

# A Focus on Summer

## National Summer Book Award Initiated at NSLA Summit

ELIZABETH MCCHESENEY

**T**he setting: a glittering ballroom holding twelve hundred people all gathered to think, learn, work, and grow together around the issues related to providing equitable access in the summertime.

The event: The Library and Literacy Professional Learning Community (PLC) awarded the inaugural National Summer Book Award at the National Summer Learning Association (NSLA) Annual Summit. The NSLA is the nation's only non-profit laser-focused on increasing access to summer programs. It works to ensure all of America's students, regardless of background, income, or zip code, can access and benefit from a high-quality summer learning experience every year.

The NSLA Summit convenes cross-sector leaders, program providers, and funders, including about one hundred public library leaders nationwide. NSLA holds space for library leaders looking to work on deepening access and equity in their summer program, align to quality indicators for program success, lift youth voices, develop partnerships, and also work to help advocate for libraries in the "big tent" of summer learning.

The Library and Literacy PLC, a community that meets monthly to workshop ideas, hear from trainers, and work on projects to contribute to library-related issues, is a testament to the power of collective effort. This year, we expanded our reach to provide information to summer program providers outside of libraries



Author Chanel Miller (r) receives the 2024 National Summer Book Award from Elizabeth McChesney at the 2024 Summit of the National Summer Learning Association.

about beautiful and culturally affirming literature they might include for youth in summer programs such as camps and special interest programs. In service of this idea, we created a National Summer Book Award, modeled after the ALA Youth Media Awards, a symbol of our commitment to excellence in literature for youth.

This idea was inspired by several of the PLC members sitting together at the ALA Annual Conference in 2024 for the Coretta Scott King Book Awards Roundtable Breakfast, where we were inspired by the power and richness of the awards ceremony. With consent and enthusiasm from NSLA leadership, we convened immediately to begin the process. We created and voted on criteria that lifted the values of NSLA, including equity and access, persistence and resilience, and the joy and power of interest-driven



**Liz McChesney**, with over thirty-five years of experience serving children and families, is a passionate children's advocate, library administrator, and literacy expert. She has earned numerous national awards including the 2024 Library of Congress David M. Rubenstein Award for Excellence in Literacy. She currently serves as a Senior Advisor at the Urban Libraries Council and a Senior Fellow at the National Summer Learning Association. *Wonder Libraries: 20 Expert Opinions on What Kids Need Now (Neal Schuman-ALA Editions, 2024)*, edited by Liz McChesney, was recently released.

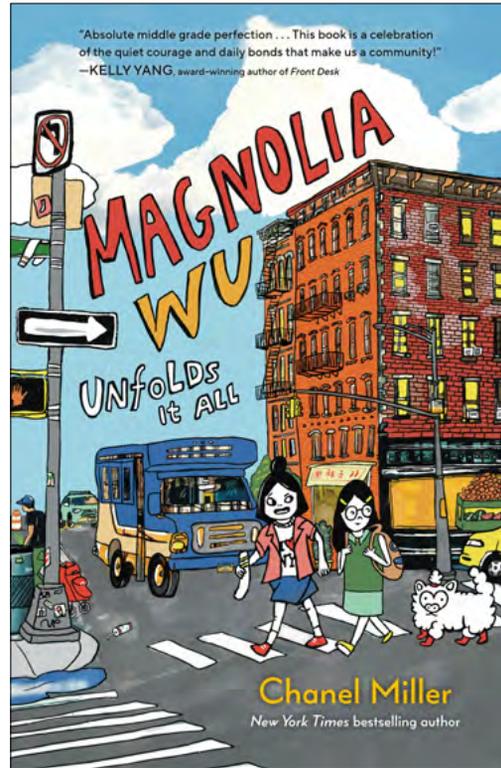
learning. This emphasis on interest-driven learning is a key aspect of the National Summer Book Award, as we know that when children are engaged and interested in every aspect of what they are learning, including reading, the learning experience is more meaningful and impactful. Additional criteria for consideration included a book published within the last four years and available in print so programs could easily access copies of it.

A working segment of our PLC stepped forward as a selection committee and quickly established criteria for consideration that were voted on by the larger community. The committee members include Becca Boland, Christy Estrovitz, Erin Gambrell, Liz McChesney, Jenny Song, Leana Pulu, and Jen Woo.

The criteria include literary quality, relevance and themes, age appropriateness, originality, illustrations where applicable, cultural and social awareness, educational value, reader engagement, and impact and professional reviews.

Twenty-two books were considered, read, and voted upon, and in September of 2024, our committee chose *Magnolia Wu Unfolds It All* by Chanel Miller, published by Penguin Random House in 2024. The book also received a Newbery Honor this year. Magnolia Wu has pinned every lost sock from the laundromat her parents owned in New York City onto a bulletin board in hopes of finding the missing owners, but no one ever notices the socks, not even Magnolia. But when a new friend—Iris—moves from California to New York one summer, the new friends set out across the city to solve the mystery of each of the missing socks and, in doing so, ask a million questions; they stay determined and encounter new people and unimaginable experiences. With each new meeting, Magnolia learns more about herself and her community, and most importantly, she learns important lessons that include

errors are just creative acts and that just below the surface of a person, there are endless unexpected layers and stories, pain and longing and dreams. This book exemplifies the best of summer learning, friendship, and resilience.



Back at that historic ballroom, Miller accepted the award to a standing ovation from program leaders, funders, educators, and out-of-school time leaders. “Being surrounded by educators and librarians fuels me to keep writing,” said Miller. “I have witnessed their unwavering focus and clarity of purpose when it comes to expanding the hearts and minds of children. Thank you for this honor and for showing me the warmest side of humanity.”

“This book offers a tremendous opportunity for children attending thousands of summer programs across the United States,” added Aaron Dworkin, CEO of the NSLA. “The establishment of the National Summer Book Award is a significant milestone in our mission to increase access to high-quality summer learning experiences. We are delighted to institutionalize an annual book for youth which all programs can include in their summer offerings. This is a significant contribution to the organization from the Library and Literacy PLC, and we are so grateful for Chanel Miller and the world of Magnolia Wu for helping us build empathetic, funny, and kind summer readers. This award is a testament to the power of literature to inspire and educate our youth, and we look forward to the impact it will have on summer learning programs across the nation.”

For more information on joining the Library and Literacy PLC at the NSLA or to be considered for the National Summer Book Selection Committee, please contact Liz McChesney at [Liz@laundrycares.org](mailto:Liz@laundrycares.org). &