

BATCHELDER FOCUS GROUP SUMMARY

The Batchelder Evolution Task Force conducted two focus groups to expand upon the responses garnered in the survey. Two conference call meetings were conducted in April 2018. The Task Force chair invited individuals to the meetings based upon the interest or recommendations expressed in the survey as well as awareness of and individual's insights into book publishing/translation process. In addition to the two conference calls, the chair gathered information through email dialogs with invitees who could not attend and/or had to leave early. Eleven individuals participated in the focus groups and follow-up conversations, including eight publishers, two academics, and one translator. Links to the focus group meeting questions, transcripts, and recordings can be found in the appendix.

The focus group meetings focused primarily on three topics: the publishing process, the award criteria, and the award structure. Each focus group meeting opened with the opportunity for publishers to describe the basic process they go through to find, select, translate, and publish an international book for young readers. The Task Force asked this question for several reasons. First, the original intention of the Batchelder Award is to recognize the work and risk invested by publishers when seeking titles for translation. Second, the Task Force is aware that publishing dynamics have changed since the award was established. Third, some responses from the survey indicated that non-publishers were unclear as to the current publishing process for translated books.

While each publisher detailed slightly different methods, they all emphasized the significant commitment required to consider books for translation by an American publisher. Relationships with international children's book publishers, book creators, and translators are a key component. Many publishers discussed the value of international book events such as the Bologna Children's Book Fair as a critical means for identifying potential titles to translate. After a potential book is identified, publishers usually seek out someone for a critical read of the book (if the publisher is not fluent in the foreign language of the title). After this happens, the publisher needs to decide if the impressions of the book make it viable for translation and ultimately commercial success. If rights to a title are purchased, the publisher then needs to invest in a translator. After translation, the book goes through the regular marketing and promotion process of an American book. The publishers discussed several contingencies in this entire process, including the length of time invested, costs, risk factors, and grants/subsidies from some foreign countries. Modern technology also came up as a factor in publishing relationships. For example, it is possible for an American publisher to obtain the rights to a foreign language text before it has been published abroad.

The publishers spoke about the intrinsic qualities of books in translation and what makes them special or worthy of making their way to an American audience. To this end, all of the publishers spoke to the value of the Batchelder Award in terms of the visibility it brings to translated titles and the recognition it brings to the publishers. To that end, the publishers strongly feel that books written in English and published in other countries should not be considered in the criteria. Furthermore, the publishers emphasized the significance of the Batchelder over any other award or list for translated books for youth, including recognitions from the United States Board on Books for Youth (USBBY) and the International Youth Library. Some of the publishers specifically mentioned the significance of the Batchelder Award announcement as part of the Youth Media Awards announcement. Also of note is a comment from a translator who spoke to the positive role of the Batchelder Award in recognizing the often unsung/unseen work of translators.

The second part of the focus group discussions explored specific aspects of the Batchelder Award criteria. In general,

the publishers commented on the lack of clarity about eligibility. This seems to be less about how the criteria is spelled out, but rather on the specific origins of individual titles. Regarding the definition of substantial text in the criteria, the focus group participants had a lot to say. Of paramount importance is the fact that longer texts, i.e. novels and nonfiction, take more work and are a greater risk to publishers. Since the Batchelder Award is for *translation*, the focus group participants emphasized that the word “substantial” should not be removed. There was discussion about picture books and length of text, but ultimately they don’t take as much work and the illustrations help the reader to interpret the text. Some of the conversation about picture books is better addressed in the section about the award structure.

Regarding the inclusion of folk literature, the response was divided. Many publishers in the first focus group felt that it is incredibly risky to translate folk literature because of issues with cultural authenticity. Some publishers said they wouldn’t even consider looking for folk literature. Another publisher commented that the interest in folk literature seems to ebb and flow over decades. During the second phone call, publishers seem warm to ambivalent about the inclusion of folk literature. There was less of a concern about the risk factors, and a belief that the overall quality of the book is in the hands of the editorial team and that the Batchelder Award Committee would not be expected to vouch for the cultural authenticity--it’s the editor’s job. Lastly, concerning cultural content/sensitivity, a similar mindset applies. One publisher spoke to the taboo topics of children drinking or smoking in American books. Simply put, this shouldn’t be a factor for the award committee--the editorial team should be making decisions with these factors in mind from the beginning.

The final section of the focus group conversation explored the award structure. The YALSA Award for Excellence in Nonfiction was used to introduce the idea of a Batchelder Award Shortlist. The concept would be to announce a shortlist in early December and announce the winner at the Youth Media Awards. This idea strongly resonated with the focus groups. Participants felt that a shortlist would help bring more attention to translated books in general and bring more readership to the potential winner by the time of the announcement. The effectiveness of this model in the age of twitter and other social media was noted by one publisher since people could post and repost, comment and argue about titles, thus bringing more attention to them

The topic of award categories was heavily discussed during both phone meetings. Participants felt that age categories, akin to the Schneider Family Book Award, would alleviate the confusion over the issue of substantial text.

Lastly, the focus group participants discussed at length the role of teachers and librarians in their awareness and promotion of translated books. Some publishers felt that practitioners tend to exoticize translated books and emphasize foreignness as unique but strange. The focus group participants felt that much could be done to increase awareness of the translated book publishing process, the numerous qualities of translated books, and the value of the Batchelder Award. Programming, whether at local libraries/schools and/or national conferences, was deemed a vital influence.