Montana Book Award

2016 Montana Book Award Winners and Nominees

Due to a scheduling mishap, the Montana Book Award Committee did not hold its usual panel discussion during the 2017 annual Montana Library Association conference. We're sorry we missed you! Not to worry, though – the committee members have reviewed each of the winning and nominated titles for your reading pleasure. Enjoy!
WINNER – Immortal Irishman by Timothy Egan

I am here to recommend you read Immortal Irishman: the Irish Revolutionary who became an American Hero by Timothy Egan. Go ahead, I can wait....

Then I recommend you recommend it to your book club, your trap-shooting club, your sewing circle, your Harley enthusiasts club, your drinking buddies, your sober buddies, your rugby team and your podiatrist. As Montanans, we should all know the story as well as how to say it correctly (“Mahr” or ’maːr; with the tiniest suggestion of 2 syllables). If you say “meager” within 100 miles of White Sulphur Springs, we get to make fun of you. And oh, we will....

If this was not a true story, you could never sell it as fiction, it is just too far-fetched: famous, wealthy, aristocratic Irish rebel convicted of sedition and transported to Australia. Oh wait, then he escapes and travels to New York? He joins the Army just before the Civil War? Oh wait, (Spoiler alert!) then he’s Governor of Montana Territory? This is all a little implausible, don’t you think??

I won’t even mention the controversy about his final days; just know that you are going to have some heated discussions with historians.
Lucky.

If you won't believe me, take Famous Librarian Nancy Pearl's advice and give it 50 pages. That gets you as far as Meagher fist-fighting his way out of Conciliation Hall after a decidedly NOT conciliatory speech. Maybe you enjoy it and forget about modern politics for a few pages (you're welcome).

-Reviewed by Stef Johnson, Butte-Silver Bow Public Library

**HONOR BOOK – Bloom of Bones by Allen Morris Jones**

This murder mystery is set in Garfield County, one of the most isolated areas in Montana. The author has captured the local color and made the unlikely story seem plausible. When a long-buried corpse is washed out of a hillside on Eli Singer's land, he is forced to face memories long suppressed – memories of a difficult and sometimes violent childhood. Love interest is supplied by the visit of his literary agent from New York. Jones has not only written a suspense-filled story, but has brought up questions of personal and community morality. What is true justice? While not without flaws, it is a very readable book.
HONOR BOOK – The Flood Girls by Richard Fifield

After nearly a decade away, Rachel, a recovering alcoholic, moves back to her hometown of Quinn, Montana with the intention of making amends with everyone she's hurt. Her reception is less than warm, as her years of fighting, drinking, and promiscuity have left their mark on the town's residents, including her mother. To win her mother's favor, Rachel helps at Laverna's and very reluctantly joins her softball team. Along for the ride is Jake, Rachel's 12-year-old next door neighbor who loves flashy vintage clothing and Jackie Collins novels. He doesn't fit in among his peers in Quinn, but he finds an unlikely home with Rachel, Laverna, and the Flood Girls.

This novel is an amusing but heartbreaking story of small-town life, alcoholism, forgiveness and restoration. Quinn is a “wild and wooly” town where the snowplow driver might be more important than the mayor and is full of characters that we all know from our own Montana experience.

-Reviewed by Jessie Pate, Helena College Library
HONOR BOOK – The Names of the Stars by Pete Fromm

Pete is one of my all-time favorite authors, so I was delighted that he was honored this year.

*The Names of the Stars* is a follow-up to *Indian Creek Chronicles*. Once again, Pete’s alone in the wilderness, babysitting fish eggs. While *Indian Creek* was written through a lens of youthful adventure and a blissful inability to believe in death, *Stars* is told by a man with a few more candles on his birthday cake. His life experiences, including fatherhood, have created a definite awareness of his own mortality.

The present tense descriptions of tasks and observations of his surroundings are interspersed with flashbacks to his childhood, to his work as a lifeguard on Lake Mead, to working as a ranger in the Tetons, and especially to fatherhood. The flashbacks are more sentimental, the present tense more awe-inspired, than the passages in *Indian Creek*. Pete’s development as a writer over the past couple of decades is clear. Wry, witty humor threads its way throughout the book.

Wilderness, the outdoors and solitude: these things sing to me. *The Names of the Stars* harmonizes beautifully.
HONOR BOOK – Yellowstone: A Journey Through America’s Wild Heart by David Quammen

Quammen’s Yellowstone National Park book is well-researched and beautifully illustrated with amazing National Geographic photographs. It covers the history of the park, animals, plants, geysers, rivers, and lakes, etc. It provides information about the whole landscape and ecosystem of the region. The text blends nicely with the photographs and maps. The chapter on connections starting on page 173 is excellent. The connections include history, many animals, resources, ecology and many other aspects Yellowstone National Park.

