Literary Laurels: Prize-Winning Writing and the Culture Industry

Spring 2020; Tuesdays 1:30PM – 3:30PM
Carleton’s Dominion-Chalmers Centre (CDCC), Room 17
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ABSTRACT

The biggest awards in the literary world—such as the Man Booker Prize, the Bollingen Prize for Poetry, or the Nobel Prize in Literature—carry with them acclaim, money, and boosts for a writer’s reputation. However, the processes and consequences of these awards are often fraught with complexity. Who is "worthy" of such recognition? What happens when they win? And what sort of ethical questions arise when they do? In this lecture series, you will examine how awards and other types of official literary recognition help shape canons, mobilize readerships, and frame both artistic and political debates.

N.B. Background readings for the course will all be accessible for free via the internet, and are not mandatory for participants. URLs will be distributed to students in the first week of class.

SCHEDULE

Week 1: Literal and Literary Laurels – In this introductory session, we will examine the history of certain kinds of literary celebrity as an act of appointment rather than necessarily of achievement. Topics include the history of patronage, court-appointed writers, poet laureates, writers-in-residence, and other types of authorship that come with imposed or implied authority. We will also consider what we mean when we speak of a “culture industry” and the things it might produce.

Week 2: Nobel and Ignoble Prizes – This session will be dedicated to the history of the Nobel Prize in Literature – arguably the most visible and impactful literary award in the world. Topics include the prize’s origins, situation within the wider context of the other Nobel prizes, notable (and notorious) winners and snubs, and its currently complicated status.

Week 3: Successes, Scandals and Snubs – We expand our focus to look at other major awards like the Man Booker Prize, the Pulitzer Prize, and prizes given out by various critics’ circles and national endowments. We will also look at some notorious controversies, including Ezra Pound winning the Bollingen Prize and Russell Hoban winning the Booker.

Week 4: Genre Trouble and Culture Wars – The world of genre fiction and its celebrity crosscurrents will occupy us this week. Topics will include the tumultuous disputes surrounding the sci-fi/fantasy world’s Hugo awards, the complex legacy of the Leacock Medal for Humour, and the late-2019 uproar that nearly destroyed the Romance Writers of America trade organization.

Week 5: Glorious and Free – This week will cover the world of Canadian literary celebrity, awards, and ongoing disputes. Topics will include the Governor General’s Awards, the Griffin and Giller Prizes, the Canada Reads program, and tensions over what (and who) qualifies as “CanLit.”

Week 6: In Closing...: In our final session, we will take stock of what we’ve covered over the previous five weeks and consider some possible future trends in literary awards and celebrity. We will also close on a lighter note, looking at some of the more unusual annual awards for the worst writing of certain types.