The 2016 Notable Children’s Books in the English Language Arts

Christine A. Draper, Evelyn B. Freeman, Pamela C. Jewett, Dick Koblitz, Diana Porter, Jennifer Sanders, and Holly Sims

The 2016 Notable Children’s Books, unique in language and/or style, encourage readers to discover quality texts that linger long after the pages have been read.

The Notable Children’s Books in the English Language Arts Committee is pleased to share a list of powerful books that we believe have the potential to change individuals, challenge beliefs, or elicit emotional responses. The charge of the seven-member national committee is to select 30 titles that best exemplify the criteria for the award. Each selection must meet the generally accepted criteria of quality for the genre in which it is written. Additionally, the selections must have enduring quality, an appealing format, and invite child response or participation. Committee members look specifically for books that:

- deal explicitly with language, such as plays on words, word origins, or the history of language

Fictional Picturebooks

The Whisper
Written and illustrated by Pamela Zagarenski

The Whisper is a testament to the power of storytelling and imagination. A young girl is disappointed when the words fall out of a storybook. She hears a whisper: “beginnings, middles, and ends of stories can always be changed and imagined differently. There are never any rules, rights, or wrongs in imagining—imagining just is.” She pours over the richly detailed illustrations and develops beginnings for each spread in the now wordless book, creating a story readers will be eager to continue. Ironically, this ode to the wordless book is filled with delightful language. It will be a favorite due to the visual appeal of the textured mixed media paintings and the fundamental truth that each reader brings a unique perspective to a story that can be reimagined and expanded each time it is read. (HS)
The Plan
Written by Alison Paul
Illustrated by Barbara Lehman

This clever picturebook plays with the word “plan” and includes only 20 words to tell the story. Each word changes by one letter from the previous word so “plan” becomes “plane,” which then becomes “planet” and so on. The book opens with illustrations of a barnstorming plane called The Mighty Comet, a girl and her dog in the plane, and the planet Saturn. The girl finds a memory album, showing photos of her mother who was a barnstorming pilot with her father. An illustration at her mother’s grave is labeled “pain.” Father, daughter, and dog plan a trip and fly off in The Mighty Comet with a crowd of people waving them on. Realistic illustrations are rendered in watercolor, gouache, and ink. This book visually shows how words relate to each other and invites children to read the pictures and narrate their own story. (EBF)

Red: A Crayon’s Story
Written and illustrated by Michael Hall

Red is a crayon who doesn’t match his label. His label says red, but no matter how hard he tries, he always colors blue. His family, teacher, and friends try to help him find his red-ness, without any success. Red continues to draw blue strawberries, blue ants, and even a blue self-portrait. Everyone has an opinion about Red: they “wonder if he’s really red at all” and think he just needs “to press harder.” When Red meets a new crayon who gives him the opportunity to be his natural self, he discovers this true identity: blue! In this picturebook with art consisting of “digitally combined and colored crayon drawings and cut paper,” Michael Hall creates room for multiple interpretations and layers of connection. He depicts the potential harm of labeling people and addresses the complexities of the social constructions of identity. Through the concise dialogue of his crayon characters, Hall leads readers to reflect on their own use of language and its effect on those around them. (JS)

Use Your Imagination (But Be Careful What You Wish For!)
Written and illustrated by Nicola O’Byrne

With the unnoticd shadow of Wolf looming over him, Rabbit laments that he has nothing to do. Wolf encourages Rabbit to use words, pictures, and his imagination to create a story. As Wolf guides...
the story, young readers will recognize the literary allusions to *Little Red Riding Hood* and will be eager to warn Rabbit of the danger. They will also delight in the engaging mixed media illustrations. Rabbit eventually decides he no longer likes their story as Wolf begins to chase him. He then realizes he can determine the plot of the story, and in a unique quadruple spread pull-out, he gets rid of Wolf by using his creativity. He decides his imagination is pretty interesting after all. The book ends with Rabbit finding a peek-a-boo hole in the back cover for readers to peer through as they begin imagining their next adventure. (HS)

Given the freedom to soar—and inspired by the experiences of his day—pages of imaginative fantasies follow with brightly plumed birds, fanciful worlds, intricate flying machines, and imaginary observatories. At the end of the book, we see an older version of the boy at a museum standing by his sculpture, one that spirals up through the museum’s ceiling and into the night sky. A sign on the sculpture tells us that he named it, “The Wonder.” (PCJ)

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*The Wonder*

*Written and illustrated by Faye Hanson*


This dazzling picturebook tells the story of a boy whose head is filled with wonder. He wonders where birds fly, who makes clouds, and how stars shine. However, his wonderings go unappreciated by impatient adults in his life—both at home and at school. Single-tone sepia illustrations reflect his colorless days and fill the early pages. When the boy goes to art class, he finds a blank piece of paper and hears instructions to use his imagination.

