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ESSAY

Prize-Writing



Illustration by Paul Sahre

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In January, the 133-year-old Library Journal announced the creation of a new annual prize: the Amanda Foreman Award for best acknowledgments. Laugh all you like; it was one of the proudest moments of my life. I knew how much effort had been expended in making those acknowledgments as comprehensive and accurate as possible; but I never thought anyone else would notice.

That isn't the only Foreman prize out there. In Britain there was Bafta's Carl Foreman Award for Most Promising Newcomer in British Film, founded in honor of my father, whose

screenplay credits include “High Noon” and “The Bridge on the River Kwai.” I have also won a few prizes in my time, and judged a great many. This puts me in a difficult position when it comes to giving an opinion on them. Be their champion, and I could be accused of having sold out to the corporate-cultural complex. Be dismissive, and I am obviously a typical literary ingrate, biting the hand that feeds.

Goodreads.com lists over 6,000 prizes on its Web site. The oldest, the Nobel Prize in Literature, was founded in 1901; the youngest was established yesterday. Ten more will certainly be announced tomorrow. Literary prizes have become so numerous and pervasive that just like the invention of the computer, it makes you wonder how writers ever survived without them. The fact they got along just fine throws a spotlight on the timing of the first prizes. The inception of the Nobel, the Prix Goncourt, the Pulitzer and the James Tait Black all coincided with the advent of modern advertising, the rise of the newspaper conglomerate — and their mutual willingness to use the arts to boost sales. Nothing was deemed off limits once Thomas J. Barratt, chairman of A.&F. Pears, turned the work of the Pre-Raphaelite artist John Everett Millais into posters to advertise soap.

The Académie Française was in the habit of giving out literary prizes long before Alfred Nobel decided to bequeath his taste in literature as well as his fortune to the world. Nobel’s great innovation was adding cash to the honor of critical recognition. Since Nobel had an explicit idea of the kind of writing he wished to promote (morally uplifting and idealistic), the very notion of a financial award was contentious from the outset.

Tolstoy thought monetary prizes were a threat to an artist’s integrity, and would have refused the Nobel even if the Swedish Academy had been able to overcome its distaste for his politics. George Bernard Shaw thought it was a waste to award a prize to writers who were commercially successful, and gave his Nobel money away. In between these views lies the question, What is the prize money really for? Is it a sanitized form of charity for deserving artists? Workfare for creatives in the age of mechanization? The Austrian iconoclast Thomas Bernhard was speaking for many writers when he raged: “It was all offensive, but I found myself the most offensive of all. I hated ceremonies, but I took part in them. I hated the prize-givers, but I took their money.”

Twenty-eight years ago, William Gass argued on this very page that literary prizes, and the Pulitzer in particular, were the enemies of quality and artistic ambition. Prizes not only encouraged writers to aim for the dead level of mediocrity, they acted as an advance guard for the forces of establishment reactionism — wielding money instead of guns: “Someone always foots the bill, of course, and when the outcome doesn’t smartly show the feet, they are inclined to squeak,” he wrote, “to meddle, or to withdraw their moral and monetary support.” It took 20 years for the Swedish Academy to unshackle itself from Alfred Nobel’s literary sensibilities. But that wasn’t good enough for Jean-Paul Sartre, who declined the

Nobel Prize in 1964 because he didn't want his work to become "institutionalized." Not everyone understood his point. Seven years later, Malcolm Muggeridge resigned his position as a 1971 Booker panel judge on the grounds that good taste must prevail: "Most of the entries seem to me to be mere pornography, and to lack any literary qualities or distinction which could possibly compensate for the unsavoriness of their contents." The Pulitzer board's refusal to award a fiction prize last year (the 11th time in its history) led media pundits to raise Gass's question again: Whom or what does the prize serve?

Whatever Allen Ginsberg's thoughts were when he agreed to serve on the 1971 poetry panel for the National Book Award, by the end of the process he had decided that the prize was an example of capitalism co-opting art to serve its own ends. Unable to dissuade his fellow judges from choosing Mona Van Duyn over the Beat poet Gregory Corso, Ginsberg vented furiously at the "Bureau System Establishment Committee Power Judge," otherwise known as the National Book Foundation board. Three years later, when Ginsberg was himself awarded the poetry prize, his acceptance speech explicitly rejected any link between the "book here honored with public prize" and the militarized industrial hegemony of the United States. Ginsberg was by no means alone in seeing the link between prizes, capitalism and oppression. The English novelist John Berger turned his 1972 acceptance speech for the Booker Prize into a denunciation of the sponsors for what he said was the ruthless exploitation of Caribbean sugar growers. He would be donating half the prize money to the British Black Panthers, he informed the audience.

Yet, if all these charges against literary prizes contained everything that needed saying, then no one in her right mind would be a judge or care so much about the outcome. The "scandals" that pockmark the histories of the most famous prizes are rarely ones of corruption. Generally, they have revolved around a juror's Ginsberg-type fury that some great work has gone unrecognized. A prime example of the moral and emotional burden that many judges attach to their role is the down-to-the-wire deliberations of the 1983 Booker panel. According to Martyn Goff, the administrator of the prize, the five judges were split: two for J. M. Coetzee's "Life and Times of Michael K," two for Salman Rushdie's "Shame," with the chairwoman, Fay Weldon, caught in an agony of indecision. Hours went by. By 6 p.m. the first guests were drifting into the reception hall; meanwhile Goff was imploring the panel to come to a decision. Weldon reluctantly agreed to break the tie: "I vote for Rushdie." Goff dashed across the room and began dialing the P.R. people. Weldon shouted: "Stop! I've changed my mind." Goff returned to the table and waited as she asked the other judges to consider their positions one last time. No change. But now Weldon announced she was giving her vote to Coetzee. Goff once again ran to the phone. Just as he began speaking, Weldon called out, "Hold it a minute." He pretended not to hear, and Coetzee won the award.

In his prizewinning book “The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value,” James F. English argues that prizes are proliferating because they enjoy an important advantage over all other forms of exchange: They don’t just convert, they facilitate the transactions between cultural and noncultural capital. The National Book Foundation board, which recently announced a thorough rethink of the judging process, would not disagree. Nor would the supporters of Toni Morrison who lobbied so vociferously for “Beloved” to receive the Pulitzer Prize in 1988. Yet the fungible capital of book prizes is just one aspect of their sway and influence in this modern age. The real source of their power lies in our need for them. Literary prizes are the lighting of the candle that helps society to convene, to share in conversation and see beyond itself. A prize may hail a masterpiece or discover a new artist; but its fundamental purpose is to fill the silence with ideas. What happens next is up to us.

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