David Quammen has won awards for his science and travel writing.

-Reviewed by Dale Alger, Roundup
All I Want is What You’ve Got by Glen Chamberlain

Glen Chamberlain's elegantly simple writing immediately draws the reader into each of the twelve stories in this collection. The stories transform ordinary situations into remarkable turning points in the characters’ lives. We know these characters, not for how unique or interesting they are, but for how much their lives resemble ours on the surface - and perhaps on a deeper level, too. Regret, missed opportunities, desire, identity, and taking a chance are some of the themes in these stories.

-Reviewed by Jessie Pate, Helena College Library
As Good as Gone by Larry Watson

This novel, set in the 1960s, is the story of Calvin Sidey, an eccentric old man who comes from his retreat in the hills to care for his grandchildren while his long estranged son takes his wife for an operation. Calvin finds that both children are being bullied and does not take time to check details. He only knows two ways to settle problems – with an ultimatum backed with a gun or to run away to a solitary life. Fortunately, his scary tactics solve the children's problems. But there is still one of his own.

Years before, his marriage had ended with the tragic death of his French wife. Now the widow next door would like a closer relationship.

I am not a native Montanan. When I finished the book, I told my husband about the character, Calvin, and said, “Can't imagine where the author would get the idea for this man.”

My husband who was born here in 1929 said, “From my grandfather.” Then he told stories that I had not heard before and had a hard time believing. He followed with other stories about men he had known in his growing up years.

So I had to admit this is a good picture of a Wild West character in the wrong generation.

Reviewed by Mareta Brusett, Jordan
Beyond Schoolmarms and Madams: Montana Women's Lives by Marth Kohl

This collection is an amazing array of short biographical vignettes about women who have made a difference in the shaping of Montana. The women come from a wide spectrum of careers and cultural backgrounds. It includes women who shaped Montana in a positive way as well as those who lived on the other side of the law. Each biography is about three pages long. There are 15 contributors who each did a lot of research to create this awesome book. Martha Kohl is the editor as well as one of the contributors.

-Reviewed by Dale Alger, Roundup

Blood on the Marias: The Baker Massacre by Paul R. Wylie
This important work describes the events, decisions, and actions that lead up to a lesser-known event in Montana history: the Baker Massacre. Over two hundred peaceful Piegan Indians - mostly women and children, many suffering from smallpox - were attacked without provocation on a frigid January morning.

Not a big reader of history books, I found Wylie's account to be surprisingly readable. The author examines everything that contributed to the attack, including numerous primary sources to support and complete the narrative. This book belongs in every Montana History collection.

-Reviewed by Jessie Pate, Helena College Library

Body of Water: A Sage, A Seeker and the World's Most Elusive Fish by Chris Dombrowski

Chris Dombrowski, Missoula author and fly-fishing guide, has written several collections of poetry and now the nonfiction Body of Water: A Sage, a Seeker, and the World's Most Alluring Fish. Set in the Bahamas, it focuses on fly-fishing for the fast and elusive bonefish but the book is about so much more: class conflict, wealth disparity, race relations, the role of nature, and ecosystem damage. One of the most famous Bahamian bonefishing guides is a wise,
patient man of integrity and faith named David Pinder who becomes a mentor to Dombrowski. Though cataracts limit his formerly keen vision and bring an end to his guiding, Pinder has an intuition which allows him to “feel and see” the presence of bonefish. This book is gorgeously written and delves with metaphysical issues, resulting in a memorable fishing book.

-Reviewed by Alice Meister, Bozeman

Champion of the World by Chad Dundas

“The clowns came to get him when it was time for the hanging.”
Thus begins Chad Dundas’ novel Champion of the World, a big story ranging from carnival life in the northwest, to the big-time wrestling world on the east coast. Sandwiched between those: an interlude in the mountains around Butte, Montana – seemingly peaceful – but building in characters, plot, and tension all the while

In Dundas’ debut, former champion wrestler Pepper Van Dean and his wife, Moira, eke out a living as carny attractions, a comedown from previous years as royalty in the early 1900s wrestling world. Yet the ever-hopeful Pepper and the resilient Moira are always planning for the day when they’ll get a break. While we’re waiting for this, Dundas’ treats us to a grandstand of fascinating characters: a vengeful mob flunky; another former champion with a dark secret,
and his wife, who is bent on a comeback of her own, among others. Former friends and enemies, each with their own agenda, cajole the Van Deans to their schemes. What is the truth and what is a lie? It's hard to tell as the characters alternately reveal themselves and then step behind a veil of promises.

