

The Edgar® Judging Process – An Overview

Since 1946, the annual presentation of the Edgar Allan Poe Awards has been one of the most important and certainly the most publicly visible task undertaken by the Mystery Writers of America. The number of awards given out has grown from one (the very first award, given to *Watchful at Night* by Julius Fast, was for Best First Novel by an American Author) to twelve, with other awards (link here?) given out on the same night. Of course, the actual presentation of these awards is the last step in a year-long process, with 68 judges considering almost 2,000 books, short stories, and many television programs. It's an incredible amount of work, year in and year out, but without it the Edgar®, the most prestigious award in the mystery business, would be “nevermore.”

It all starts with the selection of the General Awards Chair. His or her job is to oversee the entire judging process, to answer any questions, and to resolve any problems. But before any of that can begin, the General Awards Chair needs to choose one chairperson for each of the nine individual Edgar categories, plus the Simon & Schuster Mary Higgins Clark Award. Those ten chairs will in turn select four or more other judges to fill out the judging panels. The only exception to this is Best Novel – because of the sheer volume of books received (over 500 in 2013), this panel will usually have eight judges. In all cases, the panels are filled with active status MWA members. These are awards given out, after all, by working writers to recognize excellence in their field.

The books, short stories, and television shows are submitted to each of the five (or eight) judges throughout the calendar year. As you can imagine, it can be an intimidating prospect to have hundreds of them showing up at your door. For a Best Novel judge to read every single book, for instance, he or she could read one book every day and still fall well short. It's a simple fact of life that certain accommodations have to be made – books that don't engage within the first fifty pages, for instance, are often put down. But in the end, the panel's most important goal is to give every book a fair and equal opportunity to impress the judges. Toward that end, it's vital that each panel have a balanced representation of gender and geography, and especially of those writers who would normally gravitate to reading one type of mystery over another. In December 2004, the incoming General Awards Chair submitted this mission statement to the MWA National Board:

Recognizing that the Edgar Awards, the most respected and sought-after awards in the industry, reflect directly on the Mystery Writers of America, I as the General Awards Chair for 2005 will pay special attention to the integrity of the judging process itself. I will remind all category chairs of the importance of balanced representation on their panels, with the highest possible emphasis on choosing fair and impartial judges who do not have personal biases against one form of mystery-writing over another. Each panel's deliberations should be conducted with the highest level of fairness, open-mindedness, and confidentiality. As I do my best to help achieve these goals, I'll work with the national board to make sure that any new guidelines are recorded for all future General Awards Chairs to follow.

(One quick note on the “confidentiality” mentioned in this statement... In the fall of 2004, the national board voted to begin asking each Edgar judge to sign a nondisclosure

agreement, so that all deliberations would be kept confidential, both during the judging period and forever afterwards. The motivation behind this decision was not one of censorship or control – it's more a matter of trust and respect for each other. It's hard enough to receive hundreds of submissions all year, to take all that time away from your own life and from your own writing to read them, then finally to begin the excruciating process of deliberation with your fellow judges until you have a final list of nominees and one winner. To go through all that and then to have to deal with public repercussions about your own part in that decision, or worse yet to overhear someone at the Bouchercon bar revealing that a certain writer narrowly missed out on being nominated because a certain judge happened to vote for someone else... It's a bad situation for everyone involved. Enough said.)

Throughout the year, each judge will be starting to compile his or her own personal Top Ten list. The judges are encouraged to keep in constant communication with each other, to compare notes and to make sure that every book receives due consideration. At the end of the year, those Top Ten lists are compiled in the first round of voting. Using a simple 10-9-8 etc. point system, a final Top Ten list for the entire panel is established. The second round of voting occurs after each judge has had a chance to go back and consider each of those final ten selections. This round of voting will usually produce the final top five (the Edgar nominees), as well as the top overall selection (the Edgar winner), although in some cases additional rounds may be required to break ties.

The voting is concluded in early January. The nominees are announced on or around Edgar Allan Poe's birthday (January 19th). The winners are announced, of course, at the Edgar Banquet. By this time, the next year's judges have already begun their work.

If any questions or comments on this overview, or on any other matter related to the Edgar Awards, please contact the MWA national office.