



THE NEW ZEALAND
SOCIETY OF AUTHORS
(PEN NEW ZEALAND INC) TE PUNI KAITIHI O AOTEAROA

The Montana Book Awards Survey

REPORT

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Prepared for: Maggie Tarver
Chief Executive Officer
New Zealand Society of Authors

Prepared by: Julia Brannigan
+64 9 445 2538
jandpbrannigan@xtra.co.nz

INTROUCTION

The Montana Management Committee has agreed that a major review of the awards should be undertaken over the next year.

They wish to look at everything from structure, to eligibility, to judges, to criteria.

In this context, the NZSA canvassed the views of its members.

An open-ended questionnaire (see appendix) was sent by email to all NZSA members at the end of 2008. Forty completed questionnaires were returned plus one “essay” by an esteemed New Zealand journalist.

All the people who responded to the survey write in some form or another and when considering their comments, this should be taken into account.

The sample size was small thus the findings are directional rather than definitive.

The breakdown of the sample was as follows:

Male	9
Female	31
Northland	0
Auckland	20
Central Districts	2
Wellington	11
Top of the South	1
Canterbury	2
Otago	4
New writer	8
Mid-career	20
Established	12
Unpublished	2
Published	33
Self-published	5
NZ citizen	38
Other	1 (USA) 1 (Permanent resident – waiting to apply for citizenship)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Respondents clearly feel passionate about the Montana Book Awards.

While people appreciate the opportunity to air their opinions and the vast majority felt that a review of the Montana Book Awards is timely, there is an opinion that any changes should be made only after careful consideration, so as not to damage the essence of them.

“Montana has been a generous sponsor of New Zealand literature. Any changes must not kill the golden goose.”

“A review of the Montana Book Awards should not be taken as an opportunity to promote a competing, pointless and potentially highly detrimental alternative to an existing, recognised and relatively successful set of awards.”

“Consider changes but remember that these are the only prestigious award we have in New Zealand so we need to look after it.”

The Montana Book Awards are primarily seen to raise the profile of New Zealand books and writers; to reward talent; to generate publicity (although more could be done) and to create aspiration within the writing community.

This is laudable, especially for a nation that has a dedicated and talented but comparatively small writing community and a limited local publisher and readership market base.

However, it appears that there is some confusion and a sense that the aim of the Montana Book Awards is not explicit – is it for the publishers, the writers, the booksellers, the reading public? Further, the sample were unsure as to how “best” and “excellence” are defined – while this arguably is subjective, there is no clarity about whether we are talking about literary merit, production values, sales etc. In addition to this there are criticisms that the Montana Book Awards give too much power to the publishers as well as (historically) having a bias to Wellington (judges).

As the publishing world changes and new technologies broaden the opportunities for writers to expose their material there is a sense that the Montana Book Awards fails to keep up. Thus, e-publishing is an area that some wish to be represented. This necessarily raises the question of how worthy publications from these sources would be filtered and included. (The name Montana *Book* Awards might need to be revisited if including e-publishing.)

Self-published books are not thought to be included either within the Montana Book Awards and there is clear need to communicate that self-published works are part of the structure.

Regarding the structure of the Montana Book Awards which was an area of key concern for the majority of the sample, it appears that there are two potential routes:

1. An Oscar-like approach with a host of categories plus a Supreme Award (the “best of the best”) and a Lifetime Achievement/Body of Work Award (perhaps not every year but discretionary)
2. A pared-down, single-minded award system with a long-list, a short-list and one winner each for Fiction and Non-fiction, the prize money being substantial

Whatever the future, there appears to be a need to revise the publicity and promotion of the Montana Book Awards in order to maximise the impact of them and the benefit to the writing, publishing and reading community of New Zealand.

MAIN FINDINGS

Responses to the mission statement - “*The Montana New Zealand Book Awards promote excellence in, and provide recognition for the best books published annually in New Zealand.*”

Consistently the most cited comments for how the Awards are achieving this purpose were:

1. Raising the profile of New Zealand books
2. Rewarding achievement
3. Publicity of works
4. Creating goals for writers to aspire to

“They are an incentive for high standards – a benchmark for others to aspire to.”

Further, the Montana Book Awards were seen to improve book sales, most especially for the winning authors, provide peer support, add lustre to the reputation of publishers and give unrecognised work a platform.

