

What to look for in a book awards program



[WHERE AWARDS ARE A PASSION, NOT AN INDUSTRY]

IN A WORD: AUTHENTICITY.

And that starts with: Who profits? Is the program designed to highlight, to advance, to celebrate authors? And to help guide readers? Or is it set up to enrich the organizers?

In other words, is it on the level.

You can tell a lot about the character of an awards program by spending some time prowling the program's website. And in fact, it can be helpful to compare programs you know and trust, either by experience or reputation, with those you're less familiar with or only now encountering. When checking out a new program or comparing one program to another, to investigate intent, here are a few core points to start with.

The number of award categories

One first quick and easy check is, How many categories are there? Is this a nice tidy set, a curated set, or does it look like someone opened up the BISAC catalogue and dumped everything in?

A nice tidy set might be 10 to 20 categories. For larger programs, you might find more, say, 30 to 40. But truly outrageous numbers are a red flag.

More categories, and more detailed categories, sounds like a win for authors. Something for everyone, right? And it feels so delightful to see that perfect, fits-like-a-glove category that you are working in. Not just sci-fi, but Sci-Fi: Steampunk or Sci-Fi: Medical & Future Technology or Sci-Fi: Galactic Empire & Colonization. (Which means, How many other categories for sic-fi alone?)

Just think about the realities of handling the judging process for leviathan spools of categories. What number of judges would this take? What range of criteria? And — if the criteria are not that different for any one particular genre or category across the many subdivisions for each — then why all these subdivisions? What's their purpose?

It's one thing for all the books in the world to be sifted and sorted and organized into precise, finely tuned categories in bookstores and libraries. This helps readers find just what they like. It helps authors define just what they are writing, giving them genre/category guideposts (which they then might satisfy in new and intriguing ways, or even playfully circumvent). It helps also with the sheer pragmatics of shelving, and of course it helps immeasurably with marketing. Very handy things, labels.

But within a competition, such precise and narrow labeling can be a sign that something is off. Does it enrich the process and its results? Or is it disingenuous? Does it benefit authors? Or is it merely a tasty lure?

. . . the number of categories you can select for a book

Many programs allow you to enter your book in different categories. This can make sense where the categories are topics or modes that can exist organically in combination (for example: animals & pets, art & photography, gift book), but keep in mind that this is also potentially more revenue for the program.

So, where this is the case, how is that revenue being managed? It costs money to run an awards program, to be sure. Do the funds collected seem commensurate with program development? Do they drive benefits or features or excellence? Or do they seem instead to indicate another reason for the program's existence, namely, to optimize the amount of money each entry brings in? Part of the equation here, too, is the nature of the organization running the program and its relationship to the author community.

There's no one right or wrong way to handle multiple categories. It's one factor to be taken and weighed along with the others. For one program, offering multiple categories could make good sense, translating to a benefit for authors. For another, it could be a good deal more suspect. It's all about balance and numbers, the fees involved, and into what (or into whose hands) those fees seem to be channeled.



. . . and the number of winners

An extraordinary number of categories almost of necessity means an extraordinary number of winners and other award-takers (winners/finalists, first/second/third/honorable mention, gold/silver/bronze, etc). The more so, if there are many declared awards of merit per category.

If there are a hundred winners in an award cycle, say, what does that do to the value of your win? How about two hundred? Could all those many categories be more about maximizing the wins across entrants, or possibly even making everyone a winner? If the winners are those with the highest overall score in a given category (regardless of the score itself), well, sure, the former at least. And possibly edging close to the latter.

When awards are given out like lollipops, the value of any one win, or near win, any medal, any honor, is greatly lessened. Beware particularly of “pay and you win” programs. Eventually, the reputations of those programs catches up with them, and that then tarnishes your win.

Program text. The lure of higher sales? The promise of a win?

What’s the language in use around the program? Does it seem to be overpromising in terms of what winning an award will do for you? Does it seem to imply, in any way, that a win is in the bag?

Winning an award *can* help: but typically a lot of marketing is required to translate that win into increased visibility for you and your book, and so higher sales. The credibility of the win will factor in as well. Some readers will be impressed with any award. Others will look for names they recognize or for indications of credibility. (Don’t expect agents and Big 5 publishers to be swayed by anything other than the most prestigious awards. And in general, not those for independent publishing.)

As for how within reach a win is, sometimes this comes through in the tenor of the text itself, in what the pitch is and how it’s made. Other times it’s signaled more explicitly, such as (a real example here) with the menu label “Apply for Award.” If everyone’s a winner . . . then no one is, really.

