sport, arts & culture
Department:
Sport, Arts and Culture
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

THE SOUTH AFRICAN NATIONAL LITERARY AWARDS

Judging Guidelines

THE NATIONAL LITERARY AWARDS

A Department of Sport, Arts and Culture (DSAC) Initiative

Judging Guidelines: 2026/27 Edition



1. ABOUT THE AWARDS

CELEBRATING AND HONOURING EXCELLENCE IN SOUTH AFRICAN LETTERS

A. The Department of Sport, Arts and Culture (DSAC), under the guidance of the UNESCO Framework for Cultural Statistics (2009), established the **National Literary Awards** to recognise and honour individuals and groups who have excelled in the literary arts. These awards were established in 2026 and will be presented annually.

B. The overall objective of the awards is not only to recognise high achievers who are our authors, publishers, translators, illustrators and the whole book value chain but to further surge their stature as heroes and heroines for the citizenry and to foster a culture of reading and writing.

C. The 2026 edition of the National Literary Awards will take place on 27 February 2027.

2. ENTRY GUIDELINES AND ELIGIBILITY

2.1 GENERAL ELIGIBILITY

A. Citizenship & Residency

The National Literary Awards are open to:

- All South African citizens in accordance with the South African Citizenship Act, 1995.
- For the Book Publishing Value Chain Awards (Publishing Houses and Organisations), the entity must be registered in South Africa with majority shareholding held by South African citizens**.**

B. Publication Period

Works submitted for consideration must have been published for the first time between:

1 January 2025 and 31 December 2025 (Exceptions are made for some categories)

C. Publication Format

Eligible works must have been published in one of the following formats with valid ISBN and first published during the eligibility period:

- **Physical book**
- **E-book**
- **Audiobook**

D. Language

- Works may be submitted in any of South Africa's official languages.
- Language-Specific Awards, the work must be originally written in that language. (Translated works are not eligible for this category).



E. ISBN Requirements

All books submitted must have a valid International Standard Book Number (ISBN) assigned by the South African ISBN Agency.

F. Copyright & Ownership

- Submissions can be made by the copyright holder (author, publisher, or estate).
- If submitting on behalf of a copyright holder, a letter of authorisation from the owner is required.
- The Literary Translation Award: written consent from both the original author/publisher and the translator is required.
- Posthumous submissions: a copy of the death certificate and proof that the submitter is the authorised representative of the estate must accompany the submission.

G. Multiple Submissions

- An author may submit works in multiple cross-cutting categories provided the work meets the eligibility criteria for each.
- A single work may be submitted for only one Language-Specific Award (the language in which it was originally written) and may also be submitted for relevant Cross-Cutting Awards

H. Deceased Authors

Next of kin or authorised estate representatives may submit works on behalf of a deceased author, provided:

- The work was published within the eligibility period.
- The deceased author held copyright at the time of death.
- Proof of authorisation from the relevant authority should accompany the submission.

2.2 GENERAL INELIGIBILITY

The following are not eligible for the National Literary Awards:

A. Content-Based Exclusions

- Works that constitute hate speech, incite violence, or promote discrimination based on race, ethnicity, gender, religion, or sexual orientation.
- Works that contain pornographic content as the primary purpose.
- Works that plagiarise or infringe upon the copyright of others.
- Works that were created using AI

B. Author-Based Exclusions

- Individuals who are sitting members of the current judging committee or the NLA planning team.
- Individuals who are currently serving as elected public officials (works written about them are eligible).



- Individuals who have been convicted of a serious crime involving fraud, corruption, or violence against others.
- Individuals who have pending non-compliance matters with DSAC or any government entity.

C. Publication-Based Exclusions

- Works that are primarily academic theses or dissertations that have not been adapted for public literary consumption.
- Works that are primarily technical manuals, textbooks, or instructional.
- Works that are self-published without a valid ISBN and without demonstrable distribution through recognised channels.
- Works that are reprints or new editions of works previously published outside the eligibility period, unless significantly revised.

D. Timing-Based Exclusions

- Works published before the eligibility period.
- Works published after the eligibility period.
- Works that have not been publicly available for sale or distribution during the eligibility period.

3. AWARD CATEGORIES AND DEFINITIONS

The National Literary Awards are structured across two main pillars: **Language-Specific Awards** and **Cross-Cutting Awards**, with additional Special Recognition Awards for contributions to the literary value chain and works in endangered or specialised formats.

3.1 PILLAR A: THE OFFICIAL LANGUAGE AWARDS

These awards honour outstanding full-length published works including fiction, non-fiction, short stories and poetry originally written in each of South Africa's eleven official languages.