*My Two Blankets*

*Written by Irena Kobald*  
*Illustrated by Freya Blackwood*


One’s language is part of one’s identity, and many immigrants experience a sense of loss of their identity when moving to a country with a different dominant language. *My Two Blankets* is about the loss and isolation that Cartwheel, a young girl, feels when she is forced to leave her home country and migrate to a new place with a new language. Freya Blackwell illustrates this heartwarming picturebook with mixed media of watercolor, watercolor pencil, and oil paint. She depicts the strange words that surround Cartwheel as random shapes and images: a leaf, a ladder,

*Use Your Imagination*  
*Nicola O’Byrne*

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a plane, a polynomial. With the help of a new friend, Cartwheel slowly quilts these image-words together into a new blanket of language that she is able to use to acclimate to her new home. Irena Kobald tells a gentle story of a girl learning to be bilingual and bicultural through the love and patience of a friend. (JS)

Where’s the Baboon?: A 2-in-1 Book Game
Written by Michaël Escoffier
Illustrated by Kris Di Giacomo

Is it a book? Is it a game? Is it a detective story? Readers of Escoffier’s picturebook will revel in the hide-and-seek word play of this story. Each page presents a question, and the illustrations give clues for words embedded inside other words. For example, in the first full-page spread, an ostrich at the teacher’s desk asks, “Who brought an APpLE?” The highlighted letters come to life in the next page where an APE continues the inquiry by asking, “Who is hiding behind the CAsTle?” Perfect for young readers who love riddles, secrets, hijinks, and word-play, Where’s the Baboon? brings together images and text to create imaginative new meanings. But it does so much more. It also immerses readers in the sheer liveliness and vitality of our language where words are playthings that teem with possibilities! (PCJ)

Willy’s Stories
Written and illustrated by Anthony Browne

“Every week I walk through these doors and something incredible happens.” These are the words Browne’s familiar chimpanzee Willy uses to invite readers to join him on his latest adventure through 10 classic stories in the library. On each double-page spread, surreal paintings portray Willy as the main character in classics such as Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, Treasure Island, and Robinson Crusoe. On the facing page, Willy recounts highlights from each story and ends each one with a cliffhanger question to invite predictions and promote curiosity. Mixed media illustrations that cleverly feature books as
items such as sharks’ teeth, bricks, and tree trunks complete this literary excursion. Willy’s Stories has appeal for all ages and begs to be read aloud! (DP)

**Willy’s Stories**

Written by Jennifer Chambliss Bertman
Illustrated by Sarah Watts

Without a constant place to call home, one thing that keeps 12-year-old Emily feeling connected is the Book Scavenger game (a worldwide treasure hunt for books). Soon after arriving at her new home, she meets James (and his cowlick named Steve) who sends a numerical puzzle by way of introduction, and they quickly develop a secret cipher language to communicate. Together, they find a unique book and wonder if they have stumbled upon a new Book Scavenger game. The friends become ensnared in a suspenseful mystery filled with intrigue and danger that can only be unraveled using their combined wit, puzzle experience, and literary knowledge. Those who venture to the author’s website (bookscavenger.com) will discover a real treasure hunt they can join! (HS)

**Stella by Starlight**

Written by Sharon M. Draper

Stella, a fifth-grade African American girl, lives in Bumblebee, North Carolina, during the Depression. Based on the author’s grandmother and the journal she kept, Stella’s story intersects with that of the small, tight-knit community in which she lives. One night, Stella and her younger brother Jojo witness the Ku Klux Klan burning a cross. This incident begins a series of events that tests Stella and the people of her community who face prejudice in the Jim Crow south. Stella dreams of becoming a writer, but “[r]eading and writing had come slowly” (p. 55). The importance of written language is woven throughout the book. Stella’s father’s boyhood poem as well as Stella’s own handwritten and typed stories are printed. Readers will identify with Stella and how she...
overcomes both personal struggles and those of her community. (EBF)