Reading *Champion of the World* was a gratifying adventure to the very end. I found myself shouting out loud at Pepper and Moira, telling them to beware, only to have them nimbly evade catastrophe, sometimes. And when I was lulled – well, I was never lulled. Dundas' irresistible characters kept me looking, ever vigilant, for the next big break.

-Reviewed by Mary Drew Powers, Whitefish Community Library

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The Charmed Children of Rookskill Castle by Janet Fox

I loved this spooky, mysterious, and thrilling story for middle schoolers, almost from the first page. It's got a creepy castle, unexplained occurrences, Nazi spies, magic, clockwork, and a fascinating piece of vintage jewelry called a chatelaine

Kat and her siblings are sent to Rookskill Castle to escape the dangers of London during WWII. Something seems odd about the castle and its owner, Lady Eleanor, from the beginning, and once children start to disappear, Kat becomes determined to uncover the truth. You’re sure to stay up all night to finish this one - but keep the lights on if you do!
Dog Run Moon by Callan Wink

A tightly crafted debut short story collection from a young Livingston resident. The clear, precise writing engages all of the reader's senses. Callan has made an art form out of knowing exactly at what point to start and to stop a story. Several of the pieces left me wanting more, but in the best possible way.

Characters in the stories range from a historical battle re-enactor to a young man recently released from juvenile detention to a construction manager who accidentally kills his entire crew on Thanksgiving. The character development, sense of place and language were wonderfully rendered in each of the stories.

The story titled ‘Exotics’ is about James, who teaches in a trendy one-room school house. For a poetry assignment, one of his students writes, “I look at him, the boy that doesn't love me, and it's like a badger has climbed into my chest. The badger tramples my stomach while it chews on my heart.”

Very relatable.

-Reviewed by Desirée Funston, Missoula Public Library
Fifty-Six Counties: A Montana Journey by Russell Rowland

When Russell Rowland announced that he was going to visit all 56 counties in Montana and write a book about it, I could hardly wait to read it. Actually I did enjoy it and learned quite a few things about our state, but was a little disappointed that he misquoted some people and made some minor errors.

He makes no claim that it is a balanced, researched study of the counties. While it is evident that he did extensive research into some of Montana’s major industries, it is also quite evident that it is a personal journal - that many statements are not facts but his personal reactions to people and places. Rowland loves and is proud of Montana and Montanans. At the end of the book, every Montanan is sure to feel the same way.

-Reviewed by Mareta Brusett, Jordan
Hopping Ahead of Climate Change: Snowshoe Hares, Science, and Survival by Sneed B. Collard III

In his young readers’ book *Hopping Ahead of Climate Change*, long-time Missoula author Sneed B. Collard III illustrates the consequences of warmer temperatures on animals that change their coat colors with the seasons, triggered mainly by the length of the day. With winter snow decreasing due to climate change, snowshoe hares are at risk for predation due to their white coats mismatching with a non-white background. More than twenty species modify their coat colors seasonally; when there is more sun and less snow, they become mismatched more and more as climate change continues. Can these species evolve fast enough to survive? Using humor and understandable scientific language based on Biology Professor Scott Mills’ research, Collard explains a global problem’s effect on a single species through colorful photographs, additional resources, and ways we all can make the future more hopeful.

-Reviewed by Alice Meister, Bozeman
Losing Johanna by Zella Smoak

Johanna Moss is a nurse who becomes a lawyer/judge. Johanna works as a defense lawyer in Malta, MT and as city judge in Glasgow, MT. These are both part time jobs. She lives in Saco, MT, which is between Malta and Glasgow. She has a boyfriend in Great Falls and a daughter in Helena. When Johanna starts to realize that she is forgetting things she shouldn't forget, she starts to worry. The story is about Johanna's transition into the life of Alzheimer's Dementia. There are some poignant moments as her boyfriend and daughter are helping her through her Alzheimer's Dementia journey. Zella Smoak captures the life in small town Montana. I am guessing she has spent time living in Saco. It is an excellent read for families working with family members dealing with Alzheimer's Dementia.

-Reviewed by Dale Alger, Roundup

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About the Montana Book Award

The Montana Book Award is an annual award that recognizes literary and/or artistic excellence in a book published during the award year. Eligible titles are either set in Montana, deal with Montana themes/issues, or are written, edited or illustrated by a Montana author or artist. Books for all ages are considered for the award.

For more information, please visit: http://montanabookaward.org/

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