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Reflections from a Former Book Award Team Member

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Reflections from a Former Book Award Team Member



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The suggestion to create a book award originated during a session at the annual ACL conference several years ago. A committee was formed at that time to develop a philosophy, a purpose, and criteria for the award.

Those serving on that committee wanted the award to reflect something that was scholarly enough to appeal to academics but readable enough to appeal to educated laypersons. The committee also wanted the book to support a Christian worldview, from a variety of publishers, not just evangelical publishers. They wanted to make sure that titles produced from small presses, university presses, and even the major publishing houses were eligible for the award.

The committee desired the winning book to offer new insights or knowledge, have the potential of influencing the Christian world for some time to come.

The committee also wanted the recipient of the award to be well-written, well-organized, and engaging. The writing style should be suitable for the audience and follow rules of good grammar and writing.

The committee decided to exclude only a few categories of books from eligibility: reference works, devotional materials, Christian education, Christian living, and other self-help books. The committee felt that they would have more than enough books to consider.

The next issue of discussion for the committee was the nomination process for the books. It was decided not to ask publishers to nominate books even though free copies of the books under consideration may be available if this route were followed. The committee was concerned that this might bias the award toward books published by major publishers offering many advanced copies and might leave some of the best books out of the running. The committee also wanted to have more member involvement in the process so we decided to exclusively allow ACL members to nominate books for consideration by the team.

ACL Non-Fiction Book Award Qualifications

1. Audience/Format

- Is the audience clearly defined or understood from the presentation?
- Does the format of the book complement the purpose of the work?
- Does the book have features such as an index, bibliography, etc.? Are they effective and useful?
- Do additional materials (video, etc.) come with the book? Do they enhance the purpose and overall impact of the work?

2. Content

- Is the perspective, depth of treatment, and reading level consistent with the purpose of and audience for the book?
- Is the information reliable and accurate?
- If the work is scholarly in nature, is there evidence that it has been well-researched?
- Is the material organized logically? Are the main points presented in a clear, straightforward manner?
- Is the material memorable and presented in a straightforward, logical and engaging way?

3. Author/Editor/Subject

- Does the author/editor have the credentials for writing and preparing such a work? For example, if the work is scholarly in nature, is the author/editor a researcher or scholar in the field?
- Does the author/editor have sufficient experience/employment in the field to be considered highly knowledgeable?
- Does the material present the values of a Christian worldview?
- If material is biographical or autobiographical in nature, does the life of the subject model what it means to live as a Christian with all the attendant complexities, challenges, and promises?

4. Writing Style/Mechanics

- Does the style of writing make the book accessible to the intended audience?
- Are there errors in spelling, grammar, paragraphing, and punctuation?
- Are words used incorrectly?
- Does the quality of the author's prose (syntax, word choice, rhythm, etc.) enhance the content?

5. Design

- Do the cover, color, layout, and text size facilitate the reading experience?
- Where applicable, does the presentation in charts, graphs, etc. make the information as accessible as possible?

6. Impact

- Does the work meet a need in the Christian community?
- Is the presentation fresh and compelling in nature?
- Does it have the potential to significantly influence the Christian community or significantly substantiate information already available?
- Does the work add new information or a new perspective to Christian scholarship or ministry?

Since the award's inception, I have served on both of the first two awards teams. Most of us have been disappointed in the quality of the books nominated by ACL members. We often receive nominations that only say, "I liked this book a lot." The submitters fail to tell us why they think it meets the criteria for the book award. In some cases it is apparent that the submitter has not read the criteria for the award. All of us on the book award committee are volunteers, and we have spent a lot of time reading books that are poorly written or not a good fit to the ACL Non-Fiction Book Award standards

Over this period of time, I observed that many evangelical publishers are no longer editing books. Books are filled with sentence fragments. In some cases paragraphs contain multiple voices, using first, second, and third person. Many books could be shorter and more powerful if needless repetition was avoided.

Many nominated books were either too scholarly or too popular. A couple of books used too much specialized jargon to be easily accessible to laypeople, even educated ones. In fact, I doubt that anyone but doctoral level students would find one of the titles of interest. On the other hand, some books simply had no appeal to academics.

A couple of nominated books were likely to be of little interest in a few years because they addressed topics that were too faddish.

I think all of us on the ACL Non-Fiction Book Award committee wondered why we were not getting more nominations from a wider variety of Christian topics. I came up with a short list of possible reasons.

If your library is like my library, we are relying more and more on e-books in collections such as EBSCO, ebrary, and Gale. This means we are not physically handling the book. For catalogers, the records are usually loaded into the online catalog with a few tweaks that are done as part of a batch update. Public services staff members are not seeing the book because it is not physical. The circulation of such titles is being handled through a third party instead of going through our circulation desk. Acquisitions staff members do not browse publishers' catalogs as they did in the past because of limited budgets for print books.

When someone finds an excellent book that fits the criteria of the ACL Non-Fiction Book Award, some members probably assume that it has been nominated already and fail to nominate it. Our team leader commented that since the inception of the award there has been only one instance where a book was nominated by more than one person. As we were finalizing our decision for the 2012-2013 award, we looked at a list of the books winning awards from the Evangelical Christian Publishers. We asked each other why a particular title from this list had not been

nominated for the ACL Non-Fiction Book. A couple of team members had even seen excellent reviews of the book on blogs they follow. No one had bothered to nominate it for the ACL Non-Fiction Book Award even though it might have been a stronger candidate for the award than many of the others we considered.

A couple of committee members observed that while librarians do read several books through the year that fit the award in other ways, often they were too old for consideration. Some of what committee members read on their own did not fit in other ways. For example, I read advance copies available from NetGalley. Many books publishers offered there were more popular than scholarly in nature.

ACL members may not be clear about what types of books fit the award criteria. Some may think only theology books are eligible. A well-written book that integrates faith with a specific discipline is an excellent fit for the award. Similarly, a book discussing a psychological or social problem from a Christian worldview, which is not a self-help book, is a good fit. These are certainly not the only books that should be considered, but they work well with the criteria.

As a former member of the team, I want to assist the team in getting better nominations of books published in 2014 and 2015. I encourage ACL members to get involved by nominating books. Take a look at the criteria by which we evaluate books that are nominated. Take those criteria and make a rubric with the headings *excellent fit*, *fits well*, *moderate fit*, and *does not fit*. Rate the book yourself. Nominate books where you have mostly marked *excellent fit* and *fits well*. Help the team find the books that truly deserve the award. †

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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