

# The Golden Heart

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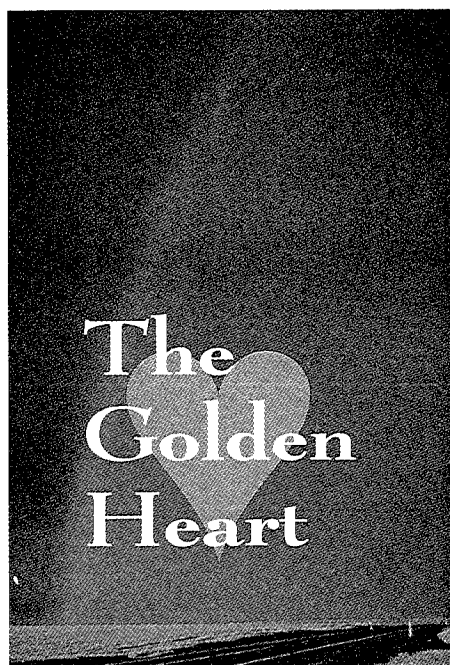
**by Roxanne Rustand & Tracy Cozzens**

Every year some 800 aspiring authors finish their full manuscripts, revise and polish their entries until each sentence gleams, then send them off with high hopes. Will this be the year? Will there be a Golden Heart pendant at the end of the rainbow?

The day coordinators begin calling finalists is one of incredible tension. Hopes and dreams and anxiety make each moment drag. Every ring of the phone could be The Call. And if that call does come, the shock and elation can be overwhelming.

For many, finalist status means validation after years of writing, years of determination and struggle. For all, wearing that finalist ribbon at the RWA Conference means an endless round of congratulations and a wonderful sense of excitement and optimism as the Awards Ceremony draws closer. For 140 writers since 1981 (four of whom have won twice), this has culminated in winning a treasured Golden Heart.

The contest has grown considerably since its inception, when all 115 entries



were judged by editors and agents at the national conference.

In 1998 there were 882 total entries, with 66 finalists in nine categories (Young Adult and Regency were cancelled for lack of entries). Every entrant accomplished something few people ever will—the completion of a full manuscript. And whether they finaled or not, many of them are talented writers on the verge of a coveted first sale.

But what about the finalists and winners? Does making the Golden Heart finals put them on a fast track to a first sale? Do only the winners reap the benefits of this contest? Or is it, as some detractors maintain, an over-hyped event that means little to a fledgling writer's career?

In 1994, Mary Lechleidner (w/a Delia Parr) conducted a survey of Golden Heart finalists from 1981 through 1993. Her article "The Golden Heart Contest: Take Heart...A Survey" appeared in the November-December 1994 issue of RWR.

She discovered that, "For the aspiring, ready-to-be-published authors who make the finals, whether winning or not, most of them (67%) do sell." Most of those authors (71%) sold the book that made the finals, and she found that winning made a difference "not in whether you sell, but when."

Since 1993 many more writers have received The Call from a Golden Heart coordinator. Is the contest still an indicator of future success? While preparing our workshop "Using Contests to Advance Your Writing Career" for the RWA Con-

ference in Anaheim last summer, we surveyed editors, agents, and members of the Golden Network Chapter (a chapter developed for past Golden Heart finalists), and then decided to take our research a step further. With Mary's blessing, we repeated her study.

RWA provided mailing labels for 340 past Golden Heart winners and finalists. After mailing those surveys, we also posted notice of the study on AOL, Genie, RWAlink, and PANlink, hoping to locate additional past finalists and winners.

Despite the larger pool of potential respondents by 1998, we received fewer total responses. Almost 30 of the surveys were returned "forwarding address un-

known." Our survey was completed by a differing roster of participants, but our data did parallel the data collected in 1994. (see table #1)

mean a manuscript will sell—and failing to final doesn't mean the manuscript won't. Amelia Autin, a '93 Golden Heart winner, wrote, "Some wonderful manuscripts just don't make very good contest entries for a variety of reasons. And some manuscripts make the finals in contest after contest but don't sell, either because the writer has spent all of her time polishing the same three chapters...or because there's no market for the story."

"I think (the Golden Heart) can be a wonderful sales and information tool for the writer who is dedicated, disciplined, and has taken time to hone her craft...but certainly, failure to win or place in the contest does not indicate that a manuscript is

**Table #1**

**Golden Heart Survey Respondents - 1994 versus 1998**

Year	# of responses	% who have sold	% not yet published
1994	208	67%	33%
1998	142	75%	25%

unsaleable," commented Kristin Hannah, a 1990 GH winner. Did the respondents who have sold feel the Golden Heart helped with editor/agent contacts that led to their first sale?

"Absolutely," wrote Megan Chance, who finaled in '90 and '91. Almost two-thirds of the now-published respondents agreed (see Table #3), and 97% of the as-yet unpublished respondents noted that the Golden Heart created greater editor/agent interest in their work.

