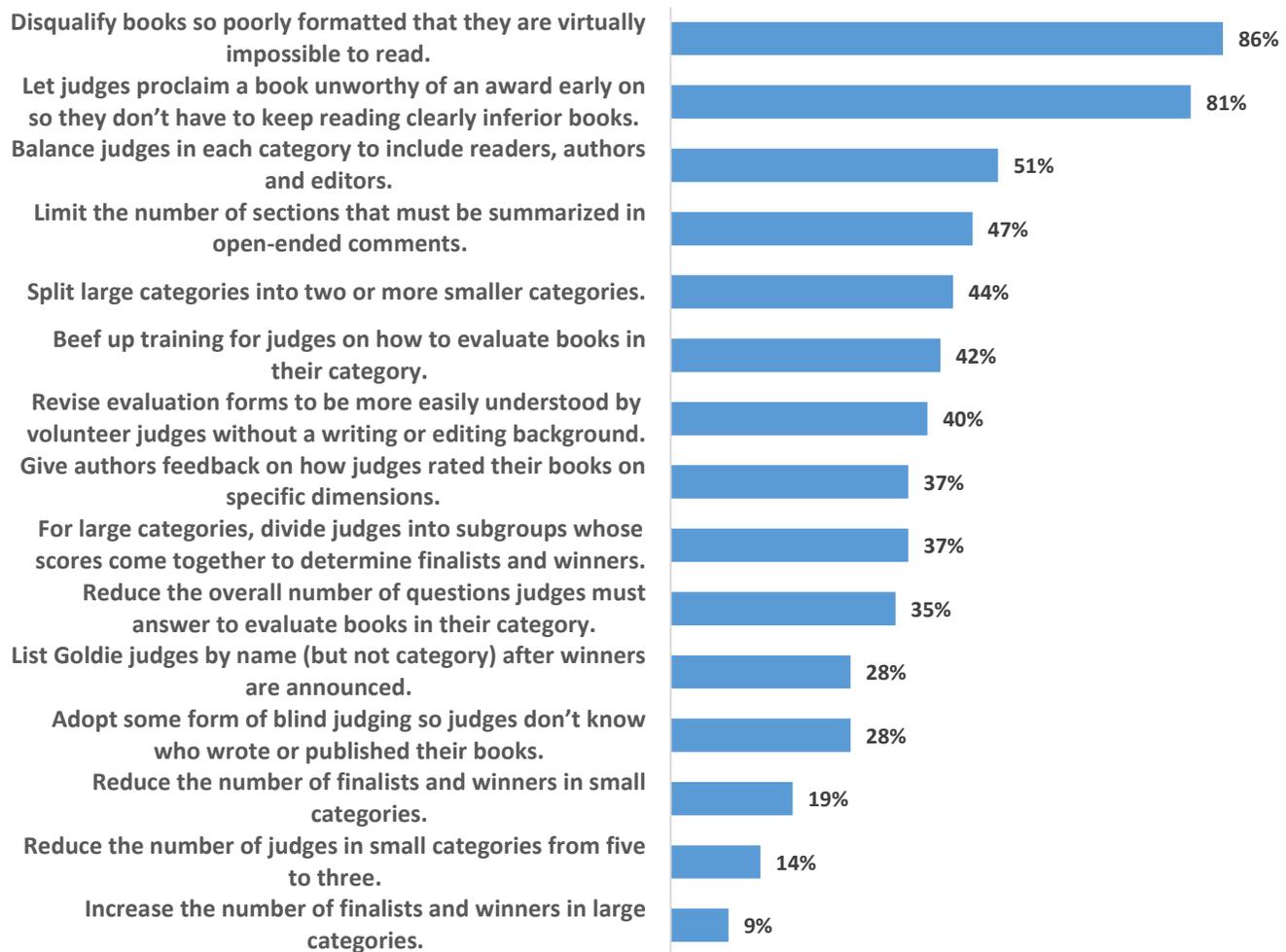
- *I enjoyed it so much in 2016 I'm doing it again now.*
- *It was a terrible experience for me. It actually caused me to not renew my membership. I judged (X category) and the judging questions did not fit the category, rendering them useless to adequately evaluate and judge.*
- *At this point, two reasons I have for not judging this year or planning on judging again: 1) the quality of some of the books made them painful to slog through. 2) my voice doesn't seem to matter that much when the same several people win year after year, after year. GCLS awards have come to feel like a high school homecoming court vote. Readers as the primary source for judging are simply not unbiased. They vote for their favorites.*
- *I'm somewhat apprehensive about continuing to be a judge in the future because there are only a few genres I really enjoy reading, and one of them is so massive, I know I cannot promise to read that many novels in a few short months. Because a judge must select the top five genres when they apply, if they don't get their first or second choice... it's likely going to be a long and rather unpleasant winter of reading.*
- *I have judged GCLS and other awards. I appreciate that we have consistent questions to answer and we are all answering them to score for each book. I think this makes for more consistent evaluations across judges.*
- *I have now been a judge for both GCLS and Lambda awards and would have to say the Lambda was a far better experience, which (to my mind) produced a far better result... I think the lack of communication between GCLS judges is a weakness not a strength. As a judge for the Lambda I had to justify my opinion to my fellow judges who had also read the books with a critical eye.*