The Marvels
Written and illustrated by Brian Selznick
Scholastic, 2015, 672 pp., ISBN 978-0-545-44868-0

Selznick masterfully connects two seemingly different but interrelated stories in this complex novel told in both illustrations and words. The first tells the story of young Billy Marvel, a lone shipwreck survivor in 1766 who manages to begin his life anew at the Royal Theater in London. Readers follow Billy and his thespian descendants over several generations by interacting with nearly 400 pages of detailed pencil drawings. The second story, told in prose, begins in 1990 as young Joseph Jervis runs away from his boarding school to seek refuge with his Uncle Albert, who lives in a mysterious house in London filled with unusual portraits and strange happenings. As Joseph searches for clues to the meaning of his uncle’s strange house and life, he discovers connections to the Marvel family’s history and learns that everything is not always as it appears. (DK)

Echo
Written by Pam Muñoz Ryan

Pam Muñoz Ryan creates this beautifully crafted novel by inserting three historical fiction accounts between fairy-tale bookends and weaving a magical harmonica throughout. Set in Nazi Germany, the first account features Friedrich, whose birthmark and obsession with composing music make him an outcast, and his father, who is suspected of being a Jewish sympathizer. In the next account, piano-playing Mike and his brother Frankie, two orphans who have been adopted during the Great Depression, struggle with feeling unwanted. In the third account, musically talented Ivy Lopez, who attends a segregated school, lives in the home of a family sent to a Japanese Internment camp during World War II. These interconnected stories

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eventually converge at Carnegie Hall, where the reader learns the fate of each character and discovers the power of music. (DP)

The Thing about Jellyfish
Written by Ali Benjamin

Suzy can’t comprehend how her long-time friend, Franny, drowned in the ocean when she was such a good swimmer. One month later, Suzy is still baffled by Franny’s death, and she deals with the trauma by choosing not to talk. Suzy isn’t “refusing to talk” like everyone assumes; she has just decided “not to fill the world with words” (p. 8). When Suzy’s class visits the aquarium, she learns about the Irukandji jellyfish and its deadly venom and wonders if that is how Franny died. Author Ali Benjamin incorporates different types of texts to tell this somber story. Some chapters are prefaced with directions for Suzy’s science research assignment (for which she inevitably chooses the Irukandji). Other chapters are flashbacks on Franny and Suzy’s friendship. Benjamin vividly captures Suzy’s quirky intelligence and compulsive curiosity along with her sadness and desperation. Through this selectively mute character, Benjamin demonstrates both the power of silence and the power of words. (JS)

The Thing about Jellyfish

A Year in the Life of a Complete and Total Genius
Written by Stacey Matson

Arthur (Artie) Bean—creative genius, writer extraordinaire, and seventh grader at Terry Fox Junior High School—intends to win this year’s city-wide Junior Author’s Short Story Contest. Artie’s story unfolds through a series of letters, emails, journal entries, and notes to and from teachers and parents. His imaginative and no-holds-barred commentaries about fellow students, teachers, and school events, however, land him in trouble with just about everyone—his English teacher, drama coach, classmates, arch-enemy, and Kennedy Laurel, whom he yearns to call his girlfriend. Through his writing, we not only learn
about his dreams of fame, but also of the family loss he is learning to handle one day at a time. Artie’s story ends with the stars in alignment and with a short note and year-end report card from his English teacher, who we learn will be his homeroom teacher again in 8th grade. (PCJ)

Nonfiction

Drowned City: Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans
Written and illustrated by Don Brown