"The editor who ultimately bought my

**Table #2**

**Was Your First Sale Made on Your GH Finalist Ms?**

	Yes	No, but it sold later on	I sold other ms; but not the GH ms
GH WINNERS	86%	12%	2%
GH FINALISTS	61%	11%	28%

book was interested in it prior to the GH," Kristin Hannah noted, "But the publicity generated by the contest captured the attention of another editor, and the book was

of the non-winning finalists sold their finals manuscript (see table #2). Still, a number of respondents cautioned that winning a Golden Heart does not automatically

**Table #3**

**Did the Golden Heart Lead Directly to Editor/Agent Contacts that Resulted in Your First Sale?**

Editor Contact	Agent Contact	No, but it led to contacts that helped later	No
GH WINNERS			
41%	8%	16%	35%
GH FINALISTS			
35%	17%	9%	39%

then bid on by both publishers."

Martha Powers, an '87 GH Winner, and Susan Fox, who won in both '84 and '85, were among those who sold to their final round judges, while Sheila Slattery recalls, "Two editors who had rejected my manuscript before I entered the Golden Heart, wanted to buy it when they judged it as a finalist."

Most of the survey participants (both published and unpublished) felt that the contest helped them make valuable contacts. But what do editors and agents say? Do they feel contests are a useful tool?

This spring we sent surveys to editors and agents, and 54% of those responding said they give greater consideration to a query if the writer mentions finaling in the Golden Heart. Of those who answered the question on the value of contests in general, a whopping 90% felt contests could be helpful for aspiring authors. Also, 59% had bought at least one manuscript after judging it in the final round of a contest.

The Golden Heart can help contestants connect with editors and agents, but does it lead to faster first sales? A definitive conclusion can't be drawn because our survey was limited to those who have been Golden Heart finalists/winners. We didn't include a control population of people who haven't entered, or those who have entered but haven't made the finals. Indeed, important variables such as talent, skill, experience, and the marketability of a given manuscript were factors well beyond the scope of this survey. Our published respondents may have sold as quickly with or without the added boost of a contest.

Still, of the respondents who are now published, 85% of the Golden Heart winners sold within six months and a total of 92% sold within the first year after the contest, while 60% of the non-winning final-

ists sold within the first year (see Table #4).

Winning did correlate with faster first sales, and did so in the 1994 study, as well. Given the miniscule percentage of manuscripts that sell, out of the thousands that are submitted to publishers every year, these are impressive statistics!

Still, some argue that finaling in the Golden Heart is a fluke, a cosmic stroke of luck. Certainly the random mix of judges and competitors on a given panel can affect one's scores. Yet, 50% of the yet-unpublished survey respondents have finalized more than once, while 30% of the now-published respondents finalized from two to four times before making their first sales—a percentage that might have been much

and have had little time for multiple sales, this group has sold a total of 985 books as of June 1, 1998! And though many of the respondents stated that they haven't entered contests since becoming published, there were 46 RITA finalists/winners, plus numerous Holt Medallion, Best First Book, RT, and Reader's Choice finalists/winners listed on the survey forms we received. "If I were an agent or an acquiring editor, I'd home in on the Golden Heart winners like a missile," wrote Patricia Gaffney, an '88 Golden Heart winner.

What comments do the published respondents offer to those considering the Golden Heart? "The Golden Heart percentile rankings offer one of the best ways for an author to assess, in a general way, a manuscript's potential as written. But the contest does not pronounce judgment on the writer," Debra Dixon, a '92 finalist, says.

Cindy Gerard, a GH finalist in '92, notes, "It's a great opportunity to test your mettle in an arena that very much mimics a potential sale situation."

Susan Kay Law, a '92 winner, warns potential entrants, "While you should certainly put every effort into getting your entry into the best possible shape, some books—because of pacing or other factors that are crucial to the story—simply aren't good contest books. Trying to change this

**Table #4**

**First Sales, Correlated to Finalist versus Winning Status**

During contest	1-3 mos. later	3-6 mos. later	6-12 mos. later	one year later
GH WINNERS				
53%	9%	22%	8%	8%
GH FINALISTS				
17%	19%	9%	15%	40%

higher, if not for the fact that many sold before having a chance to enter again. These statistics indicate that the Golden Heart system of five-judge panels does provide a degree of consistency in identifying quality work.

The now-published respondents have definitely proven their talents over the long haul. Though seven of the 107 published survey respondents were Golden Heart finalists/winners within the past two years

usually doesn't work, and your goal is the best book, not the best entry."

"See it as a fun experience, not life or death," says Jill Marie Landis, an '86 GH winner. "The contest is only as good as the judges...don't take the scores personally."