## **FINDINGS: Proposed Ideas**

“Former judges have suggested a variety of ways to improve the GCLS judging process,” respondents were told. Then, they were asked to indicate “how much each of the following ideas should be adopted by GCLS.” Here are the results:

### **Percent Strongly Agreeing Idea Should be Adopted by GCLS**

*(Rating of "4" on 1-to-4 scale, where "1" means "strongly disagree" and "4" means "strongly agree")*



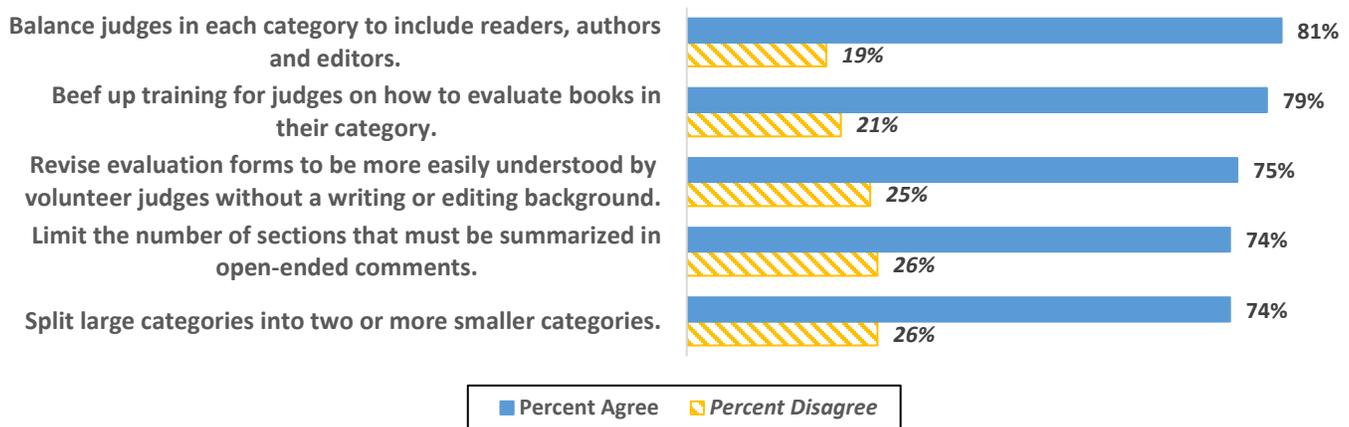
Two of the 15 ideas proposed had almost universal support from 2016 judges – disqualifying poorly formatted books (98% agree) and letting judges proclaim a book unworthy of an award early on (91% agree).

#### **Selected comments on eliminating inferior and poorly formatted books:**

- *Substantially inferior books should be weeded out early. Shoddy books remain in the mix because the Goldies are a popularity contest and no longer a literary awards competition.*
- *I have spent way too much time evaluating books which are clearly (at the first chapter/page) not ready for publication or entering in the GLCS awards. It is a waste of time to judge them.*
- *Poorly formatted books cost extra time to judge, so a possibility to disqualify would be a good option. In my category I had several poorly formatted books. The only way I could read those books was choosing another format and change of device. The disqualification should only take place if it is signaled by a majority of judges.*
- *Being able to declare a book as ineligible (from formatting or from content) early in a read would be a great option, especially in the larger categories. I had a book that was clearly a plagiarized plot but I still had to complete it.*
- *Getting rid of books so poorly written there is no chance for them to compete – a huge and painful waste of time to wade through what is essentially dreck.*

