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### YALSA Axes Venerable BBYA List

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By Debra Lau Whelan -- *School Library Journal*, 1/27/2010

Say good-bye to the venerable **Best Books for Young Adults** (BBYA) list. The 15-member board of the **Young Adult Library Services Association** (YALSA) recently cast a unanimous vote to restructure many of the organization's lists starting January 2011. The result? BBYA will no longer exist, but there'll be a new list called "Best Fiction for Young Adults."



YALSA President Linda Braun says the board was responding to years of criticism.

So where will librarians turn to find the top graphic novels, adult books, and nonfiction for teens? They'll have to go to the Great Graphic Novels for Teens list and YALSA awards committees, which will now release their own lists of vetted titles.

So, for example, the committees that select the winner for YALSA's new Excellence in Nonfiction Award and the Alex Awards for adult books that appeal to teens will unveil their own respective lists of about 30 to 50 official nominees each January—and those individual lists will include the titles that will no longer appear on BBYA.

That's disappointing news to Ed Spicer, of North Ward Elementary School in Allegan, MI, who has relied on the monthly list of BBYA nominations to help him find titles to share with students and spark discussions. "The new format does not have this service built into it yet, except at the end of the year," he adds, referring to the fact that award committee lists only come out once a year.

This dramatic change to the 80-year-old BBYA list has upset quite a few librarians who've come to rely upon it for its annotated list of significant fiction and nonfiction adult and young adult books, as well as its list of top-10 titles. But the term BBYA will no longer exist after 2010. Instead, the umbrella title "Best of the Best for Young Adults," will be used to describe a compilation of YALSA awards and lists.

If you're still trying to figure it all out, you're not alone. Many librarians returning from the **American Library Association's** (ALA) midwinter meeting in Boston earlier this month were left scratching their heads about the revamping of YALSA's oldest, and most beloved, book list.

"There's a lot I find confusing," says Liz Burns, a youth services consultant and the blogger behind **A Chair, A Fireplace & A Tea Cozy**, who describes the restructuring as a "muddying of what is an 'award' and a 'list.'"

#### **An unfair burden**

YALSA President Linda Braun says the move was a response to years of criticism from members who found the much-loved list problematic. One of the main issues was the workload—many felt the range of materials was too much for one committee to cover (some 90 books were drawn from 203 nominations in 2010).

"I know of at least a few YALSA folks, myself included, who have turned down invitations to participate in BBYA because of concerns about not having time for a balanced life," says Dawn Rutherford, a YALSA board member and teen services coordinator for the Sno-Isle Libraries in Marysville, WA.



In the end, it came down to whether the final list really represented the best titles. "It became a quality issue," says YALSA Executive Director Beth Yoke. "The question was, were these really the best titles or just a list of recommended titles?"

Some had suggested increasing the number of votes needed to nominate a title, which would decrease the amount of books a committee member would have to read. But Yoke says changing the nomination process wasn't the answer.

"The root of the problem was readership, not the nomination process," she says. "There were so many books out there that the group couldn't possibly read them all to ensure that they were actually picking the best. And requiring more nominations would actually increase the chance of a great book falling through the cracks, because more people would have to find the time to read the title before it would be eligible."



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According to the Bowker Annual, there were 46,050 hardcover adult books and 2,100 hardcover YA titles published in 2008 in the United States, all of which were eligible for the BBYA list.

"No amount of tinkering with the nomination process or making other small changes to the way the committee did its work can adequately address the fact that book publishing has grown exponentially since the establishment of the list," Yoke explains.

Braun says the recent changes will allow YALSA to "more successfully meet the needs of members and the teens they serve by providing lists that focus specifically on a particular genre, audience, or format." And that individual lists will supply librarians with many more quality nonfiction, graphic novel, and adult titles than

BBYA ever did.

### The expert argument

But Audra Caplan, director of Maryland's Harford County Library System and a former BBYA committee chair, doesn't buy the argument that more expert committee members will necessarily result in more stellar individual lists.

"I wasn't an expert in science fiction and fantasy when I was on BBYA, but I certainly knew what constituted good writing and the same went for the elements that make good nonfiction," she says. "Believe me, as a trained librarian, after reading 300-plus books you can tell what a best book is and what is not. I also learned to love fantasy from sitting on the committee, and it broadened my ability to work with kids who loved the genre."

