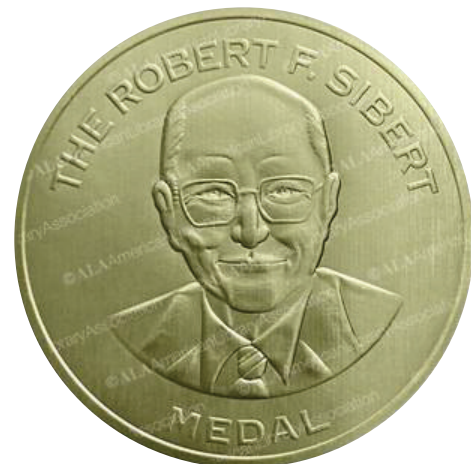


Behind the Award

An Interview with Robert L. Sibert

MELISSA STEWART



As we celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Robert F. Sibert Informational Book Award, let's get to know a little bit about the children's literature-loving family behind the award. Here to answer some questions is Robert L. "Bob" Sibert, age sixty-nine, the son of Robert F. Sibert. Bob lives in Jacksonville, IL, with his wife, Karen, and has worked for his family's business—Bound to Stay Bound Books (BTSB)—for forty-eight years. The couple has two children and one grandchild.

Greetings, Bob! Thanks for agreeing to answer some questions about your family and its connection to the American Library Association's Sibert Award. This may seem like a strange way to start an interview, but I've heard people say "Sibert" in so many different ways. What's the proper pronunciation?

Thank you for asking. It's **Sigh**-bert.

Your grandfather, Lawrence D. Sibert, cofounded the company that became BTSB in 1920. That's 106 years in business! What's the secret to the company's success?

My grandfather, known as LD, spent a lot of time meeting with librarians in person. That helped him understand things from the customer's perspective. Also, Jacksonville, IL, where BTSB is based, turned out to be an ideal location. We could easily ship books all over the country, and there was a great local workforce available.

Your father, Robert F. Sibert, joined BTSB in 1936, became president in 1964, and stayed in that position until you became president in 1992. What were some of his major accomplishments? How should we remember him?

My father built strong relationships with all the major publishers of children's books. Everybody who dealt with him—suppliers, customers, employees—remembers his incredible work ethic, his dry sense of humor, and his devotion to BTSB. He continued to serve as chairman of the board until his death in 1998.



BTSB has a long history of supporting American Association of School Librarians (AASL) and Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC) programs and initiatives. The Robert F. Sibert Informational Book Award is just one example. What do you remember about the award's creation?

In the mid-1990s, I began looking for a charitable project to increase the visibility of BTSB in the school library market. I was a great admirer of the Caldecott and Newbery Awards and what they did for the children's book industry, particularly the bookstore side of things. I wondered if there could be something comparable for the library side of things.



Melissa Stewart is a children's nonfiction researcher and author of more than two hundred science books for children. She won the Sibert Honor in 2022 for *Summertime Sleepers: Animals That Estivate*, illustrated by Sarah S. Brannen.

The Caldecott celebrated picture-book art. The Newbery celebrated writing and was usually awarded to a middle-grade novel. Bookstores loved how these awards sold books and created traffic.

I realized that there was a lot more to children's books than just picture books and novels. What about an award for informational books? Wouldn't that be a natural concern for school libraries? It seemed to make sense to me.

After receiving approval from the BSB Board in 1997, I met with Susan Roman, then the executive director of ALSC. She liked the idea, though she wanted to be sure a new award wouldn't detract from the Caldecott and Newbery. Over the next few months, she began the long, arduous process of convincing the ALSC Board to approve the award.

The biggest sticking point was what to call the award. At first, ALSC considered naming it after a prominent children's book author, like Russell Freedman or Sy Montgomery, but they didn't want to appear to be playing favorites. I suggested Thomas Jefferson as a major figure in historical book affairs, but there was already an award in Virginia schools named after Jefferson, so that was rejected as too confusing. They finally suggested the Robert F. Sibert Award because BSB was funding the award. When they asked if that was okay with me, I was delighted.

The only other thing they asked me, a few years later, was if it was okay to give the award to the illustrator of the winning books as well as the author. I fully supported that because, in children's books, the art is at least as important as the text.

How did you feel when you heard that the ALSC Board approved the award?

I was thrilled. It was quite a shock the first time I saw the Sibert Award medal with an image of my father on a book. He was passionate about libraries, librarians, and children's books, so I think he would have been truly honored.

Is BSB involved in selecting the winners of the Sibert Award?

No, we don't have any input or control over the authors or the titles that receive the award. Like all the other ALA Youth Media Awards, the Sibert winners are chosen by a committee of librarians, educators, and other children's literature enthusiasts appointed by the ALSC leadership. We have no contact with the committee until after they have announced their picks.

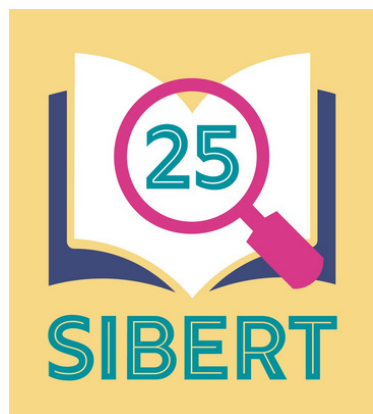
Thank you for continuing to support the award financially and sponsor the celebratory breakfast at the ALA Annual Conference each year. What is your hope for the future of the award?

Supporting the award and the breakfast has been a rewarding experience, and we look forward to continuing our funding. I hope the award will continue to grow in influence and stature among publishers, authors, and librarians. I also hope the award's recognition will spread beyond libraries to bookstores and parents.&

Save the date: June 26, 2026

Come Celebrate 25 Years of the Sibert Award!

Bound-to-Stay Bound Publisher Robert F. Sibert's Medal recognizing the literature of fact!



Pre-Conference at McCormick Center
in Chicago at ALA Annual from 1-4 pm

“Deep Dive Into Discovery: Celebrating 25 Years of the
Sibert Medal”

- From 2001 to today - historical overview including how the medalists have shaped our understanding of excellence in nonfiction over these 25 years.
- Panel discussion featuring past Sibert-honored creators.
- Plus a discussion featuring 2026 Sibert-honored creators including an editor for a perspective from the inside of publishing.

Register here: <https://2026.alaannual.org/ticketed-events>