Support also was strong for five additional ideas. Eight in ten respondents agreed with two proposed approaches to improve the quality and composition of judging panels – balancing judges to include readers, authors and editors (81% agree), and beefing up training on how to evaluate books (79%). Approximately three-quarters supported revising evaluation forms to be more easily understood by volunteer judges (75% agree), limiting the number of required open-ended comments (74%) and splitting large categories into two or more smaller categories (74%).

### Idea Should Be Adopted by GCLS: % Agree and % Disagree



#### Selected comments on balancing judges and beefing up training:

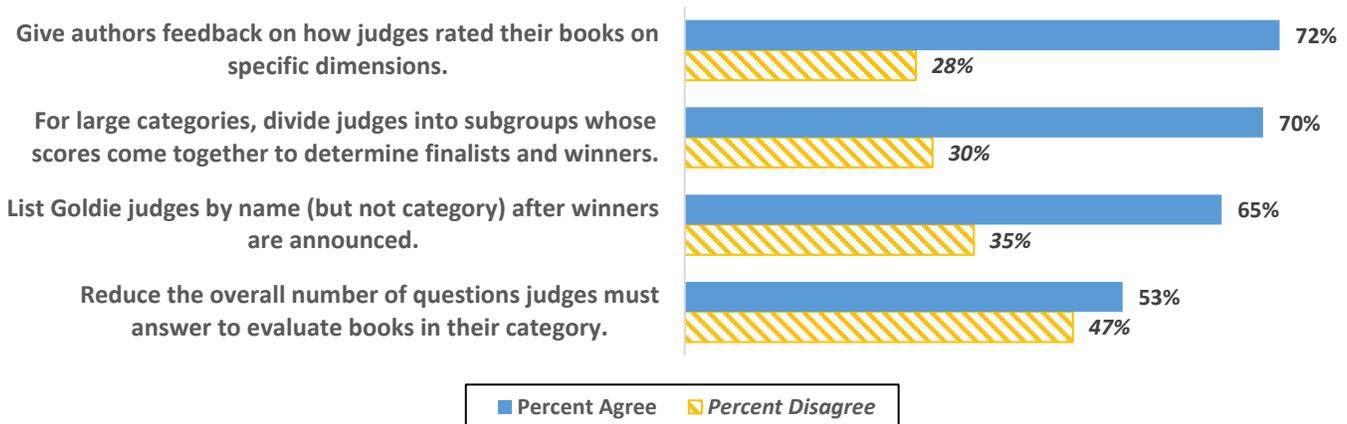
- *Having people more knowledgeable about the entire process of writing/publishing would be great. Bring in editors, perhaps readers who normally don't read lesfic, perhaps offer to swap judges for another writing group's awards.*
- *The conference should have a session each year on judging with former judges there to give feedback to potential judges. It's an arduous task to judge, but I think if more potential judges were able to ask questions of people who have done it, more people would be willing to do so.*
- *While the training was good and the instructions were clear, I struggled to come up with anything of value to say in the additional comments section. To this end for me the 'beefing up training' would have been helpful, as I'm an avid reader and write a little but am quite a distance from professional, therefore do not have the correct terms or critical awareness that would be helpful to an author for constructive feedback or an overseeing judge to help distinguish my thoughts on the books...The training would not need to be extensive just a couple of additional pointers to tell what to write about that are not in the key questions. I found my lack of expertise limited the areas I could talk about but I did feel confident in my opinion when asked a direct question.*

#### Selected comments on revising evaluation forms and approach:

- *Streamlining the rating questions (which should be reviewed and revised regularly to make sure they are pertinent to the category), and reducing the number of comment boxes. I've judged small categories (no more than 17 entries) and even so have found the rating process onerous. I can't imagine how anyone judging a large category survives.*
- *There are far, far, too many areas where a judge must write a paragraph regarding a judging section. These need to be substantially reduced. What am I supposed to say about "lesbian content" other than Yes, Some, or None?*
- *I sometimes feel like I spend more time writing up the reviews than I do reading the novels, possibly because there are too many questions and required paragraphs to complete.*
- *Sometimes there was nothing specific to say about a question and it was difficult to come up with something individual. You could leave those boxes as a voluntary option.*
- *Splitting large categories into smaller ones would allow me to volunteer in more areas – some I am more interested in than the areas I volunteer in now.*

