MEMO TO: Publishers

CC: Independent Review Committee Members

FROM: Virginia Dodge Fielder, Ph.D.

SUBJECT: Topline Survey Results – GCLS Publishers

DATE: September 22, 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 August 31, 2016. 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. 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.

As publishers nominating multiple books, you are important stakeholders in the GCLS awards process – a supposition borne out by your helpful responses. Our committee is indebted to the 11 of 12 publishers who responded to our open-ended survey by the mid-September deadline, namely: Affinity Ebook Press NZ LTD; Badger Bliss Books; Bedazzled Ink Publishing LLC; Bella Books; Bold Strokes Books; Brisk Press; Bywater Books; Desert Palm Press; Regal Crest Enterprises; Sapphire Books; and Shadoe Publishing. Taken together, your books accounted for 63 percent of all Goldie submissions for 2016. Your input will provide crucial direction for how we focus committee efforts as we craft recommendations for improving the 2018 Goldie Awards cycle.

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

- ✓ I have excluded highlights related to the Trailblazer and other "non-category" awards not judged or voted on by the general membership, as those areas are outside our chosen purview.

- ✓ Inclusion of specific 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 opinions you have to offer, not the statistical *weight* of those opinions. That will come in later quantitative surveys of multiple stakeholders, including awards entrants, judges, authors, publishers and readers.

- ✓ Remember, any changes recommended by the independent review committee will not take effect until the 2018 awards, as procedures for the 2017 Goldies already have been announced.

So, with these caveats in mind, here are the topline results of opinions expressed about the GCLS awards process by responding publishers:

Primary Strengths

- Some publishers believe the Goldie Awards benefit authors, readers and publishing companies. To a troubling extent, others are hard pressed to name significant strengths.

- Recent changes are thought by some to have improved the awards process, most notably moving from three judges to five; increasing the number of categories; and adopting a process that, presumably, can be audited and evaluated. One publisher mentioned liking "the judging template."

- The process for submitting entries has been streamlined and, for the most part, receives good marks. Multiple deadlines, while understandable, make the submission process cumbersome for some.

- Some publishers express hope that the GCLS awards process will continue to improve. Others say that isn't likely to happen, despite lip service to the contrary.

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 undeserving finalists and winners. Arbitrary rules on the number of finalists and winners are mentioned as a culprit.

- Lack of transparency in the judging process is problematic, some publishers argue. Lack of feedback from judges exacerbates the issue, as does not knowing the identity of judges subsequent to the competition.

- A couple of publishers believe their books have little chance when nominated against titles from the "Big Two" – Bella Books and Bold Strokes Books.

- Perceived weaknesses include lack of agreement about the role of "lesbian content" in submissions and "shifting rules" in the nominating and awards process.

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 start, some argue.

- Consider some form of blind judging, presumably increasing the likelihood that books will be considered solely on their literary merit. Some foresee problems with this approach, given the familiarity of GCLS members with books and authors in the lesbian genre.

- Evaluate other possibilities for reducing perceived "fan" bias in the awards process, including recruitment of non-GCLS judges, improved training for GCLS judges, and better vetting of judges and their qualifications.

- Consider new awards categories reflective of GCLS reading and literary interests, along with new judging approaches that would increase the number of worthy authors receiving an award.

- Make the awards process more transparent. Suggestions include listing the names of judges after the Goldie Awards are announced; providing entrants with feedback on their scores; conducting an independent audit of results; and making sure submission rules are explicit and applied equally to all.

Additional Comments

- The GCLS awards have made strides, but publishers still perceive issues that must be addressed to make the awards process more rigorous, more transparent and less prone to criticism. Most of all, Goldie winners must represent highest standards in lesbian literature.

- For some, the perceived weaknesses of the awards process are so great as to signal a potential withdrawal from future cycles.