Across the sample there was an evident view that the Montana Book Awards are a “good thing”.

However, when asked how the Montana Book Awards are NOT achieving the stated purpose, there are clearly a number of areas that respondents felt strongly about.

These encompassed:

1. Aim:

Who are the awards really for – the publishers, the authors, the booksellers or the public?

What is meant by “excellence” and “the best books”?

Does this mean quality of writing (many assume it does or should) or does it mean quality of production (many believe that this is the case currently)?

“The Awards have become diluted and lost focus.”

2. Confusion:

Too many categories/awards

But also omissions of genres

Misfits (i.e. poetry in fiction category)

Poor communication re: submissions

People's Choice Award

"There are too many awards and individuals get lost in the crush."

"It has a narrow cultural focus."

"Ignoring the popular..."

"Innovative works get overlooked."

"Good works go unnoticed."

"Writers don't know that their books have been submitted."

"A clumsy contraption."

3. Publisher biased

"It is publishing focused rather than writer focused."

4. Publicity opportunity not optimised

"How much does the General Public know or hear about the Awards?"

"There isn't enough media attention."

"Not enough coverage on the radio."

"Not promoting winner through the bookstores."

5. Elitist and not up with the times:

No representation of E-publishing, and perception that credible self-publishing is not represented although in reality it is.

"E-publishing is the future..."

"An Old Boys' Club."

"Elitist because the entry eligibility is limited."

6. Prize money

A couple of respondents felt the prize money was desultory. This being said most considered the prestige of winning of more importance than monetary baubles.

Views on how to improve the Montana Book Awards.

A majority of responses related to simplifying and tidying up the Montana Book Awards.

Some saw this as broadening and more clearly delineating the categories, the specifics of which might involve opening up categories (children's, popular fiction, creative non-fiction, romance, memoir, poetry, drama/plays, First Book) plus an award for a body of work (a sort of "lifetime achievement" award).

"The categories are restrictive."

"Reinstate the First Book Award which is essential for recognising new talent."

(Evidently this respondent was unaware of the NZSA First Book Award from Montana even though it is publicised.)

Conversely others felt that the Montana Book Awards should be trimmed considerably to include perhaps just 2 or 3 prizes – for fiction, non-fiction and/or poetry.

A number asked for the creation/publicising of the Long List.

There was call for including an Overseas judge on the panel.

Some respondents also wanted judges to be selected from a wider cross-section of the literary world.

Further, one respondent questioned the tradition of ratio of two male to one female judge.

"It has been pointed out to me that there are always two male judges and one woman. Should this be an issue? It's possibly more to the point than the regional thing."

Greater publicity was deemed appropriate – via all media; readings, signings, tours, debates etc.

"Televise and glamorise them! Phone me – I used to be a TV editor..."

"There should be radio and TV readings and critical panel discussions."

"Build the school and library links."

"Montana has enough clout to sponsor more coverage both on TV and radio."

A few suggested that the publisher-driven nature of the Montana Book Awards be scrutinised with a view to giving prominence to the writers.

Views on how the Montana Book Awards meet or fail the needs of the writers.

Increased sales for the winners and a bit of media exposure were the two main areas that were mentioned in terms of the Montana Book Awards meeting the needs of the writers.

Looking at areas of opportunity (i.e. where the Montana Book Awards are deemed to fail the needs of writers), respondents key comments echoed some the criticisms outlined above:

- Categories are restricted
- Too dependent on the publishing houses
- Lack of definition as to “excellence”
- Emphasis on book production values more than the writing

Isolated comments of note were:

“It would be good to integrate the Awards with funding so that there are more opportunities for travel, investigation and research.”

“Montana stopped paying for authors to tour in the provinces and the bookshop owners relied on this for publicity.”

One respondent questioned the premise that the Montana Book Awards should meet/fail the needs of writers.

“Accolades are always important but I doubt the awards ‘meet the needs of writers in general’. Surely no-one has the Montana Book Awards in mind when they write.”

Attitudes to the present structure of the Montana Book Awards.

The most common comment about the present structure related to it being confusing and muddled.

“The present structure is complicated and confusing.”