It’s a difficult proposition. Any endeavor that involves the participation of others must seek to attract those others. But there should be no overpromising, no misleading. (And of course, no overcharging.)

p.s. We’re not just talking fun copy here. Hey, we all like fun copy.



Relationship of organizers to the author community

Does the organization exist to support authors and their work in some way? Is this a gathering of writers or publishers? Or perhaps a publication involved in some way in recognizing, or publishing, fine work? In other words, is this an organization known for its service to the publishing industry, an organization tightly interwoven into the community?

Or does the organization instead exist to sell services to indie authors? And where that's the case, do the awards seem to feed into that arm of the organization? Or are the two most beautifully and cleanly separate?

Or perhaps this is an organization that has no reason to exist, no other ties to any community, apart from its awards program. The organization *is* the program. In this case, when you scrutinize all aspects of how the program is organized, what it offers, what it charges, if everything looks to be entirely sound and above board, then in the program itself is the organization's service. And if the scrutiny turns up anything that seems particularly dicey? Big red flag.

Upsell?

Does submission to the awards program involve upsell? (As with, for example, excessively multiple and pricey categories.) Or does winning (or placing or getting honorable mention) then set you up for additional purchases? In other words, is the program itself merely the springboard for a host of other services?

And where there are additional services, are these beneficial to authors? Or are these merely profiteering moves?

High entry fees alone, multiple categories alone, do not necessarily render a program suspect. It's the combination of factors, and what that combination says about intent. It's the use that money is put to.

Other factors

What else should you consider? Transparency of process is important, of course, and the makeup of the judging panel. Then, if print books are required, the number should dovetail with the process as laid out. (With digital, there's no way to gauge from outside the process.)

With respect to process, the two basic models for the sorts of programs most of us are applying to, or working within, are a couple of rounds (or more) with a winnowing effect or one round with multiple judges per book (three is typical).



For three or more rounds, the first round is typically a qualifying round (pass/fail). Each successive round, the criteria become more stringent, and new judges are brought on. For two rounds, the first round generally combines a qualifying pass with one incorporating more criteria. The result is a kind of long list, for the books that will now get the more in-depth judging.

For one round with multiple judges, all the books go through the same process and all are tallied to compete with each other. The number of books each judge reads varies by program. In the sorts of programs most of us will enter, these more modest programs, judges typically judge independently of one another. And those scores are then reviewed and tallied in the final stage.

But there's plenty of variation. Reading through the process notes for several programs will give you a feel for the range. As a barometer, you might start with programs you already know and trust. Then analyze the differences.

And what criteria are these judges applying? That has everything to do with who the judges are, in terms of their experience and training. The evaluation criteria will be supplied by the program, but it directly correlates to the makeup of the panel. Are these judges industry professionals? Or simply target readers in your genre, the sorts of readers who might post a review on Amazon or Goodreads? Professionals are more firmly grounded in evaluation, more practiced in delivering feedback (which means more able to distinguish between fine points, and to evaluate with precision), and more likely to be working from a sound, yet nuanced, set of foundational principles. The best way to get a feel for the makeup of the panel is to take a look at the application form for judges, if it's posted online, which it often is. That form will tell you how stringent (or not) the selection criteria are for the judges themselves, which, in turn, tells you a good deal about the scoring criteria for the books. Judges can't judge beyond their capabilities.

Some will tell you that anonymous judging during the process is problematic, but this approach tends to be the norm with modest programs. It's only in the most prestigious awards — The National Book Award, The Booker Prize, to name two — that the judges are sometimes, and only sometimes, listed. The jury lists for the Pulitzers, for example, are confidential. And if you've been able to review the judging application form, you already know a good deal about the background of the judging panel.

Some will tell you that only those programs that offer cash wins are legit. But cash wins of any substance require greater sums of money to be collected up front from all. It's the entry fees that enable those cash prizes. So, for more modest programs, cash prizes are less likely.



In the end, it's the entire constellation of factors that matter, as a set. And just as with looking for the right publisher or the right service providers, it can take some attention, some mulling over. For authenticity — to look at why a program exists, who it actually serves — it's all the ways money is collected and why. How that money is employed (or not), where it goes. This, in turn, has much to say about how valuable (or not) the program's awards and honors are.

There are many fine awards programs, and they are not mirrors of one another. There are also plenty of others to steer clear of. Read closely, read carefully, read critically. And if your spidey sense tingles, run.

100% human-powered.