Language	Description
IsiNdebele	Awarded to the most outstanding work of Fiction (novels, short stories, poetry), non-fiction. originally written in isiNdebele, demonstrating literary excellence and cultural resonance.
IsiXhosa	Awarded to the most outstanding work of Fiction (novels, short stories, poetry), non-fiction. originally written in isiXhosa.
IsiZulu	Awarded to the most outstanding work of Fiction (novels, short stories, poetry), non-fiction. originally written in isiZulu.
Sesotho	Awarded to the most outstanding work of Fiction (novels, short stories, poetry), non-fiction originally written in Sesotho.



Sepedi-	Awarded to the most outstanding work of Fiction (novels, short stories, poetry), non-fiction. originally written in Sepedi.
Setswana	Awarded to the most outstanding work of Fiction (novels, short stories, poetry), non-fiction. originally written in Setswana.
Siswati	Awarded to the most outstanding work of Fiction (novels, short stories, poetry), non-fiction. originally written in Siswati.
Tshivenda	Awarded to the most outstanding work of Fiction (novels, short stories, poetry), non-fiction originally written in Tshivenda.
Xitsonga	Awarded to the most outstanding work of Fiction (novels, short stories, poetry), non-fiction originally written in Xitsonga.
Afrikaans	Awarded to the most outstanding work of Fiction (novels, short stories, poetry), non-fiction. originally written in Afrikaans.
English	Awarded to the most outstanding work of Fiction (novels, short stories, poetry), non-fiction originally written in English.

3.2 PILLAR B: CROSS-CUTTING AWARDS

These awards recognise exceptional achievement that transcends language boundaries, celebrating the best of South African literature across all official languages.

Award Name	Description
Lifetime Achievement Award	Presented to an individual who has made a monumental and sustained contribution to South African literature over the course of their career. This award may also be conferred posthumously to honour the enduring legacy of a deceased literary giant.
Children's Book Award	Honours outstanding works for younger readers, from picture books to young adult novels. The award recognises age-appropriate themes, literary quality, and the ability to inspire a love of reading in the next generation.
South African International Author Award	Honouring South African authors whose books have been recognised on international platforms and sold outside the boarders of South Africa. To encourage the business of selling books and accessing all markets nationally and internationally



3.3 SPECIAL RECOGNITION AWARDS

These awards acknowledge works in specialised formats and contributions from key players in the book publishing value chain.

3.3.1 Special Recognition: Books

Award Name	Description
Liberation Struggle Literary Award	Recognises a work that documents, chronicles, or reflects upon the South African anti-apartheid struggle, liberation movements, or the fight against racial oppression. This award honours the role of literature in bearing witness to history and preserving the memory of the struggle for future generations.

3.3.2 Special Recognition: Book Publishing Value Chain

Award Name	Description
Publishing House of the Year	Acknowledges excellence and innovation in multi-language publishing. This award celebrates a publishing house that has demonstrated a commitment to quality, diversity, and the promotion of South African voices.
Outstanding Literary Organisation of the Year	Awarded to an organisation (NGO, non-profit, trust, or foundation) that has demonstrated a sustained commitment to literary promotion, reading campaigns, and the development of the literary sector.

3.3.3 Summary Table: Awards at a Glance

Pillar	Category	Number of Awards
Language-Specific	Official Language Awards	11



Pillar	Category	Number of Awards
Crosscutting	Lifetime Achievement and Children's Book Award	3
Special Recognition (Books)	Liberation Struggle	1
Special Recognition (Value Chain)	Publishing House of the year and Outstanding Literary Organisation	2
TOTAL		**17**

4. MINISTER'S SPECIAL AWARDS (DISCRETIONARY)

The Minister of Sport, Arts and Culture may present the following discretionary awards:

- **a. Lifetime Achievement Award:** Recognising a lifetime of outstanding contribution to South African literature. Recipients must be over the age of 65.
- **b. Liberation Struggle Literary Award** Recognising an individual or organisation that has made a significant contribution to promoting reading, literacy, and access to books in underserved communities.

The adjudication panel will shortlist and recommend three for each of the Ministerial Awards and provide motivation, and the Minister will select from the shortlist.

6. HOW TO ENTER

A. Register and submit your application online via the official DSAC portal.

B. You will require:

- A copy of the entrant's ID / proof of citizenship / permanent residency.
- A digital copy of the book (PDF/ePub) and physical copies sent to the address provided upon registration.
- Proof of publication (e.g., copyright page showing ISBN and publication date).



- If you are not the rights holder, a signed letter of permission from the publisher or rights holder.

C. Each entry will require a separate submission form and fee (if applicable).

D. All entries must be submitted by **12 December 2026**. Late entries will not be accepted. The NLA organising committee accepts no responsibility for entrants missing deadlines.

