



Pacific Northwest Writers' Association

Literary Contest - Category Definitions

Category 1 **Mainstream/ Literary**

Mainstream and literary fiction is often defined as non-genre fiction. As such, it is not written to appeal to fans of a specific genre, or to satisfy subject matter requirements of genre fiction.

Mainstream and literary fiction may place strong emphasis on additional objectives: to provoke debate and discussion, to provide a refuge of beauty, to inspire, to provide insight. The intent of literary fiction is to create aesthetic value and impact on the reader through craftsmanship that serves the story and its meaning. Style, technique, characters, and layers of meaning are as important as subject matter and plot.

The protagonists in mainstream/literary fiction may not resolve their conflicts, but explore and illuminate their unique humanity.

For examples of mainstream/ literary fiction see the Man Booker Prize for Fiction, the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Category 2 **Historical**

Historical fiction presents readers with a story that takes place during a notable period in history, and usually during a significant event in that period. Historical fiction often presents actual events from the point of view of people living in that time period. In some historical fiction, famous events appear from points of view not recorded in history, showing historical figures dealing with actual events while depicting them in a way that is not recorded in history. Other times, the historical event complements a story's narrative, occurring in the background while characters deal with events (personal or otherwise) wholly unrelated to recorded history. Sometimes, the names of people and places have been in some way altered. As this is fiction, artistic license is permitted in regard to presentation and subject matter, so long as it does not deviate in significant ways from established history. If events should deviate significantly, the story may then fall into the genre of alternate history, which is known for speculating on what could have happened if a significant historical event had gone differently. On a similar note, events occurring in historical fiction must adhere to the laws of physics. Stories that extend into the magical or fantastic are often considered a historical fantasy.

Category 3 **Romance/Women's Fiction**

Romance fiction focuses on the relationship and romantic love between two people. Romance readers expect an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending. Publishers designate romance novels as category or single title. Category romance is usually shorter, and must adhere to publisher's guidelines regarding setting, time periods, level of sensuality and types of conflict. Single titles are often longer (350-400 pages), and are not constrained by specific publisher guidelines.

Women's Fiction are novels that explore the lives of female protagonists, focusing on all kinds of relationships, be it lovers, spouses, parents, children, friends, or members of a community. The common thread is that the central character is female, and the main thrust of the story is something happening in the life of that woman (as opposed to the overall theme being a romance or a mystery of some sort). Emotions and relationships are the common thread

between books that belong in this category. A woman is the star of the story, and her emotional development drives the plot. (Definition provided by author Rebecca Vnuk)

Subgenres may overlap, but the following are general categories in common use:

- Contemporary (set in current time)
- Historical (set in the past)
- Regency (set between 1811-20 or thereabouts)
- Futuristic/time travel (set in a future or past world; or the protagonists come from different time periods)
- Fantasy (includes elements of magic and fairies, dragons, elves, and so forth; often set in historical times)
- Paranormal (usually set in contemporary times, with characters who often have supernatural powers)
- Romantic Suspense (subplot includes mystery, with danger for the hero and heroine)
- Chick-Lit (hip, stylish, urban; marketed to young, single women in their 20's)
- Inspirational (stories with a religious theme, no sex)

Category 4 Mystery/Thriller

Mysteries are any fiction in which a crime or a threat to the characters and the solution to the problem are central to the story. Readers of the genre expect the crime to be solved, and the perpetrator to suffer consequences for his/her actions.

Thrillers tend to be high energy mysteries involving major threats to the wider society, such as bio-terrorism, government/national crises, nuclear weaponry, kidnapping and assassination. Danger and suspense are important factors, and the protagonist is usually working against time.

Subgenres include:

- Classic: emphasis on reasoning from clues provided by the author; examples include works by A. Conan Doyle and Ellery Queen.
- Cozy mysteries: Usually involve a small, enclosed community, domestic setting, and an amateur sleuth. Sex and violence are usually off-stage. Examples include Agatha Christie (especially Miss Marple's) and Mary Daheim.
- Espionage/Political Intrigue: The focus is on national or international settings with spies and politicians involved in the plot or as the protagonists. Example: John Le Carre
- Ethnic: The ethnic background of the characters is an important factor in the mystery. Example: Tony Hillerman
- High-tech: Current or future technology is an important factor in the mystery. Example: Michael Crichton.
- Historical: set in the past. Example: Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, Anne Perry, the Pitt and Monk mysteries.
- Legal: involves courts, trials, and attorneys. Examples: John Grisham and Erle Stanley Gardner (*Perry Mason Mysteries*).
- Medical: setting and plot involve medicine and forensics. Example: Robin Cook, *Brain*. Eileen Dreyer, *Bad Medicine*.
- Noir: Protagonist, atmosphere and outcome are marked by darkness of soul. Example: Dashiell Hammett
- Occult: includes metaphysical and psychic phenomena, and the unknown. Example: Mercedes Lackey, *Burning Water*.
- Police Procedural: Story focuses on specific cases, the methods used by the police to solve a case, and with the police themselves as major characters. Example: Reginald Hill, *Ruling Passions*
- Private Eye mysteries: The central character is either a private, or professional, or amateur detective. Example: Robert B. Parker's Spenser mysteries; Sara Paretsky's V. I. Warshawski mysteries; Mary Stewart (*This Rough Magic*, *My Brother Michael*).

Category 5 Science Fiction/Fantasy/Paranormal

Science Fiction is visionary writing about science and technology to create future scenarios. Authors attempt to create an internally consistent set of physical laws that extrapolate from known science. Main characters are often scientists, engineers, computer programmers, military personnel or astronauts.