In terms of broadening the categories, while the specifics would necessarily be subject to further debate (internally or externally) the view was that they might include:

- Fiction by genre
- Non-fiction by genre
- Poetry
- Drama/play (although should be covered by Playmarket and if we were to include this category then the film industry could quite rightly argue for TV/film scripts to be included...remember that this is the Montana **Book** Awards!)
- New writer/first book - one for fiction/non-fiction/poetry (evidently some lack of awareness that this category does exist)
- Lifetime achievement/body of work (a very popular suggestion)

“Include playwrights...a full written and published script to present to the judging panel and an earlier production of the play.”

“Separate the poetry category. It doesn’t sit comfortably in fiction.”

“Popular fiction should be included or are we still stuck in old snobby ideas about ‘great literature’?”

Additionally, it was mooted that a Supreme Award would be well worth including. (Again, a very popular suggestion)

“A book supremo!”

“I’d like to see a Supreme Award – the very best of the lot.”

“...wouldn’t it be better to have prizes for the winners of each category and then one supreme award for the best book.”

Alternatively, the Montana Book Awards might encompass just **one big prize** for fiction and non-fiction.

One respondent queried the need for the complete second set of Maori awards – although this is misunderstanding on his/her part as the current situation is to award one Maori language award which would appear appropriate.

Responses to the idea of a second set of awards honouring the quality of writing for e.g. fiction, non-fiction and poetry.

Responses varied significantly, most probably reflecting levels of awareness and understand of how the Montana Book Awards are constructed.

So, a number of people assumed that the Montana Book Awards already honour quality of writing, so didn't see the point of a second set, which would confuse.

"Doesn't the current set of awards honour the quality of writing?"

"I thought Montana was designed to do these things."

*"I thought the Awards **were** about the quality of writing."*

A small number thought that a second set of awards would be *"an excellent idea"*.

Although it appeared that this was interpreted as the second set of awards having different nomenclature and possibly prize money in order to distinguish the two.

"A separate set of awards based principally on literary merit, like the old National Book Awards is a good idea. The prestige of winning."

"Yes – if a well-written book in shoddy production could win. That benefits the writing community."

"The writing and publishing of a novel in this country is nothing short of a miracle and needs to be celebrated as such. It is the one opportunity novelists can get to celebrate themselves."

However, most seemed to see that a second set of awards from Montana would dilute the existing awards and that the key issue was to look at rationalising these rather than generating another set of awards.

"It would dilute it."

"Beware fatigue."

"It would detract from Montana's credibility, antagonise the sponsor and be detrimental on many levels to the existing awards."

"I don't understand how it would work."

"If we look at the film industry genre or the music industry, they do all their awards in one hit on one night."

Many of these respondents preferred to see a reassessment of how the current Montana Book Awards are structured.

"Turn the focus back and reward excellence – the current awards are too book production focused."

"Perhaps add a fiction and poetry award for writers by writers to recognise experimental work."

Responses to the judges retaining the right to name fewer titles than set.

There were mixed reactions to the judges being able to name fewer titles than set and clearly the events of 2008 had irritated and offended some; both the action taken and the way in which it was communicated.

Those in favour claimed that it was fair and an important right in order to retain excellence.

“We do not want to be the best of a bad bunch.”

“I think that this is right. If the book isn’t up to it then why include it?”

“...the intellectual credibility of the Awards depends on them being able to list as they see fit.”

Those against it found it arrogant and exclusive.

“I don’t like this. It creates a have and have-not culture.”

“I’m not happy with it. Appalling.”

“It’s a cop-out and damages everyone. It’s insulting.”

“Outrageous. NZ writers have so few chances to win a prize compared with other countries.”

Responses to judges being able to call in books not submitted.

The majority of respondents felt that it is acceptable for the judges (indeed their prerogative) to be able to call in books not submitted.

“Yes – publishers can be quite blinded by certain writers.”

“Reading the way it runs now I am appalled how publisher-driven it is.”

“This would help the small presses who do not have the money to enter writers for the prize and could cover an outstanding self-published book or maybe a work that has been published electronically. It is vital that the prize keeps pace with the huge shifts in technology that are sweeping across the publishing industry at the moment.”

The minority against judges being able to call in books not submitted cited:

It would muddy the process

What rules would apply?

Would it lead to people lobbying the judges?