5. JUDGING PROCESS AND PROCEDURES

5.1 CHAIRPERSON(S) OF THE JUDGING COMMITTEE

- DSAC shall appoint a chairperson of the Judging Committee per category; a person of experience, ability, and integrity in the literary sector.
- The Chairperson's role is to oversee the judging process, rule on disputes, and ensure integrity. They may not serve as a genre-specific judge.
- The Chairperson should ensure that the recommendations on any ruling in relation to the judging process are submitted to DSAC accordingly.

5.2 JUDGING PANELS

- Separate judging panels will be appointed for each major category (e.g., Fiction and Non-fiction Panels).
- Panels will consist of a minimum of 3 and a maximum of 5 judges, each with a minimum of 8 years' experience in the relevant literary field (e.g., publishers, academics, booksellers, senior authors, critics).
- Panels where possible, will be balanced with respect to age, gender, ethnicity, and language representation.
- **Conflict of Interest:** All judges must declare any connection to a submitted work. If a judge is an editor, publisher, or close associate of an author whose work is in contention, they must recuse themselves from the panel for that category.

5.3 JUDGING PHASES

The judging process comprises of two phases:

- **Phase 1: Long-Listing & Nominee Selection:** Each panel reviews all eligible entries to create a long-list. From this, they select a short-list of **3 to 5 nominees**.



- **Phase 2: Winner Selection:** The panel reviews the short-listed works in depth. Through discussion and a secret ballot vote, they select a single winner. The vote is based on the majority consensus of the judges.

5.4 CONFIDENTIALITY

All judges and committee members must sign a Non-Disclosure Agreement (NDA). Results are strictly embargoed until the official awards ceremony.

5.5 AUDITORS

A reputable firm of auditors will be appointed to oversee the voting process and ensure adherence to the rules.

6. LITERARY AWARDS SCORE CARD

Judges will evaluate entries based on the following criteria. Each category has specific weighted criteria.

JUDGING CRITERIA AND SCORE CARDS

The score cards are designed to be:

- **Fair:** Each criterion is clearly defined.
- **Flexible:** They accommodate different genres (fiction vs. non-fiction, children's books).
- **Quantifiable:** The weighted scoring system ensures consistency across different judging panels.

6.1 GENERAL SCORING KEY

All judges will use the following 10-point scale to evaluate each criterion:

Score	Rating	Description
1-2	Poor	Does not meet basic standards; significant shortcomings.
3-4	Below Average	Meets few criteria; noticeable weaknesses.
5-6	Good	Competent work; meets expectations but lacks distinction.



7-8	Excellent	High level of achievement; stands out in several areas.
9-10	Outstanding	A benchmark work; exceptional in nearly all respects.

6.2 PILLAR A: LANGUAGE SPECIFIC AWARDS (THE CORE ELEVEN)

Applies to: *IsiNdebele, IsiXhosa, IsiZulu, Sesotho, Sepedi, Setswana, Siswati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Afrikaans, English*

Note: Since these awards cover fiction, non-fiction, and poetry within a single language, the score card must be versatile. Judges will apply the relevant section based on the genre of the submitted work.

Criteria	Description	Weight	Score (1-10)	Weighted Score
Linguistic Mastery	Command of the language; richness of vocabulary; idiomatic authenticity; grammatical precision, additionally illustrations in the case of children's books. **For** poetry: attention to rhythm, sound, and form in the original language.	30%		
Literary Merit	Quality of writing; stylistic elegance; narrative or poetic craftsmanship; originality of expression.	25%		
Cultural Resonance	The work's connection to the culture, history, or contemporary experience of its language community; authenticity of voice.	20%		
Structural	**Fiction:** plot, pacing, character	15%		



Criteria	Description	Weight	Score (1-10)	Weighted Score
Coherence	development. **Non-fiction:** clarity of argument, research depth. **Poetry:** cohesion of the collection.			
Contribution to the Language	The work's role in enriching, preserving, or advancing literature in that language.	10%		
TOTAL		100%		/10

6.3 PILLAR B: CROSS-CUTTING AWARDS

6.3.1 Lifetime Achievement Award

Note: This is a discretionary award based on a body of work, not a single publication.