In this nonfiction graphic novel, Don Brown has created a poignant account of Hurricane Katrina and its impact on people of the Gulf Coast. In subdued, digital watercolor tones of blues, purples, olive, and sienna, Brown depicts this horrible and complex chain of events. The multiple perspectives of the citizens and agencies involved are conveyed through actual quotes from the media, survivors, and rescue workers. Source material is listed in a thorough bibliography. The language is straightforward and honest; nothing is sugar-coated. Brown reveals the lack of emergency preparation, lack of communication and effective action among governmental agencies and other parties, and the lack of coordination of efforts. The drama and devastation are palpable, and Brown’s skillful storytelling and pen-and-ink images propel readers from one panel to the next. This book is an invaluable documentary of this catastrophe that affected millions of Americans. (JS)

An Ambush of Tigers: A Wild Gathering of Collective Nouns
Written by Betsy R. Rosenthal
Illustrated by Jago

Many children have heard of a litter of puppies or a flock of birds. They may have seen a herd of elephants or a team of horses. But what about...
a walk of snails? Or a cast of hawks? Primary students will delight in this latest addition to picturebooks about animal collective nouns. Humorous illustrations that are digitally produced accompany creative and comical rhyming couplets that celebrate both imagination and creativity. The illustrations and fanciful wordplay interact to help young children remember the unusual names for groups of three or more animals, as in “Should a crash of rhinos/stay off the street/and a shiver of sharks/turn up the heat?” Students will laugh as rhinos crash into a water hydrant flooding a street and sharks wear hats, scarves, and earmuffs as they swim in the ocean. A glossary provides common definitions for each collective noun to help readers figure out the relationship between each word used and the animal group it describes. (DK)

How to Read a Story
Written by Kate Messner
Illustrated by Mark Siegel

According to Kate Messner, in only 10 easy steps, you too can read a story! Through humor and a conversational tone, readers are guided through each step by an enthusiastic young boy as he demonstrates the steps—from choosing a book that is interesting all the way to finishing the book . . . then starting over to enjoy the story again! Young readers are also introduced to using character voices for dramatic effect, and encouraged to make predictions while reading. The playful illustrations by Mark Siegel convey the dos and don’ts of each step, as well as offer a glimpse into the story selected by the boy in this guide. This “How To” book is not only an excellent mentor text for procedural nonfiction writing, but also a joyous tribute to the universal pleasures of reading. (HS)

Enormous Smallness:
A Story of E.E. Cummings
Written by Matthew Burgess
Illustrated by Kris Di Giacomo

Have you ever pondered the given name of e. e. cummings or questioned the reason behind this distinguished poet’s lowercase letters? Matthew Burgess invites you to “Peek inside and . . . see the room where E. E. writes his poetry.” Born Edward Estlin Cummings in 1894, this innovative poet’s contributions began at age three, when he spoke his first poem, and continued throughout his lifetime. All this time, he was experimenting with words and developing a style of his own. Consequently, when his first book was published, “e. e. put lowercase letters where capitals normally go.” Child-friendly poems, interwoven with

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Di Giacomo’s full-spread collages, result in a picturebook biography, suitable for all ages, that is truly a masterpiece of creativity! (DP)

Voice of Freedom: Fannie Lou Hamer, the Spirit of the Civil Rights Movement
Written by Carole Boston Weatherford
Illustrated by Ekua Holmes

This inspirational biography of civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer is written in verse. Each poem, penned in the first person from Hamer’s point of view, describes one aspect of her life. Born in Sunflower, Mississippi, to sharecroppers, Fannie was the youngest of 20 children. Although poor and with limited education, Fannie became a champion of voting rights for African Americans. She was threatened, imprisoned, and severely beaten with lasting injuries, yet she never abandoned her pursuit of justice. Against all these obstacles and many more, she registered to vote, voted, and ran for public office. An illustration, rendered in mixed-media collage, accompanies each poem. An author’s note and timeline of Hamer’s life provide additional information. A bibliography of books and other resources is included. This book is a compelling testament to a courageous, determined, and selfless woman. (EBF)

The Remarkable Story of George Moses Horton: Poet
Written and illustrated by Don Tate

This picturebook biography tells the story of 19th century poet George Moses Horton. Born a slave, George loved the sound of words and
taught himself to read from an old spelling book. He loved composing poems in his head. As a teenager, he was allowed to sell fruit on the weekends at a nearby university. Upon hearing George recite his poetry, some students began to give him their old textbooks and pay him to write poems for them. Eventually, the wife of a professor taught George to write and helped him publish his poems. Although in physical bondage most of his life, George’s determination and love of words gave him both spiritual and mental freedom. Quotations from Horton’s poems fill the endpapers and interconnect with some of the softly colored mixed-media illustrations. A list of books for further reading, websites, and an author’s note with both personal and historical information are included. (DK)

The Book Itch: Freedom, Truth, and Harlem’s Greatest Bookstore
Written by Vaunda Micheaux Nelson
Illustrated by R. Gregory Christie

When Lewis Micheaux requested a loan to open a bookstore in Harlem in the 1930s, the banker denied it, stating, “Black people don’t read.”

