

Bound to the Beginning

The Debut of the Sibert Award

MELISSA STEWART

In 1997, Robert L. “Bob” Sibert, president of Bound to Stay Bound Books (BTSB), approached Susan Roman, the executive director of the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC) at the time, with the idea of sponsoring a new ALSC award focused on informational books. At the spring 1998 ALSC meeting, Roman suggested creating a task force to explore the possibility. The task force was approved by the ALSC Board at the 1998 American Library Association (ALA) Annual Conference, and Leslie Edmonds Holt, then the ALSC president, appointed a three-person task force that included Karen Breen, Margery Cuyler, and chair Maria Salvatore.

They began researching existing children’s nonfiction awards. After looking at the purpose and criteria of these awards, as well as how they were administered, the group agreed that there was room for an ALSC award to “honor excellence in nonfiction and generate discussion and recognition of these books in a much broader forum.”¹

The task force engaged in “vigorous discussion” about whether the award should honor nonfiction in general or informational books in particular.² The term *informational book* came into use around 1970 because librarians were looking for a way to distinguish factual books based on documented research from other kinds of books shelved in the nonfiction section, such as poetry, drama, folktales, and fables. Ultimately, the group decided the award should limit its focus to informational books, which they defined as “books written and illustrated to present, organize, and interpret documentable factual material for children.”³

Using the Newbery Award as a model, the task force also developed criteria for the award and determined how it should be administered.⁴

One of the task force’s biggest challenges was deciding on the award’s name. The members of the task force initially discussed naming it after a prominent editor or children’s book author, but their June 1999 report to the ALSC Board of Directors recommended calling it the Benjamin

Franklin Award for the Outstanding Informational Book. While Sibert approved that name,⁵ some ALSC Board members weren’t satisfied.

After considering several alternatives, ALSC President Caroline Ward suggested honoring Robert F. Sibert, who was Bob Sibert’s father and had recently passed away. Robert F. Sibert served as president of BTSB for twenty-eight years and was widely known for championing libraries and children’s literature.

At the January 2000 ALA Midwinter Meeting, the ALSC Board of Directors voted to approve the Robert F. Sibert Informational Book Award, contingent on BTSB’s approval of the revised name. The ALA Award Committee also granted conditional approval so that an award selection committee could be appointed in time to announce the first winners at the ALA Midwinter Meeting in 2001.

After BTSB happily agreed, the ALA Award Committee officially approved the Robert F. Sibert Informational Book Award at the 2000 ALA Annual Conference, and in January 2001, the first group of winners was announced during the ALA Midwinter Meeting.

They included that year’s Sibert Medal winner, *Sir Walter Raleigh and the Quest for El Dorado* by Marc Aronson (Clarion). Four Sibert Honor books were named: *The Longitude Prize* by Joan Dash, illustrations by Dušan Petričić (Frances Foster Books/Farrar, Straus and Giroux); *Blizzard!: The Storm That Changed America* by Jim Murphy (Scholastic); *My Season with Penguins: An Antarctic Journal* by Sophie Webb (Houghton Mifflin); and *Pedro and Me: Friendship, Loss, and What I Learned* by Judd Winick (Henry Holt and Company).



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

At the same conference, the ALSC Board voted to establish a task force to develop a detailed procedural manual for the Sibert Award, and ALSC President Virginia Walter appointed a four-person task force: Susan Faust (chair), Nina Lindsay, Cathryn Mercier, and Grace Ruth. Faust, Lindsay, and Mercier had all served on the first Sibert Award Committee, and Ruth was a member of the ALSC Board at the time.

The task force completed its work in May 2002, “establishing the practices, procedures, and principles for the selection of the award.”⁶ The ALSC Board approved the Robert F. Sibert Informational Book Award Committee Manual at the 2003 ALA Annual Conference.

Over the years, the manual has been updated several times:

- In 2006, ALSC began presenting the award to illustrators and/or photographers as well as authors in recognition of the important role that art, photos, and other visual elements play in informational books.
- At the request of the 2011 Sibert Award Committee, a Poetry Eligibility Task Force was convened in 2012 to consider whether poetry should be eligible for the award. After careful deliberation,

the task force recommended allowing poetry if it is used “as a format or vehicle to convey information.”⁷ The recommendation was approved at the 2013 ALA Midwinter Meeting.

- In the award’s early years, committee members often debated whether books with primary source materials truly met the award’s “original work” criterion, which had been modeled after language developed for the Newbery Award. To prevent further confusion, in 2015, the ALSC Board voted that “archival images and documents and other primary source materials” should be included as part of the definition of original work.⁸

As of 2026, 116 books and 129 creators had received the Sibert Medal and/or Honor Award.

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6. Robert F. Sibert Informational Book Award Committee Manual, March 2023.
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