Criteria	Description	Weight	Score (1-10)	Weighted Score
Sustained Excellence	A body of work spanning many years that consistently demonstrates high literary quality.	30%		
Influence & Impact	The extent to which the individual has influenced other writers, shaped literary discourse, or impacted society.	25%		
Contribution to South African Literature	Role in developing the literary sector, mentoring emerging writers, or	20%		



Criteria	Description	Weight	Score (1-10)	Weighted Score
	advancing a particular language or genre.			
Cultural & Historical Significance	The individual's role in documenting, reflecting, or shaping South African history and culture through their work.	15%		
National & International Recognition	Awards received, translations published, academic attention, and reputation within and beyond South Africa.	10%		
TOTAL		**100%**		**/10**

6.3.2 Children's Book Award

Criteria	Description	Weigh t	Score (1-10)	Weighted Score
Age-Appropriateness	Suitability of theme, language, and complexity for the target age group.	20%		
Literary Quality	Craft of writing; engaging content and effective storytelling.	25%		
Illustration & Design	Quality of artwork; integration of text and images; overall book design.	20%		



Criteria	Description	Weigh t	Score (1-10)	Weighted Score
Engagement & Appeal	The work's ability to capture and hold a child and young reader's imagination and interest.	20%		
Cultural Relevance	Reflection of South African realities, diversity, and stories; representation of different cultural experiences.	15%		
TOTAL		**100%**		**/10**

6.3.3 South African International Author Award

Criteria	Description	Weight	Score (1-10)	Weighted Score
Literary Excellence	The quality of the author's prose/poetry, originality of narrative technique, and mastery of language and emphasis on "literary quality".	30%		
Global Influence and Reception	The author's reputation and readership in international literary circles; critical reception, translation into multiple languages, and inclusion in academic research or teaching.	25%		



Criteria	Description	Weight	Score (1-10)	Weighted Score
Relevance and Resonance with South Africa	The degree to which the author's works resonate with South African readers and literary circles—whether through thematic dialogue (such as colonialism, identity, memory, social justice), direct interaction with South African literary traditions, or significant attention received after publication in South Africa.	25%		
Originality and Vision	The author's unique voice, innovative contributions to literary form or themes, and the ability to provide new perspectives on the human condition.	10%		
Sustained Creative Achievement	Not a one-off success, but the ability to maintain high quality across multiple works, demonstrating the depth and continuity of literary practice.	10%		
TOTAL		**100%**		**/10**

6.4 SPECIAL RECOGNITION AWARDS

6.4.1 Liberation Struggle Literature Award



Criteria	Description	Weight	Score (1-10)	Weighted Score
Historical Accuracy	Well-researched representation of the South African struggle history.	25%		
Preservation of Memory	Contribution to preserving the stories, experiences, and lessons of the liberation struggle.	25%		
Narrative Power	The work's ability to convey the human dimension of the struggle and emotional resonance.	20%		
Original Contribution	New insights, previously untold stories, or fresh perspectives on previously documented stories on the struggle.	15%		
Educational Value	Potential to educate current and future generations about South African history.	15%		
TOTAL		**100%**		**/10**

6.5 BOOK PUBLISHING VALUE CHAIN AWARDS

6.5.1 Publishing House of the Year



Criteria	Description	Weight	Score (1-10)	Weighted Score
Multi-Language Publishing	Commitment to publishing in multiple official languages; number and quality of titles across languages.	25%		
Editorial Excellence	Quality of editing, production, and design across the publisher's list.	25%		
Author Development	Investment in nurturing and developing authors; discovery of new voices.	20%		
Innovation	Creative approaches to publishing, marketing, or distribution.	15%		
Industry Contribution	Evident role in advancing the publishing sector; collaboration with booksellers, distributors, and literary organisations.	15%		
TOTAL		**100%**		**/10**

6.5.2 Outstanding Literary Organisation of the Year

Criteria	Description	Weight	Score (1-10)	Weighted Score
Mission Impact	Effectiveness in achieving its stated mission related to literature.	30%		



Criteria	Description	Weight	Score (1-10)	Weighted Score
Reach & Engagement	Number of people/entities reached and depth of engagement.	25%		
Innovation	Creative programmes, projects, or approaches to literary promotion.	20%		
Sustainability	Financial and organisational stability and long-term planning.	15%		
Collaboration	Partnerships with other literary entities, publishers, authors, government or any other private sector organisation.	10%		
TOTAL		**100%**		**/10**

7. SUMMARY: AWARDS AND JUDGING PANELS AT A GLANCE

Note: the number of adjudicators will be dependent on the number of submissions received.

Pillar	Category	Judging Panel
Language-Specific	Official Language Awards	Separate language panels (each with 3-5 judges proficient in that language)



Pillar	Category	Judging Panel
Cross-Cutting	Lifetime Achievement	Minister's Discretionary Panel
	Children's Book Award	Cross-Cutting Panel
	South African International Author Award	Cross-Cutting Panel
Special Recognition (Books)	Liberation Struggle	Special Recognition Panel C (including historians)
Special Recognition (Value Chain)	Publishing House of the Year	Special Recognition Panel
	Outstanding Literary Organisation of the Year	Special Recognition Panel