Fantasy is fiction in which the action and characters are not bound by the physics or realities of the known world. They may be set in wholly or partially non-existent worlds, such as under the earth or a fairyland or in a mythological setting. Characters may be human, part human, or non-human, and may have extraordinary powers or the ability to work magic.

Urban fantasy is a subset of fantasy defined by place; the fantastic narrative has an urban setting. Many urban fantasies are set in contemporary times or contain supernatural elements. However, this is not the primary definition of urban fantasy. Urban fantasy can be set in historical times, modern times, or futuristic times. The prerequisite is that it must be set in a city, primarily rather than in a suburban or country setting, which have their own genre subsets.

Paranormal encompasses elements of the paranormal, such as ghosts, vampires, werewolves, shapeshifters, and any sort of magical or otherworldly creatures. This type of fiction often goes beyond fact and logical explanations to speculate about the things that cannot be seen or proved, such as extrasensory perception (ESP) and alien life.

Subgenres include:

- **Hard Science Fiction:** For examples of hard sci-fi authors, go to http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/hard_science_fiction.
- **Space Opera:** science fiction that emphasizes romantic adventure, exotic settings, and larger than life characters. Examples: Star Wars, Firefly, works by Alexi Panshin or Roger Zelazny.
- **Military Science Fiction:** Interstellar or interplanetary conflict and its armed solution make up the main backdrop of the story. Examples: Battlestar Galactica; the Man-Kzin wars series.
- **Mythic Fantasy:** Fantasy that includes mythic elements such as the battle between good and evil and the hero's journey. Examples: Tolkien's Lord of the Rings, works by Ursula LeGuin and Anne Bishop.

Alternative History: The story depends on a drastic change within a historical context; the story then develops an imagined world in which the standard history is altered because of a cataclysmic event. Example: Eric Flint, 1634; Harry Turtledove's American Empire trilogy.

Category 6 Young Adult (ages 12-18)

Young Adult books are written for ages twelve and up. Length of completed manuscripts varies widely. Young Adult novels include all categories of literary and genre fiction. Themes are relevant to the problems and struggles of today's teenagers, regardless of the genre. Common themes include peer relationships and coming of age, including the difficulties of dealing with the chaos, complexity and injustice of the world that young adults inherit from adults. The protagonists, usually young adults, often gain maturity through challenges that result in new knowledge and clearer understanding of others. Settings are often urban and contemporary, but range from historical to science fiction and fantasy.

Category 7 Middle Grade (ages 8-12)

Middle Grade Novels are primarily defined by what they are not: they are not picture books, early chapter books, or young adult novels. Middle grade is for kids who have mastered reading well enough to leave picture and early chapter books behind, approximately ages 8 to 12 (typically with a protagonist at the higher end of this age range). Middle grade readers are learning about who they are, what they think, and where they fit in; the book's subject matter should reflect this. The themes often involve school situations, friendships, and relationships with peers and siblings. The chapters are shorter and the pace is quicker than in a YA novel.

Category 8 Nonfiction/Memoir

Nonfiction books and memoirs are distinguished by their factual content. Nonfiction books are written for audiences with specific interests and often include a table of contents, index, references, and bibliography. Writing style may be narrative or expository. Topics include subjects such as how-to's, history, cookbooks, biography, autobiography, science, and the humanities.

Memoir is book length narrative nonfiction that describes the personal life history of the writer in such a way that the reader, among many possible reactions, may be inspired, delighted, informed, or encouraged through empathy and recognition of universal elements of a life's journey.

Category 9 Poetry

Poetry is distinguished by its vivid imagery and visceral impact. It can be any length. Prose rarely if ever emphasizes meter and rhyme, whereas meter and rhyme are intrinsic to some kinds of poetry. Some poetic forms, such as sonnets and haiku, are identified by their formal structure. Others, such as the poetry written by e.e. Cummings, are structured wholly by the inspiration of the poet.

Category 10 Short Story

This category includes short stories that deal with adult themes and situations that intrigue, provide, and inspire. Often a short story will focus on a specific mood and setting through concise word choice and an intense, brief, emotional arc. Conflict, climax, and resolution are developed within the confines of the succinct fictional encounter. Examples of short story authors include, Edgar Allen Poe, Grace Paley, Dorothy Parker, Sue Hubbell, and Philip Dick.

Category 11 Children's Picture/Chapter Book

PICTURE BOOKS: Any book that pairs a narrative format with pictures can be categorized as a picture book. Picture books are most often aimed at young children, and while some may have very basic language especially designed to help children develop their reading skills, most are written with vocabulary a child can understand but not necessarily read. For this reason, picture books tend to have two functions in the lives of children: they are first read to young children by adults, and then children read them themselves once they begin learning to read.

CHAPTER BOOKS: A story book intended for intermediate readers, generally age 7-10. Unlike picture books for beginning readers, a chapter book tells the story primarily through prose, rather than pictures. Unlike books for advanced readers, chapter books contain plentiful illustrations. The name refers to the fact that the stories are usually divided into short chapters, which provide readers with opportunities to stop and resume reading if their attention spans are not long enough to finish the book in one sitting. Chapter books are usually works of fiction of moderate length and complexity.

Category 12 Adult Short Topics (articles/essays/memoir)

This category includes nonfiction articles, personal essays, narrative nonfiction essays, and short memoir pieces. Each piece must be complete, self-contained, and a maximum of 14 pages (see contest rules).