"The Golden Heart offers an accurate assessment of a proposal. It can identify writers with potential," wrote Heather MacAllister, who finalized in '88 and '89, and won with a second manuscript in '89." "Be



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ready to use the contacts and opportunities the contest gives you. Remember that a fresh crop of finalists and winners is less than a year away. Have that completed manuscript polished and ready to go!"

Janece O. Hudson said, "Enter! Enter! Enter! Contests give you excellent feedback, a sense of where you are in your development as a writer. Plus, if you make the finals, you have an opportunity to be read by an editor, and perhaps bought."

"The Golden Heart was a very positive experience for me," wrote Sandra Novy Chvostal, a 1990 finalist. "An editor followed the person who accepted my award for me, and told her to have me call immediately."

"It is a way of acquiring professional skills, professional contacts, and a sense of moving toward a goal," offered Jimmie Morel aka Lindsay Longford, a finalist from 1989. "Go for it. But don't ever let your GH status, whether successful or not, determine your worth."

Terese Daly Ramin, who won a GH in '87, said, "Contest winners don't always sell their work. Writers who write for love, who learn their craft, acquaint themselves with the market, and who are persistent despite the odds...these are the writers who sell their work and live their dreams."

"For me it was the greatest joy to win an award from a group that was, and is, the greatest support in my writing life. It also was an award that honored my chapter, because we critique," wrote Martha Powers. "It suggested that the group's help and encouragement had produced results. The women of

RWA have been very instrumental in my getting published and staying sane."

Donna Fasano aka Donna Clayton, a 1989 finalist, says, "My experience as a GH finalist has given me memories that will last forever. In one month's time, I became a finalist, acquired an agent, received a call from a senior editor at Silhouette who wanted to publish my book, and found myself on a plane bound for Boston and my first RWA conference. It was an overwhelming, whirlwind adventure that I wish every writer could experience."

Respondents who have not yet sold also had valuable comments to share. "The GH is a wonderful opportunity to be rewarded for your hard work, talent, and writing skills," wrote Chelle Cohen, a finalist from 1996.

"But don't be disappointed if it doesn't lead to immediate publication. Finaling is an accomplishment...but develop a plan to sustain yourself beyond the Awards Ceremony."

"Making the finals is so wonderful and encouraging that for that reason alone people should enter," noted Kathi Conti, who finaled in 1995 and 1998. "Whatever the lows in your career, no one can take away your GH status."

"I will always cherish the friends I've met and the contacts I've made from finaling in the GH. When I get really down and consider giving it all up, I remember that I write because I love it...and have accomplished something a limited number of romance writers ever do. That gets me over the proverbial bumps on the road to publication," wrote Kristi Goldberg, who was a double finalist in 1996.

"Enter! It's a great opportunity for visibility and a potential sale. And even if the ms doesn't sell, you still have a writing accomplishment to mention when marketing other manuscripts," said 1995 finalist Lesa Raesz.

Still, there are some who say the contest is a "crapshoot," and five of the survey respondents agreed. Every year we hear heated debate over the scoring method, the lack of critiques, the qualifications of the judges, or some other aspect of the contest.

Speaking as the 1998 Golden Heart Chairperson, Shirley Hailstock says, "Any contest is going to be subjective. We cannot get away from that. We have personal tastes, likes and dislikes. In the Golden Heart you get five judges who are chosen

at random. Five opinions. Wouldn't it be logical that out of five you would get a good cross-section of how well the manuscript is written and the story presented, even if all you see are the scores?"

"There are judges who judge hard and others who don't. Within the Golden Heart we have set up a mechanism to try and smooth this out—the standard deviation method, which was approved by the membership several years ago. If you get a judge who is truly off the mark, her score is dropped and the average is included in place of it. If you get several low scores, then maybe there is something within your manuscript you should try to look at objectively."

Should you enter? Last year, nearly 900 aspiring authors filled out entry forms, finished manuscripts, then sealed their hopes and dreams into priority envelopes. For those who made the finals, the affirmation of reaching that goal will stay with them forever. For all the rest, the experience of setting goals, meeting a deadline, finishing an entire manuscript, and polishing a proposal was a valuable experience.

Best wishes to you all in 1999!

Many thanks to all of the wonderful survey participants who wrote extensive, thoughtful answers—often adding additional pages to the survey form.



*Roxanne used to write for horse magazines, but happily left reality for the world of fiction after a friend gave her a stack of wonderful romance novels. She won the 1995 Long Contemporary*

*Golden Heart, and was also a finalist in 1998. She served as a Golden Heart Category Coordinator in 1996, and is hard at work on her next two manuscripts.*



*Tracy Cozzens won the 1998 Golden Heart for her long historical, Star-Crossed, and was also a finalist in short historical and paranormal. In the past two years, she won the Emily, the Outreach Award of Excellence, and Lone Star chapter contests.*

*She and Roxanne have judged a number of contests, and presented a workshop in Anaheim titled "Using Contests to Advance Your Writing Career."*