A majority of respondents supported four more ideas for improving the judging process, though a substantial minority did not. Seven in ten agreed that authors should be given feedback on how judges rated their books on specific dimensions (72%). Approximately the same number agreed that, for large categories, judges should be divided into subgroups whose scores come together to determine finalists and winners (70%). Two-thirds were in favor of listing Goldie judges by name (but not category) after winners are announced (65% agree). Views were almost evenly split – 53 percent for and 47 percent against – on reducing the overall number of questions judges must answer to evaluate books in their category.

### Idea Should Be Adopted by GCLS: % Agree and % Disagree



#### Selected comments on giving authors feedback:

- *Provide feedback. This is the only value added component of judging to actually increase the caliber of writing.*
- *(A) pet peeve: reading/seeing the same problems with the same authors year after year. Authors can't learn from their mistakes unless they're given feedback.*
- *Give authors feedback. You could charge an extra fee for this and provide the judges with a standard form or simply copy the judges' section comments to their feedback form.*
- *I have learned a lot as an author simply being a judge and there are many works I've read that I feel the author should get feedback as a reality check on their development as a writer. Knowing the author was reading my comments might make me a bit more circumspect as I rant at times, so I wonder if there might be one comment block which could be a more carefully worded message to the author. Of course, the overworked awards staff could have some control of this.*
- *While it may help them develop their craft, providing judging feedback to authors seems like a dicey proposition – and something that is normally outside the purview of a book "awards" process.*

#### Selected comments on dividing judges into subgroups:

- *I would recommend either having a pre-judging time where only the higher-ranking books go forward, or divide up the judging some other way. The number of submissions only gets bigger every year and all this does is constrain and add bias to who is even able to dedicate the time to judge.*
- *I would appreciate a vetting process for the submissions before they are sent out to the judges, contoured judging questions that fit the categories, perhaps in larger categories (taking in judging fatigue) resubmitting the top ten for the judges to rank with clearer heads to select the top three.*
- *Need extra judges in large categories. I feel it is unreasonable to expect three or five people to read ALL books in large categories. Get six or 10, etc., and break the books they read into smaller bunches. For example, if there are 100 books in a category, break it into 25 or 50 books between 15 different judges.*
- *Two sets of judges are essentially two different opinions, and that leaves too much room for unfairness or imbalance, no matter how unintended.*

Selected comments on listing Goldie judges by name:

- *Being acknowledged as a judge after the awards ceremony would have been a nice touch last year, especially because it was the first year I had judged or attended GCLS. I had hoped there was something more (other than the mountain of free books), but instead the readers were left to remain in the shadows.*
- *I do think if we volunteer our time to read many books to aid GCLS in picking finalists, that it is only right to acknowledge the judges at the awards ceremony. I strongly feel too that editors should be acknowledged when a finalist title is read. We all work hard and would like a small pat on the back for helping GCLS grow.*
- *Judges names should never be announced, and such should never be considered.*
- *List judges (transparency is best) – but not categories they judged.*
- *After I finished judging, I'd like to see (anonymously) the results of the other judges in my category, to see if it was very different.*