Resilient and determined, Micheaux peddled books from a pushcart until he achieved his goal. Micheaux’s neighbors thronged to The National Memorial African Bookstore, along with well-known social and political figures such as Malcolm X, Muhammed Ali, and Langston Hughes. Written as an intermediate/middle grades companion text to No Crystal Chair, a young adult novel Nelson and Christie published in 2012, this picturebook captures the story of Lewis Micheaux from the imagined perspective of Micheaux’s son. Christie’s richly textured paintings portray the heartaches faced by those who fought for justice during this time period, and extensive back matter extends the story. (DP)

W Is for Webster: Noah Webster and His American Dictionary
Written by Tracey Fern
Illustrated by Boris Kulikov

This picturebook biography of Noah Webster describes the life of the man who “created a new American language for a new American nation.” Born in 1758, Noah loved to learn and attended Yale College. A school teacher, Noah was not satisfied with British textbooks. The Revolutionary War had begun and Noah felt that schools needed American textbooks. He advocated for an
American language, one that differed from British English. After he created a bestselling speller that “included everyday words,” Noah decided to create a patriotic dictionary. Noah persisted in his work that took 20 years. In 1825, An American Dictionary of the English Language was published with more than 70,000 entries. Whimsical illustrations work in tandem with the text to create this fascinating portrait of Noah Webster. An author’s note and list of resources are included. (EBF)

28 Days: Moments in Black History That Changed the World
Written by Charles R. Smith Jr.
Illustrated by Shane W. Evans

Smith takes readers on a celebratory journey in this unique look at African American figures and events. Each day of February features an important historical, professional, sports, government, or celebrity figure, as well as Supreme Court decisions and constitutional amendments. Through free verse, concrete and acrostic poetry, eulogies, chants, and wordplay, the author presents nearly 250 years of African American history in chronological order. Numbers, song lyrics, and quotes are interwoven into some of the poems, with short nonfiction excerpts for further explanation. From Revolutionary hero Crispus Attucks to President Barack Obama, readers learn about the important contributions of African Americans to our country’s history. Illustrations in digital collage and oil dramatically highlight and support the accompanying text. An extra poem at the end for leap year challenges readers to create a bit of history on their own. A bibliography is included. (DK)

Poetry and Novels in Verse

My Seneca Village
Written by Marilyn Nelson, winner of NCTE’s 2017 Award for Excellence in Poetry for Children

This slender volume of poetry tells of beginnings. Drawing upon historical records, Marilyn Nelson brings to life 19th-century Seneca Village,
In this free-verse memoir spanning the years 1951–1965, Margarita Engle writes about the emotional tug-of-war she felt as a child growing up in two different cultures. Having an American father and Cuban mother, Engle is unsure of her true identity and often feels like dual selves trying to be whole. Reading books and writing poems become her refuge during the school year in California, but her heart lies in the carefree summers she spends in the tropical island of her Cuban relatives. Conflicts between America and Cuba, however, eventually disrupt the tranquil life of her mother’s family. Travel between the two countries becomes more difficult, and Engle begins to doubt the very existence of her invisible twin. Readers will enjoy the author’s travel memories as they learn about mid-20th-century history and issues of civil war and immigration. A historical timeline and author’s note are included. (DK)

**Enchanted Air: Two Cultures, Two Wings: A Memoir**

Written by Margarita Engle  

Inspired by her life as a child in a military family, Nikki Grimes tells the story of a young girl who discovers poems hidden away in the attic and

**Poems in the Attic**

Written by Nikki Grimes  
Illustrated by Elizabeth Zunon  

Inspired by her life as a child in a military family, Nikki Grimes tells the story of a young girl who discovers poems hidden away in the attic and
A Spectacular Selection of Sea Critters: Concrete Poems
Written by Betsy Franco
Illustrated by Michael Wertz