Attitudes to authors submitting their own book.

Virtually everyone – whether for or against authors submitting their own work - who commented on this question assumed that it referred to self-published books. This would indicate that there is very limited if any awareness of the eligibility of self-published authors to submit their works.

The general consensus was that authors being able to submit their own books was worthy of consideration and that it would “open up” the Montana Book Awards, most obviously to self-published authors.

“Yes, it would widen the range and help self-published books to be considered.”

“...would lessen the elitism...”

“Great! Anything to break the cliquey stranglehold on book publishing in this country would be great.”

“How else would they get books entered if they self-publish?”

“With the high technical quality of texts now possible to the self-published writer, the parameters of self and industry publication are becoming more permeable. So in principle there’s no reason why writers shouldn’t submit their own publications.”

“Self-publishing is going to increase and some self-published books are fantastic. They should have the opportunity to be recognised like any other.”

This being said there were some concerns and objections of note:

Increasing the number of books to process potentially making it unwieldy

Making more work for the judges

Need to consider a sub-committee?

“Opening the Awards to self-publishing might lessen the appearance of excellence.”

*“It’s useful **only** if the publishers are neglecting to submit book.”*

“Never, never, never – the judges would never get through the pile. There needs to be a good, fair selection panel.”

“...the judges would drown under a series of wannabees...”

Some respondents also commented on how allowing authors to submit their own works would benefit published authors whose works had not been forwarded by their publisher.

The question raises the issue of what the fee would be for individual versus publisher submissions. Also, one might consider how it would affect the writer-publisher relationship in a hypothetical case where a book submitted by an author wins a prize, the publisher not having submitted it.

Attitudes to whether there should be a geographical spread of judges/advisors.

A few felt that a geographical spread was imperative to representing the whole country and for a couple of respondents, taking the bias away from Wellington.

“In the past there has been a predominance of Wellington judges and advisors. This year, I believe some effort was made to adjust this balance. This is still an area that needs to be carefully looked at each year.”

However, the vast majority of respondents believed that location was far less of an issue than procuring the best people for the job, wherever they might be.

“It’s nonsense. There has never been an adequate substitute for merit.”

“Get the best people for the job – merit rather than where they live.”

“You should get the best people for the job. This regional stuff is silly.”

“Pick the best people for the job. They can all live in Timaru. Place of dwelling is irrelevant when it comes to the quality of delivery.”

As pointed out earlier, one respondent queried whether the judging ration should be 2 males to 1 female.

Number of judges and remuneration.

The vast majority stated that **three** was the ideal number, with a small minority (5 respondents) suggesting five

Most respondents thought that judges should be paid for their time although the inclination was for expenses/small honorarium rather than a hefty fee.

Gordon McLauchlan's Comments

I offer the following submission on Montana New Zealand Book Awards. I'm sorry I missed the New Zealand Society of Authors (PEN NZ) Inc deadline. The reason is I had surgery on my right hand and was incapacitated for more than a month. I have been involved one way or another on the awards since the early 1980's when they were the Wattie Awards.

The "three ways" formula imposed by the society seems unsatisfactory, so I have taken the liberty of discussing changes to the awards in a less rigid manner. Indeed I don't believe that this kind of formula-driven questionnaire is the best way to come to sensible answers to the problems associated with the awards. It would be better to call for submissions to be made in writing and in person, and to conduct discussions among people who have ideas to offer from all branches of the industry.

It is my belief that to mollify disappointed publishers and writers over the years, the number of categories has been expanded to the point where publicity and interest is too diffuse. If you asked the average reader in New Zealand how many award categories there are, very few could tell you.

The best way to build up interest and impact would be to reduce the competition to two awards only rather than many categories and two "overall winners", as at present. Each of the two categories could have its own set of three judges, which would make the judging process more realistic and believable. A short list and a long list for each category could be announced, and momentum built up for the big night of the awards. You will note that the Man Booker annual award does this, and especially does not take too earnest an attitude towards the judging and the result. The awards are not taken lightly but no one believes that literature can be judged unerringly or without the dimension of taste and opinion. Judging is seen as a kind of intellectual battleground with consequential controversy seen as a good thing. British society and their judges are mature enough to allow free comment on the judging process and for the judges to give frank but reasoned remarks on that process. Unfortunately, New Zealand gets rattled by this sort of open debate but, by the very nature of the industry, publishers, writers and booksellers should be leaders in adapting this culture by encouraging reasoned and individual opinion and comment.