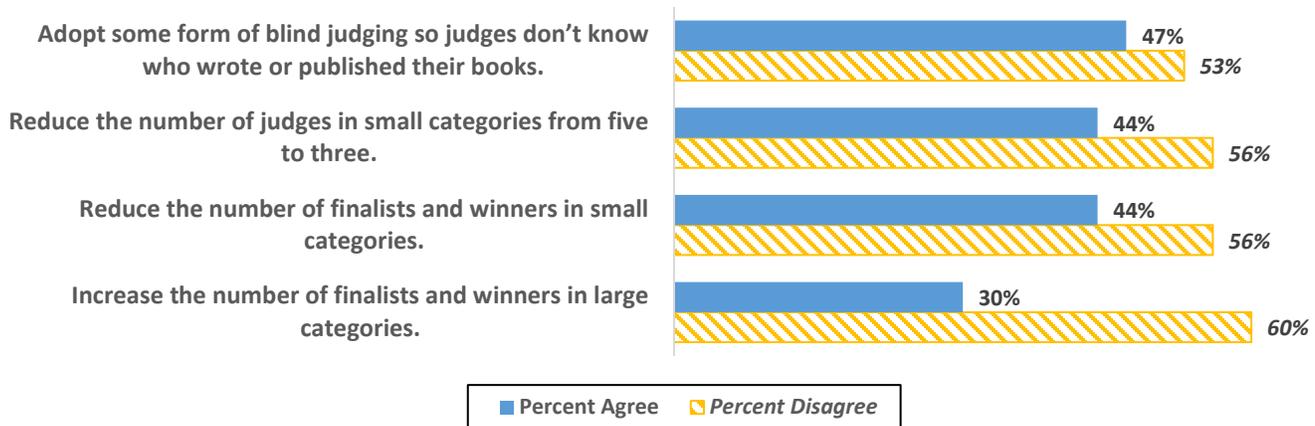
Selected comments on reducing the overall number of questions:

- *It feels like a number of the questions in the forms cover much the same ground and could be merged.*
- *The evaluation forms need to be thorough in order to ensure the books have been read by judges, but they are a bit overkill. Someone first looking at them, they are somewhat intimidating. Some questions could be omitted and others combined to make it a bit more fluid.*
- *If you want this award to truly mean something, then the evaluations should be as thorough as they are now. I do not recommend making the criteria "simpler." Admittedly my point of view may be a bit skewed by the fact that I am retired and had/have plenty of time for reading and evaluating. But I think a Goldie should be as "prestigious" as we can make it, and to me that means covering as many bases evaluation-wise as we can. That being said, some of the award categories are definitely too large and thus unwieldy.*
- *I'd like to see more specific questions for each category and within a category. For example, Is there too much narrative and not enough dialogue? And vice versa? Is there a lot of repetition? Are the main characters compelling? And, in a mystery, does the main character actually investigate and solve the crime by interviewing witnesses, searching for clues, and eliminating suspects? Are the suspects credible?*
- *It seemed to me the GCLS questions had been put together by someone with absolutely no understanding of the genre. For example, world building is a vital and distinct part of the (science fiction and fantasy) genre. The author must create a world that does not, and has never, existed, and then convey it to the reader without bogging the story down with masses of exposition. Yet although there was a general, non-category specific section on world building (containing four questions - three of which amounted to asking the same thing using different wording) there was nothing specific to the genre - the originality, complexity, aptness for the story, and particularly the coherence and solidity of the world the author has created.*

*In judging, I looked long and hard at the three identical world building questions, and tried to put shades of meaning into them to cover the aspects of world building that are important for the genre. I hoped if I adopted a consistent approach to all the books it would be fair. But it wasn't easy. Instead the genre specific questions contained questions about things such as characterization, despite the fact these issues were covered in their own section. Which left me with the suspicion that whoever set the questions believes characters in science fiction and fantasy are in some way bound by different rules to those in any other genre. They aren't - beyond world building issues that were not addressed.*

Finally, a majority of respondents disagreed that four of the 15 ideas should be adopted. These included adopting some form of blind judging (53% disagree), reducing the number of judges in small categories (56% disagree), reducing the number of finalists and winners in small categories (56% disagree), and increasing the number of finalists and winners in large categories (60% disagree).

### Idea Should Be Adopted by GCLS: % Agree and % Disagree



#### Selected comments on blind judging:

- *Adopt a blind system so judges don't know the author or publisher ahead of time. This would help to eliminate the potential for bias based reviews. Once review is completed, the author and publisher could be revealed to the judge.*
- *Blind submissions would be beneficial in making the process more equitable.*
- *I did not strongly agree with ("Adopt some form of blind judging so judges don't know who wrote or published their work") because it would be impossible to hide the name of the author and publisher. Authors and publishers in this genre will do everything they can to get around this. If I could actually trust the blind judging system, I'd be all for it.*
- *I can't think of any practical way to effect blind judging when it is easy to Google a title and find the author.*
- *I am concerned there is still a bias towards a specific publisher and would consider the blind judging an option. Unfortunately, the books entered for judging have already been published which makes blind judging from a group of lesbian readers, editors, and writers impossible. I'd hand judging over to a robot before trying to make that work.*