With just the right amount of humor and surprise, this book is a refreshingly clever collection of concrete poems about ocean life. Betsy Franco demonstrates a knack for capturing the personality of these sea creatures in concrete poetry form. In a cinquain about the Moorish idol (a type of fish), she describes it as having “a high sense of fashion” that is “punctuated by a stylish top fin.” In addition to the concrete form, she incorporates haiku, acrostic, and limerick poems, while maintaining a focus on the content and creativity of the poetry. Franco uses rich language to describe the various sea creatures, avoiding controlled, simplified vocabulary. For example, the movement of box jellies is described as “undulating,” “pulsating,” and “navigating.” Readers will delight in this book with brightly colored and detailed illustrations in red, orange, and yellow against blue ocean backgrounds, creating an engaging ocean environment that calls to be read aloud over and over. (JS)

Flutter and Hum: Animal Poems/Aleteo y Zumbido: Poemas de Animales
Written and illustrated by Julie Paschkis

This collection of poems flows easily in both English and Spanish, and the playful sounds beg to be read aloud. “Snake: Slithering/ through the grass/ the sinuous snake/ is writing/ a slippery poem/ with his body./ But his alphabet is/ too
simple. He only knows/ one letter:/ sssssssssss.”
“La Serpiente:/ Deslizándose/ por la hierba/ la serpiente sinuosa/ está escribiendo/ un poema resbaloso/ con su cuerpo./ Pero su alfabeto/ es súper sencillo./ Sólo sabe/ una letra:/ sssssssssss.”
Paschke’s colorful, expressive illustrations depict visual representations of the rhythm and patterns of her poetry. The words playfully incorporated into each painting extend the poems and offer additional language in both English and Spanish, encouraging vocabulary development. (HS)

**Jumping Off Library Shelves: A Book of Poems**
Selected by Lee Bennett Hopkins
Illustrated by Jane Manning

Perusing the Table of Contents, readers of all ages immediately begin to sense the various lenses through which the 15 poets featured in this anthology view the library. In “Refuge,” Nikki Grimes sees the library as a place to rest, whereas in Cynthia S. Cotton’s poem entitled “My Card,” a mere piece of plastic “unlocks the world/ and
more/ with a single/ scan” (p. 11). Alongside the many eloquently written poems, Hopkins honors Augusta Baker, a librarian, for her contributions to children’s literature in “Storyteller.” Manning’s gouache and pencil paintings, featuring a softened background accented with splashes of vibrant color, beautifully complement the text and speak to both the serenity and power of the library and the books it houses. (DP)

For more information about the Notable Children’s Books in the English Language Arts and the Children’s Literature Assembly, visit http://www.childrensliteratureassembly.org.

2015–2016 Notable Children’s Books in the Language Arts Committee Members: Christine A. Draper, Chair, Georgia Southern University, Statesboro, GA; Evelyn B. Freeman (EBF), The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH; Pamela C. Jewett (PCJ), University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC; Dick Koblitz (DK), Webster University, St. Louis, MO; Diana Porter (DP), Eastern Kentucky University, Richmond, KY; Jennifer Sanders (JS), Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK; and Holly Sims (HS), Independence Elementary School, Independence, OR.

Candidates Announced for Section Elections; Watch for Your Ballot

The Elementary Section Nominating Committee has named the following candidates for Section offices in the NCTE spring elections:

For Members of the Elementary Section Nominating Committee (three to be elected; terms to expire in 2018): Chinyere Ngozi Harris, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, NY; Karla J. Möller, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; Kindel Turner Nash, University of Missouri, Kansas City; Natasha A. Thornton, Kennesaw State University, GA; Nancy Valdez-Gainer, Blazier Elementary School, Austin, TX; Melody Zoch, University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Members of the 2016–17 Elementary Section Nominating Committee are Denise Davila, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, chair; Jane Bean-Folkes, Rowan University, Glassboro, NJ; and Sanjuana Rodriguez, Kennesaw State University, GA.

Lists of candidates for all of the ballots can be found on the NCTE website at http://www.ncte.org/volunteer/elections.