That is why the chair of judges in the two main categories should be people of experience, judgement and confidence.

So my recommendation is the two super awards worth even more than they are now, with paid judges sophisticated enough to handle the publicity and controversy that should follow the result.

I sense that publishers, booksellers and writers will balk at my suggestion because of the any-prize-is-better-than-none mentality, but I firmly believe the two big awards concept, properly handled in terms of publicity, would engender maximum

attention. Only one category – a Book of the Year – would be even better but a compromise of two categories would be acceptable. Imagine if the Man Booker was judged over a number of categories. Impact would be minimal.

The present system of publishers submitting entries is acceptable, it seems to me, as long as they notify their writers that they are or are not going to submit books. Then the writers should have the right to submit their book – or not.

Judges should not be chosen from regions on the basis of population but the absurd situation of recent years where the great majority of them have come from one small city has caused widespread resentment and alienation. I can see how it happened. It is easy to quickly canvass locals in a centre like Wellington, where the managing committee is centred, than on a national basis. A widely canvassed list of people deemed qualified should be compiled and an effort to ensure some geographical balance. It may be worth inviting those who think they qualify – according to prescribed guidelines – to apply.

I believe the management of the awards has been in a rut over the past few years, and not unnaturally: every organisation needs constant reappraisal and renewal by sensible, experienced and professional people.

SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS

The main points that came out of the survey are:

1. Is the focus on excellence of writing or book production values?
2. Who should have control for submissions – writers or the publishers?
3. The current categories are too diverse and confused.
4. There is a need and want for a Supreme Award/Lifetime Achievement Award.
5. Consideration should be given to the allocation of judges – gender and geography. (Race also?)
6. Self-published authors are not seen to be eligible under the current structure – that their works can be submitted needs to be communicated effectively.
7. The marketing, publicity and coverage of the Montana Book Awards can and should work much harder.

APPENDIX – THE QUESTIONNAIRE



NZSA Members Survey

Montana Book Awards

The Montana Management Committee has agreed that a major review of the awards should be undertaken over the next year. They wish to look at everything from structure, to eligibility, to judges, to criteria.

In this context, the NZSA would like to canvas your views – please complete the following survey questions and return them to The New Zealand Society of Authors (PEN NZ Inc), PO Box 7701, Wellesley Street, Auckland 1141, fax through to 09.379 4801 or <mailto:director@nzauthors.org.nz> by

Monday 24th November 2008.

All completed surveys received by the deadline will be entered into a draw for a \$100 book voucher kindly sponsored by Dymocks Booksellers.

1. “The Montana New Zealand Book Awards promote excellence in, and provide recognition for, the best books published annually in New Zealand.”

a) List three ways you feel that the awards are achieving this purpose?

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b) List three ways you feel that the awards are NOT achieving this purpose?

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2. List at least three things that you think can be done to improve the awards overall?

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3. How do you feel the awards meet or fail to meet the needs of writers?

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4. There has been some discussion about the need for a second set of awards honouring the quality of writing, say for fiction, non-fiction and poetry. Please comment on this, and explain how such awards would benefit or not benefit the writing community.

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5. Do you think judges should be able to call in books not submitted? How do you think this could impact on the awards process?

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6. How would it affect the awards process should authors be able to submit their own books?

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7. What do you think about the present structure of the awards (i.e. division into categories with two overall winners)? What changes, if any, would you like to see?

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8. What do you think about judges retaining the right to name fewer titles than the number set for each category if they feel that only those named meet the criteria?

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9. What do you think about the geographic spread being a major contributing factor in the selection of judges and category advisers?

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10. How many judges do you feel there should be and should they be paid?

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11. Are there any other comments you would like to make?

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General

Please circle one of the following:

- (i) Male Female
- (ii) Age Range
- 18-29 30-40 40-50 50-60 60-70 70+
- (iii) NZSA Branch you belong to
- Northland Auckland Central Districts Wellington Top of the South
- Canterbury Otago
- (iv) New writer Mid-career Established
- (v) Unpublished Published Self-published
- (vi) NZ Citizen Other.....