In fact, many say that sitting on the BBYA committee was the perfect training ground for moving on to awards committees, such as the Michael L. Printz Award for excellence in young adult literature.

This marks the second BBYA uproar in as many years. Last July, librarians averted a YALSA board vote to **phase out the list** by the end of January 2011. The rationale at the time was the same—a noticeable overlap between BBYA and other lists, and concern about the committee's workload.

### Whither nonfiction?

As far as Sharyn November, a senior YA editor at Viking Children's Books, is concerned, she prefers the original BBYA because, as she explains, a list created by generalists is ultimately better for the generalist YA librarian and teen reader. Besides, boys tend to read more nonfiction than fiction, and the new set-up "knocks a whole group of teen readers out of the selection process, as well as the final list."

"Ultimately, this strikes me as YALSA 'narrowcasting'—making every category its own list means that readers and their librarians will lose out on the wide range of materials being published today," she adds. "And authors and publishers will have to deal with the consequences."

One author who agrees is **Marc Aronson**, who says that while he's willing to accept that BBYA was "broken," eliminating nonfiction from the list sends the message that





Marc Aronson says eliminating nonfiction from BBYA sends the wrong message.

those kinds of books don't belong among the "best."

Another major area of concern? Librarians and teenagers who sat in the audience during the BBYA nomination process were introduced to genres they may not have known much about. But now, there's no list in which different kinds of YA books are considered together.

"The new rules bulldoze that ecosystem out of existence for nonfiction," says Aronson. "And what is worse, the board either did not notice or did not care."

#### Teen input

While YALSA says the new Best Fiction for Young Adults committee still plans to host teen sessions at conferences, it does admit it's still unclear how other committees plan to gather teen feedback—especially since award committee meetings are done behind closed doors.

Any non-award committees are welcome to gather teen feedback, and Braun plans to host a conference call next week with all of the committee chairs to talk about this issue. "Whether they actually [meet with teens] or not is uncertain," Yoke says.

Rutherford thinks it's shortsighted to believe the new Best Fiction for Young Adults list will stifle the voices of teens who participated in previous BBYA feedback sessions. For one, few teens took part in those meetings, and "there is no reason why we cannot create new ways for teens to get involved," she says, such as in teen sessions for Great Graphic Novels and Quick Picks, two other YALSA book lists.

Rutherford adds that the new arrangement comes with lots of benefits: publishers can more easily promote their titles; authors will have experts to judge their books; small libraries will no longer feel overwhelmed by the massive BBYA list; middle school librarians won't have to worry about the adult titles on the list; and YALSA members can talk about teen fiction and still have something resembling a social life.

#### Issues with transparency

Nonetheless, librarians like Lynn Rutan of Holland, MI, a *Booklist* blogger and a former BBYA chair, say there's a perception that this important proposal wasn't well publicized to the YALSA community. "Whether that is accurate or not, it is important to examine why that perception exists. I hope the board will also consider additional methods that will help the membership to feel more connected to the process as this trial year progresses," she says.

YALSA, however, says it kept members informed about the changes primarily through its blog, with Braun posting 11 messages on the subject between July 2009 and January 2010. The immediate response? Only one person contacted the organization to object to the proposed change.

"Some people need to take personal responsibility. I don't know if the blog was the best place to do it, but the information was there," says Yoke. Information about board actions at ALA's annual conference was printed in the fall 2009 issue of *YALS*, and the January 2010 issue of *YAttitudes* also included information about the board's meetings. Those documents also went online on YALSA's Web site on January 5.

Meanwhile, the Best Fiction for Young Adults committee starts its work on February 1, and previous BBYA lists, including the most recent 2010 list, will continue to be available on YALSA's Web site. For those members looking for one resource of selected titles, there will be an annual Best of the Best for Young Adults publication that YALSA will distribute starting in January 2011.

"The YALSA board labored with great care and consideration over the challenges," Rutherford says. "We individually gathered input from many YALSA members, and had deep discussions both at conferences and in the months between on ALA Connect and over email."

And Yoke likes to add that nothing is written in stone.



"In one year's time, the board will evaluate the changes and determine if any adjustments need to be made," she says. "So it is possible that things could go back to the way they were before."

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YALSA board member Dawn Rutherford turned down offers to serve on BBYA because the heavy workload was daunting.

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