#### Selected comments on number of finalists and winners:

- *Reducing the number of winners in any category, either large or small. There should only be one winner, and MAYBE, a runner-up.*
- *I have little faith in the honesty of the awards after seeing the number of mediocre books that made it to the finals in the small category I judged. Virtually every book nominated in the (X) category became a finalist. The publishers and authors have a long list of "friends" who volunteer to be judges simply to help certain books garner awards. It's no different from the way Amazon reviews are loaded with 5-star reviews by friends of certain publishers and these "friends" are often rewarded with more than free books, particularly at holiday time. It makes the Goldies no better than the lame Facebook contests one sees in which friends and family can merely stop into a group and cast a "like" vote.*
- *I would appreciate not setting a number of awards but rather awarding up to a certain number if there are that many that warrant it and not awarding in a category if none of the entries warrant a Goldie. I would love to look at a book boasting a Goldie and be proud of it for the award means something, having gone through this process. Sadly, I do not have that feeling.*

Overall, first-time judges rated the 15 proposed ideas, on average, about the same as those who previously had served. First timers posted an average rating of 2.93 on all items combined, versus 2.96 for multi-year judges. The largest differences were on balancing judges to include readers, authors and editors (favored more strongly by multi-year judges), and on beefing up training and reducing the number of questions judges must answer (both favored more strongly by first-time judges).

<b>AVERAGE RATINGS BY NUMBER OF TIMES JUDGED</b> (1-to-4 scale, where 1 means "strongly disagree" and 4 means "strongly agree")	<b>Total Results</b>	<b>Judged Once</b>	<b>Judged Two Plus Times</b>
Disqualify books poorly formatted	3.84	3.80	3.87
Let judges proclaim book unworthy of award early on	3.65	3.50	3.78
Balance judges to include readers, authors, editors	3.33	3.05	3.57
Beef up training on how to evaluate books	3.16	3.40	2.96
Split large categories into smaller categories	3.14	2.95	3.30
Limit sections summarized in open-ended comments	3.12	3.30	2.96
Revise evaluation forms to be more easily understood	3.09	3.25	2.96
Give authors feedback on how judges rated books	2.98	2.85	3.09
Divide judges into subgroups to determine finalists, winners	2.91	2.80	3.00
Reduce number of questions judges must answer	2.74	3.00	2.52
List Goldie judges by name (but not category)	2.72	2.55	2.87
Adopt blind judging	2.51	2.50	2.52
Reduce finalists, winners in small categories	2.49	2.50	2.48
Reduce judges in small categories to three	2.40	2.40	2.39
Increase finalists, winners in large categories	2.14	2.15	2.13
<b>AVERAGE OF ALL FIFTEEN ITEMS</b>	<b>2.95</b>	<b>2.93</b>	<b>2.96</b>

Selected additional comments:

- *Never fully understood where is the line between General Fiction and Romance. Knew books from both categories, and it didn't make sense (to me).*
- *I'd much rather have had more time to read the books that stood a chance than force myself to read all the way through books that weren't even edited or formatted or were just of such a low quality as to obviously not be a contender in the slightest.*
- *There is a disconnect in the instructions that should be addressed. The opening page notes (under Points Table) that "Each question should be considered and scored using this guideline:  
5 – Excellent: Minimal flaws, a joy to read  
4 – Above Average: Few flaws; Minor technical flaws did not detract from the reading  
3 – Average: Some flaws present; Needed further editing or reworking in key aspects  
2 – Below Average: Needs improvement in enough aspects that the reading was not as smooth as it should have been  
1 – Poor/Unacceptable: Serious flaws; Needs such major revision/rewriting that it did not provide for a good reading"  
The judging forms, however, do NOT ask for points ratings, but instead use excellent, above average, average, etc.*
- *Too many books get into a category they don't belong in and too many books are so poorly written it makes it difficult to read them even though we must.*
- *I find the process straightforward but I would like a summary of judges 'scores' after the end date to see how many agreed with my choices - just curiosity*
- *I would love to see a new category of "Series and Sequels." Often when a book is part of a series or is a sequel I will have read the previous books, but when I haven't I will feel like I wish I had so I would better know what's going on.*