

May 11, 2008 marks the 150th anniversary of Minnesota statehood. What better way to celebrate this than to find out the history behind Minnesota Youth Reading Awards!

Who started the Minnesota Youth Reading Awards?

Dr. Doris Pagel, librarian, professor of library media education at Minnesota State University Mankato (1959-1987), and advocate for children's books and libraries, felt that Minnesota deserved a children's book award. Doris was always interested in seeing that teachers and librarians had the resources they needed to continue bringing children and books together.

Doris Pagel was the president of the Minnesota Association of School Librarians from 1975 to 1976. She started the "Friends of the Minnesota Valley Regional Library" organization in Mankato which accomplished such important work as commissioning the painting of the Maud Hart Lovelace mural in the Lovelace Wing of the library. She was named *Librarian of the Year* by the Minnesota Library Association in 1979 for her advocacy in library networking.

Doris supported libraries of all kinds, starting the Center for Children's and Young Adult Books (CCYAB) at Mankato State and she was a charter member of Children's Literature Network. Doris was awarded the 1992 Kay Sexton Award given by the Minnesota Humanities Commission for her dedication and patience in gathering the materials for *Authors and Illustrators as Program Resources: Minnesota Creators of Juvenile Books*. (She created a second directory with the same name in 1997.)

How is the Minnesota Youth Reading Awards connected to the Maud Hart Lovelace Award?

The Maud Hart Lovelace Award is how it all started. According to a letter from Doris on February 2, 1991, the Maud Hart Lovelace Book Award program was designed for schools and libraries in the three counties served by the Minnesota Valley Regional Library. In this letter Dr. Pagel states, "Basically, it came into being as a vehicle to recognize Maud Hart Lovelace's extensive involvement with Mankato. During the first year of the program, two school librarians from near the Twin Cities asked to be involved, and geographically the program mushroomed."

At one point there was a lot of discussion about having another children's book award in honor of Wanda Gag. That is why the Maud Hart Lovelace Award name was changed to the Minnesota Youth Reading Awards (MYRA) just in case someday that award would happen. Perhaps someday MYRA will sponsor another youth reading award!

When did the Minnesota Youth Reading Awards begin?

According to Doris Pagel, the Maud Hart Lovelace Award program started in 1979 in Mankato. For many years, the selection of nominees took place in Mankato, at sessions chaired by Doris Pagel and Mary Ann VandeVusse, children's services librarian at the Minnesota Valley Regional Library. The first winner in 1980 was The Summer of the Monkeys by Wilson Rawls. Subsequently, 1980 was also the year of Maud Hart Lovelace's death.

The first Board of Directors, according to the Articles of Incorporation were Carol Sibley (Moorhead), Gertie Geck (Avon), May Jesseph (Morris), Jeanne Nelson (Alexandria), Barb Lantis (St. Cloud), Leann Hess (Park Rapids), Marilyn Bayerkohler (Staples), Gail Jubala (Duluth), and Helen Rudie (Moorhead).

Is it true that the Maud Hart Lovelace book award was not always state-wide?

Yes. The Maud Hart Lovelace Book Award program was designed for schools and libraries only in the three counties served by the Minnesota Valley Regional Library. The children's vote did not go state wide until 1988 when Night of the Twisters by Ivy Ruckman won the award.

How were the criteria for nominations for the book award created?

In 1979, several states were either planning a children's reading award program or were implementing such a program. Several of these states were contacted to learn about procedures and goals. After learning about these procedures, criteria were developed during the first two years of the Maud Hart Lovelace Book Award program. The criteria from 1980 are as follows:

1. Books should combine good writing with appeal for children.
2. Books should not be popular or well known. (There are "sleepers" waiting to be discovered!)
3. Books should appeal to children in grades 3-8.
4. Books should have been originally published within the past ten years.
5. Books should be written by a living U.S. author.
(This criterion soon changed to living North American authors so some good Canadian authors could be represented.)
6. Books should be available in paperback editions.
7. Books should be fiction.
8. Books should not be part of a series.
9. The final list of books should cover a variety of subjects, such as a survival story, humorous story, a book by a Minnesota author, a fantasy, an animal story (preferably an out-of-doors animal), a book of historical fiction, science fiction, mystery, sports story and a story representing diversity.

Is it true that only one book was chosen for the award at first?

Yes but the nomination committee saw the criteria of choosing books appealing to children grades 3-8 as a problem. Doris wrote, "There were years when great efforts were made to include a couple of books that would mainly appeal to the lower range of grade levels, and a couple that would appeal to the upper range... Often the upper range was neglected. In the early years, about 1/3 of the participants were junior high schools but that number has much decreased. My feedback is that teachers and librarians at this level much want such a program, but that the book nominees do not meet their needs." In 1997, the award was split into a Division I and a Division II with some of the books crossing over.

Why a child's reading award?

According to Doris Pagel, "There are other awards in which librarians, teachers, and other adults determine the winners, often without regard for appeal of the winners for children...Kids select the best books from a list of books that appeal to kids."

A special thank you to May Jesseph for filling in gaps and answering my many questions. And also thank you to Jeanne Nelson for her very informative letter. If you have more information on the history of the Minnesota Youth Reading Awards, I would love to hear from you! Please contact me at historybananablue@yahoo.com.