Guidelines for Evaluating WILLA Entries in the Mystery/Thriller Category

The purpose of Women Writing the West® is to become the internationally recognized organization of writers and other professionals engaged in writing and promoting writing about the North American West with emphasis on the experiences and sensibilities of women in that region. The WILLA Literary Awards are presented annually for outstanding literature featuring women's or girls' stories set in the North American West and includes Alaska and Hawaii.

Mystery entries must feature stories which focus on a puzzling crime, situation, or circumstance that needs to be solved by the protagonist. Thriller entries must feature plots which give the reader heightened feelings of suspense, excitement, anticipation, and anxiety. The following rubrics were developed to help readers evaluate these entries. They are intended to be guidelines only. Readers should use their own judgement in assessing how well each entry suits its target audience.

Points should be awarded as follows:

10 – exceptional in all regards

9 – excellent

8 – well done

7 – majority well done; room for polish

6 – good overall with strong points

5 – good overall

4 – good overall with some weak points

3 – good start but needs work

2 – good idea but poor presentation

1 – needs work throughout

0 – ineligible

Note that entries that do not warrant at least 4 points in the first benchmark, "Women of the West Theme," should be disqualified.

WILLA CATEGORY RUBRIC
MYSTERY/THRILLER

Fiction	Ineligible	4 – 7 points	8 – 10 points
1. Women of the West Theme	• Male main character(s) • Book not set in the West* • Does not portray authentic western experience • Theme & content do not reflect WWW's mission & goals	• Female characters prominent • Book set in the West but could have happened anywhere; or, book partly set in the West* • Generally portrays authentic experience • Theme & content generally reflect WWW's mission & goals	• Female main character(s) • Western setting primary & essential* • Consistently portrays authentic western experience • Theme & content excellent reflections of WWW's mission & goals
	0 – 3 points	**4 – 7 points**	**8 – 10 points**
2. Characterization	• Characters not well developed • Stereotypical character(s)** • Dialogue not convincing • Characters indistinct from those in similar books • Didactic, preachy	• Most characters complex • Generally no gender, ethnic, racial, or other stereotypes** • Dialogue at times sounds unnatural • Characters similar to others within the genre, but well developed • Character's "lesson" generally well presented	• All characters complex, well developed • No gender, ethnic, racial, or other stereotypes included** • Dialogue sounds natural • Characters distinct, original • Any "lesson" subtle & organic
3. Setting	• Setting not important to the book • Setting not described	• Setting of moderate importance • Setting described in conventional terms	• A strong sense of place is inherent in book • Setting vividly described, using all senses

Fiction	0 – 3 points	4 – 7 points	8 – 10 points
4. Plot	• Plot confusing • Subplots (if used) sporadic, or not well balanced with main plot, or left unresolved • Book fails to hook readers; ending not satisfying • Implausible • Plot predictable	• Plot moderately well developed • Subplots (if used) not always balanced or well resolved • Slow beginning leads to more action; or conclusion leaves some questions unanswered; or conclusion is not satisfying • Some points may strain credibility • Plot not new, but shows some freshness	• Plot well developed • Subplots (if used) well integrated & resolved • Opening draws reader in; conclusion satisfying • Suspension of disbelief consistent • Plot original, fresh
5. Voice	• Narrative voice lacking, confusing, distances readers from the story • Point of view confusing	• Narrative voice dependable • Point of view wavers, or occasionally jumps	• Narrative voice engaging, fresh, distinct • Point of view clear, consistent; or POV shifts clear & intentional
6. Literary Qualities	• Poor or inappropriate command of language (slang, word choice, figurative language, etc.) • Imagery confusing or nonexistent • Premise conventional, simplistic, expected • Book not suited for intended audience, unappealing • Not enjoyable or thought-provoking	• Moderate command of language (slang, word choice, figurative language, etc.) • Imagery clear • Premise not new, but well explored • Book generally suited to the intended audience, moderately appealing • A pleasant read	• Consistently strong command of language (slang, word choice, figurative language, etc.) • Imagery vivid, fresh • Premise breaks new ground • Well suited to intended audience, appealing • Thought-provoking

Fiction	0 – 3 points	4 – 7 points	8 – 10 points
7. Technical Conventions	• Word count, sentence structure, vocabulary inappropriate for target audience • Frequent problems with grammar, punctuation, spelling • Sloppy, wordy, repetitious writing • Poor balance between dialogue & narrative	• Word count, sentence structure, vocabulary appropriate for target audience • Occasional lapses of grammar, punctuation, spelling • Clear writing • Adequate balance between dialogue & narrative	• Word count, sentence structure, vocabulary excellent for target audience • Clear grasp of grammar, punctuation, spelling; or reader trusts that conventions purposefully set aside • Tight writing • Good balance between dialogue & narrative
8. Presentation	• Unattractive cover art & design • Interior design features lacking • Font & typesetting difficult to read • Illustrations (if used) of poor quality, or irrelevant to text	• Adequate cover art & design • Interior design features adequate • Font & typesetting adequate • Illustrations (if used) of moderate clarity, or not always germane to the text	• Attractive, appropriate, compelling cover art & design • Interior design features reflect book's tone • Font & typesetting clear • Illustrations (if used) appropriate, clear • Properly bound, i.e., audio books and eBooks

* WWW defines "the West" as anywhere on the North American continent west of the Mississippi River, including Alaska and Hawaii, Canada west of Manitoba, and Mexico.

** Depiction of a character's biases or stereotypical views, presented in context, may be appropriate.