

Writing in the Mind Body Spirit genre: A former Awards judge explains.

The primary aim of literature in this genre is in assisting in the education and further enlightenment of humanity. The genre will encompass a holistic approach in viewing the universe, and includes any work that is describing or teaching the essential unity and interconnectedness of all things.

The main requirement is that the book expounds a holistic view of the universe. The mind, body, spirit genre is literature that is in complete opposition to the idea of separation. For example, one might consider a book on a specific health issue to be separate – it will not usually include a spiritual dimension. Similarly, any works written as though the mind somehow stands alone do not fit the holistic vision. All works in the mind, body, spirit genre incorporate the fundamental teaching that everything in the multi-verse is interconnected and in relationship with all else.

Mind Body Spirit literature may encompass a wide range of beliefs. Often the genre will explore higher consciousness, expanded awareness, and enlightenment. Subjects that fall into this genre might include mysticism, spirituality, religion, alternative healing, metaphysics, quantum physics, meditation, holistic personal development, and theosophy.

As with any subject, one must be well versed in the material in order to write well in this genre. In addition, it is important that the manuscript or book assists in educating, further enlightening, or expanding awareness. Ideally, the material should be thoroughly researched, and present current themes and ideas in a new and innovative way.

The awards are open to works in both fiction and nonfiction. It is fair to say that nonfiction in this genre is more popular, and easier to get published, than fiction.

What is “excellence in a published book in the genre of Mind Body Spirit”?

Books in this genre have at their core a deep insight into the connectedness of body, mind and spirit. The spiritual aspect is an essential component, because health focuses on the body, psychology on the mind, and social and cultural writing connect body and mind. Most writing includes aspects of mind and body. It is the presence of spirit in the writing that differentiates the mind, body, spirit genre from other genres of writing.

In terms of applying this to judging books in this competition, if no “spirit” is explicitly present in the writing, as an essential aspect of the topic, then the book is not in the genre of mind, body, spirit.

There are, of course, many ways of approaching, investigating and expressing spirit. I see three primary ways of doing so. There are *experiencers*, there are *researchers* and there are *theorists*.

It is a given that all these three categories of people undergo a single transformative experience, or a series of formative experiences, that give them personal insights into the spiritual aspects of mind, body, spirit. The difference between them is how they use their experience to drive their writing.

Experiencers focus on the direct and personal aspects of transformative spiritual insights and experience. Examples of writing produced by experiencers include memoirs, in which people tell others what they have undergone, and self-help books, in which writers use their experiences as a template to guide others towards the same experiences. Fiction writers and poets seek to directly evoke the experience of being transformed, such as Isha Schwaller de Lubicz's books on the initiation of Chick Pea in ancient Egypt, and Redfield's *The Celestine Prophecy*, which takes the reader directly into the experience of discovery.

Researchers are driven to situate their personal experiences within a wider context. In doing so, they may or may not reference their own experiences. As a researcher, they scour the world for material on whatever aspect they have gained insights into and seek to draw that research together into a comprehensive overview. An example is the collating and interpretive work of scholars working in the field of comparative religion, including Huston Smith, Joseph Campbell and Karen Armstrong. Others use the personal experiences of clients to provide research materials, such as Carl Jung in the field of psychology and Elizabeth Kubler-Ross on death and dying. Michael Harner was a researcher in the field of shamanism. He had his own experiences with shamans in the Amazon, then studied different forms of shamanism as recorded in historical records, in contemporary anthropological studies, and by visiting practising shamans around the world. He also taught others shamanistic practices, and collected his students' experiences in a database for other researchers to use.

Theorists generate new ideas about the impact of spirit in our lives. Some are spiritually oriented philosophers, such as Ken Wilber. Others are theologians. Others are cultural writers, such as Terence McKenna and Aldous Huxley. Some extrapolate from their research and draw general conclusions. Carl Jung is an example. Another is Barbara Ann Brennan, in the field of spiritual healing. In Carlos Castaneda's books the figure of Don Juan is used to present a spiritual overview of the human condition.

