

Written by Stephanie Finnegan
Monday, 21 January 2013 09:03 -

Over the past few weeks, the country has been bursting out with awards fever. It's been played up in the press with breathy reports on the Oscar nominations as well as the handing out of the Golden Globe Awards. Folks love the finery, the fashions, the fanatical behavior that go hand-in-glove with award ceremonies. I, too, had my own recent rub with award fever: specifically, the TOBY Awards.

Stevi T's "Steampunk Panserbjorne Armored Bear" won a berth in the Industry Choice Awards in the category of "Bear or Friend Using Nontraditional Materials."
 Philip Pullman's "The Golden Compass" was a complex look at an alternate world that combined the familiar with the strange and breathtaking. The heroine Lyra and the armored bear are a melding of the real with the surreal.
 "Uggie," by Olga Timofeevski, is a salute to the scene-stealing Jack Russell terrier who dominated the silent movie "The Artist." Timofeevski won an Industry Choice Award in the "Small Friends" category.
 French leading man Jean Dujardin and his canine co-star, Uggie the Dog, won raves, hearts, and many awards for their onscreen chemistry in "The Artist."
 Rollicking romance was guaranteed by Jutta Michels's "Zorro the Raccoon" which turned heads in the "Miniature Friend" category.
 "Zorro" is known for his swagger, his zest, and his scintillating use of the letter "Z!"
 Steiff North America led the manufacturer's pack with four wins. Among their judges' nods was the "Polar Express Conductor" in the "Manufacturer Bear" category.
 "The Polar Express" began its life as a children's picture book and then evolved into a motion-capture animated film, starring Tom Hanks as "The Conductor."
 In the category of "Manufacturer Friend," Gund's "Boo" lives up to his reputation as the world's cutest dog.
 Proving that he is indeed the cutest dog in the world, Boo flashes his natural charisma.

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I was lucky enough to be among the judges who had the chance to survey hundreds of candidates and to narrow the winners down to a select few per category. These chosen bears are now the TOBY Industry Choice winners, and they become the nominees for the readers of the magazine to choose and vote upon in the June issue. That leg of the campaign is the Public's Choice Awards. So, the TOBY Awards are like two awards shows in one: think the Grammys, which are voted on by musicians and their peers, and the Billboard Awards, which are based on public sales and record buyers, melded together. The TOBYs reflect the selections of a panel of bear professionals (me, Ken and Brenda Yenke, Mindy Kinsey, and Maria Balser) who all vote in private. Though it's the result of a group decision, the individuals

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all operate and vote autonomously and anonymously.

It was a thrill to take part in this program once more. I've done it in the past and my admiration never lessens. These truly are the best of the best!

When the results of our surveying were made public on January 12, I couldn't wait to see which ones made the final mix. I was delighted to see that many of my favorites apparently had scored high on the other judges' ballots too. The readers of the magazine have quite a choice to make, and each nominee is already a winner. This is one arena where a "win-win" situation is not an exaggeration. The nominees have already won the Industry Choice Awards.

I can't list all of the bears and their pals that most impressed me—there were dozens and dozens that did—but I'll let you know which ones really tickled my fancy. (And mind you, I had no idea who made these critters when I was voting on them.)

I truly liked the Steampunk sensibility of artist Stevi T.'s Alpaca Encounters. I see that Stevi T.'s name has popped up in a lot of the categories, but the "Steampunk Panserbjorne Armored Bear," which celebrated "The Golden Compass," and the "Steampunk Mice Search Mobile," which was both fantastic and frantic, delighted me beyond measure. I have a personal connection to "The Golden Compass," which is part of Philip Pullman's breathtaking "His Dark Materials" series. I was working as a Managing Editor at Random House's children's division when this YA book franchise was debuting in America. I had the great privilege to work as the copy editor and fact-checker for these tomes.

When I saw the rendering of the "Steampunk Panserbjorne," I knew instantly that this was the Pullman creation sprung to life. It was amazing to see a character that had clambered about in my mind made whole and made real. What a treat it was to see this winner in the "Bear or Friend using Nontraditional Materials" category.

Another creation that leapt to life—but from a cinematic pedigree—was "Uggie," created by Olga Timofeevski, of Needle Felted Dogs. "Uggie" is the tiny terrier that stole hearts and all his scenes in the Academy Award-winning film "The Artist." My very first blog for this Teddy Bear & Friends website was about "The Artist," so I felt such a giddiness when I saw this painstaking, meticulous re-creation of the dapper Jack Russell pooch in the "Small Friend" category.

As an artist, a person is placing his or her heart on the line. There is never a guarantee that a creation will be purchased or appreciated, understood or recognized. All of the folks who placed their handiwork before us should be applauded and congratulated. It's an act of bravery to make a personal dream come true. It's even more courageous to offer that artwork up to be judged and scored.

There are so many worthwhile nominees that you'll get to vote on and fall in love with in the June issue. I was a sucker for many of the lighthearted renderings that combined gorgeous costuming with a subtle sense of humor. Chief among those were "Zorro the Raccoon," created by Jutta Michels, of Mic Baren & Hasen.

Smiling and Nodding: The TOBY Industry Choice Awards reflect a panel of judges' nods of excellence and

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It's this commitment to excellence and the unexpected that make the TOBY Awards such a treat to participate in on every level.

From manufacturers (like Steiff, which has racked up four nominations, and Gund, right on its heels with three) to independent artists like Donna Griffin, Judi Paul, or Jenny Johnson, there are nominees that inspire and uplift the judges' and the collectors' spirits.

In a world that can often be bleak and disappointing, that is why I love the TOBY Awards. It is a chance to recognize the best of the best: it's people putting their best efforts forward. And I know it's one of the most tried-and-true clichés, but really in this case, it is so spot-on. Each and every person who had the confidence and the self-assurance to enter his or her animal into the competition is already a winner. It takes a certain amount of self-worth, self-determination, and self-assurance to go public with an accomplishment. Even though certain submissions didn't get a judge's nod or a nomination, that's not a discredit. It's not a negative comment on any entry. Rather, it's proof of just how rich, how diverse, and how amazing all of the entries were.

Each and every one—to borrow a term from a bygone awards program—was a Golden Teddy. Congratulations to all who entered the TOBYs. Good luck, nominees! And best of luck, readers. You're going to have a heck of a Public's Choice, come the June issue. I envy you!