Experiencers' writing appeals to the reader's desire to directly engage with and transform their life. The writing of researchers appeals to readers who wish to appreciate the range of possible human experiences and the ways different cultures express them. Theorists' writing appeals to readers who wish to understand what is going on spiritually.

Most mind, body, spirit writing contains two or more of these categories. Castaneda's books are full of theory but are written from an experiencer's perspective: we are there with Castaneda as he learns and his awareness is transformed. Michael Harner focused on direct experience, but spent considerable effort organising accounts of experiences into research materials. Ken Wilber is driven by personal experience of the spirit, has researched deeply into spiritual phenomena as expressed in ancient and contemporary cultures, and has used experience and research to generate new concepts.

What makes a book in this genre excellent?

Powerful spiritual writing has at its heart deep experience and insight. To be an excellent book this needs to be expressed in strong writing. However, in order to translate deep insights into strong writing the experience/insight has to be developed, contextualised, teased out, and re-deployed in a range of appropriate contexts. Doing so, writers make their experiences and insights their own. Their work then becomes an original contribution to the field in which they are writing. Translating experience/insight into words to create an excellent book requires sound thinking. As David McCulloch said: "Writing is thinking. To write well is to think clearly. That's why it's so hard."

Accordingly, in judging this competition I have used the categories of insight, originality and strong writing.

1. Insight

- (a) Insight is transformative. It has transformed the writer's perspective, and that transformation is embodied in the book. The transformation may be a short hop or a long bound. But the book needs to leave the reader in a different place from where they were when they started.
- (b) The insight may take a breadth approach, bringing together many different kinds of phenomena, including historical or contemporary, personal or shared.
- (c) Or the insight may provide depth of view, focusing on a narrow band of human experience but delving deeply into it.
- (d) In the context of this competition, writers have used their insights to generate a holistic perspective of life, integrating mind, body and spirit.

2. Originality

- (e) Everyone has insights. A writer's skill is to develop an insight into a significant statement.
- (f) Developing an insight into a statement requires appreciation of the wider context in which the insight has occurred, whether personal or on a wider social level, along with its implications, that is, the way it echoes out from the original occurrence into different aspects of life.
- (g) A level of research is required to achieve this. A savvy writer uses research to support and develop their story in ways that illuminate the original insight but without obviously stealing from others.
- (h) The book feels like it is written by a particular person, with a particular viewpoint, who has something significant to say and does so in a fascinating way.

3. Strong writing

Many aspects contribute to strong writing. Different people emphasise different aspects. For this award I have gone with the following, which are aspects I use when critiquing my own work:

- (i) A clear thesis, concept, premise or idea that is developed in an intriguing way, whether offering something entirely new or and fresh perspectives on what is otherwise familiar. Cliché is always to be avoided.
- (j) An appropriate structure. A book may be structured in many different ways, depending on subject matter, treatment, or the kind of reader the book is aimed at. Each book needs to find its own structure, appropriate to its driving concept.
- (k) Language that communicates clearly and understandably, shifting vocabulary and tone as appropriate, and that affects the reader in ways that are intended. Sometimes language needs to be "invisible", facilitating the lucid expression of ideas, at other times it is appropriate that language is at the forefront, challenging readers in order to make them experience more intensely, or slow them down and think more deeply.
- (l) Taking readers into account. The moment readers open the book and absorb the first words they are being taken on a journey, at the end of which they will be transformed emotionally, intellectually, socially, or spiritually. Language, structure, organisation, all contribute to the journey and need to serve it.
- (m) The book shows that it has not just been written but rewritten. Research is subtly integrated, repetitions are eliminated, cluttered paragraphs pruned, language is consistent and appropriate, tone is sustained, and book's overall development is clear.
- (n) For a published book, it shows no editorial lapses, spelling is sound, and the book itself is well designed and printed.