

The Publishers Association

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Comment

I have taken the information on the American National Book Awards from the Handbook on the Awards sent to me by Peter Jennison, Executive Director of the National Book Committee, Inc. I have tried to cut out duplication, which is rife in the document, as far as I can, but I have left in the details of Award categories since they are integral to the programme although not very relevant to us.

The judges' "Brief" seems to me to be grossly overstated since, presumably, one ought to choose judges who will by definition make the sort of judgements involved. But mention of the 'audience' is probably a good idea, particularly for initial publicity purposes.

The American submission system also seems to be unnecessarily complicated. It goes without saying that not all the judges will need all the books as they will already have read and/or reviewed them, but out idea of putting the onus on publishers, with a limit of two titles per annum, while giving judges the option to call in unsubmitted titles will be much simpler and ought to be just as effective.

Although I sent identical letters to France and America, you will see by the contrast in the amount of information available that the French either misunderstood my questions or that the Goncourt publicity just 'happens'. From what we already know as publishers, the latter is quite likely! The letter from France has only just arrived, for obvious reasons, and it is probably unnecessary to ask for more informations since the American 'program' would seem to be closer to our own aims and ideas.

I have made certain comments, in parenthesis, in the text of the attached paper.

Finally, it occurred to me that it might be a valuable launching tactic to invite, say, Aragon, to be present at our preliminary Press Conference. It would be ideal to have Jennison as well, but perhaps too expensive unless he is planning a visit here anyway!

JILL MORTIMER

NATIONAL BOOK AWARDS

Size:

Five \$1,000 awards

Donors:

The American Book Publishers Council, the American Booksellers Association and the Book Manufacturers' Institute

Organization:

From their institution in 1950 until 1960, the National Book Awards were run by a volunteer committee from the publishing industry. Since 1960, they have been administered by the National Book Committee - a non-profit, educational association of citizens concerned with fostering the public interest in books and reading. The arrangements for conferring the Awards are in the hands of an Awards Advisory Committee of the National Book Committee, on which the three donor organizations are represented. (See below)

Purpose:

"To recognize distinction of thought and spirit and of their literary expression and to honour books worthy of a distinguished role in American general, intellectual and cultural life." (See Judges' "brief" below)

Awards Advisory Committee:

This is intended to be broadly representative of American letters and of the public interest. It includes members whose knowledge of particular fields qualifies them to select panels of judges. Apart from those from the three donor organizations, members must be as free from vested interests as possible so as to assure the disinterested character of their administrative decisions. Members who are writers are expected to absent themselves from the Advisory Committee in any year in which they have a book published.

The Committee consists of 18 members. Membership of the National Board of the National Book Committee is not a condition of membership on the AAC. Members are appointed by the Chairman of the National Book Committee.

Judging:

The judicial process has remained essentially the same since 1950. Panels of judges are appointed in the following categories: Poetry; Fiction; History and Biography; Arts and Letters; and Science, Philosophy and Religion. Judges in the three latter categories are not required to make an Award. Judges are chosen for their literary qualifications and capacity to make judgements. Writers are preferred, since an award generally means more to an author if it is made by his peers.

Judges may not be connected with the sponsoring organizations. They may not have a book of their own published in their field during the year. They must be willing to find the time to do the reading involved, to serve at a modest fee and to attend one meeting at which their choice is made.

Selection of Judges:

The AAC invites suggestions for judges and pools all the eligible names. The Chairman appoints one member of the Committee to be in charge of forming each panel of judges. Decisions as to the selection of each panel are taken in consultation with the whole Committee, after it has had the opportunity to review the proposed panels and alternatives drawn up from the large list of possibilities. The Committee feels that a jury system is the best method of making Awards. (Presumably in the U.S. this means a proportionate majority vote.)

The Judges are not shielded by anonymity and it is therefore particularly important that the AAC should protect and respect the judges' freedom.

Timing:

Judges are appointed in the Summer, so that they have from 6 to 8 months in which to work. The Awards are made in early March. Their "brief" is as follows:

"The books considered by the judges must be written by American citizens and published in the United States during the calendar year. Only current work not previously published in book form may be considered. Translations may be considered provided the author of the original work is an American citizen. Posthumous works may be considered if the author died within three years before publication of the book. Books restricted in subject or manner of presentation to a specialized scientific or scholarly audience are not to be considered.

The term 'most distinguished' should not refer merely to style, although style should certainly be one of the considerations in the choice. An important element in considering any book should be the contribution the book makes to the world of literature and the world of ideas. The freshness of the author's approach to his material, the perceptive treatment of content, and the book's significance for an intelligent general audience should be among the determining factors in arriving at a choice.

The Award winner should be chosen solely on its merits as a book, without reference to the author's other work (except as noted below), to the fact that it may have been or may be awarded other prizes, or to the fact that it may or may not already have received popular recognition. Unless it appears to the judges so clearly the most distinguished work of its category as to admit no other truly satisfactory choice, a book by an author who has previously won an Award in that category should not be chosen.

There are to be no special citations or honourable mentions."

After making their selections, each panel of judges is required to prepare a brief citation describing the book and thus indicating, at least in part, the reasons for their choice.

Submission of Books to Judges:

There is no formal submission of books to the judges. The AAC makes every effort to see that the judges have access to all books that have any claim for consideration for the Awards. They are urged to ask for copies of all books they wish to examine at any time during the year. Their requests are passed on to publishers who send the books directly to the individual judges. When each judge is appointed, he is given a list of outstanding books in his category that have been published so far within the specified time limit. These lists are prepared in consultation with the AAC and are based on critical reception as reflected throughout the country and in polls of reviewers. Where the reputation of the author makes it plain, before publication, that a book deserves the judges' attention, such titles are also included on the lists.

Books are not sent automatically to the judges; they are instructed to ask for all or any of the books on the list, plus any other books they have seen reviewed, announced, or heard of in any other way. The reason books are not sent automatically to judges is that they have frequently already reviewed or received complimentary copies of many of the books.

Judges are encouraged to report on the books as they read them, indicating from time to time which books they feel can be ruled out and which should be read by the other judges.

Leading Nominees:

The AAC is wholly sympathetic to the desire of the donors that the National Book Awards should have a favourable effect on as many books as possible. This is achieved by the publication of a list of "Leading Nominees". This occurs some weeks in advance of the judges final choice. (One month is later specified)

Publicity:

The AAC is responsible for releasing news about the appointment of the judges, the naming of the speaker and the conferring of the Awards. Continuous press relations on behalf of the Awards, and especially during the week of the announcement ceremony, are maintained in co-operation with the Publishers' Publicity Association.

Ceremony:

The donors and the sponsors of the National Book Awards feel that the annual ceremony can serve a larger purpose than merely the giving of the prizes. They wish it to be an occasion of sufficient interest and distinction to warrant the personal attendance of the nation's critics and the book page editors, as well as authors, publishers, librarians and others in the world of books. They also wish it to serve as a symbol of excellence, the power and importance of books and to focus nationwide attention on one of the greatest strengths of American democracy.

Income from the sale of tickets pays for the costs of the ceremony and the reception which follows, and also meets a large share of the total annual expense of operating the programme. Complimentary tickets are

offered to the guests of honour - the winning authors, judges and reviewers. The rest are sold to members of the organizations which contribute the prizes.

The announcement of the winners and the conferring of the prizes takes place simultaneously at a ceremony in New York City. The winners are present to receive the Wards with appropriate remarks. (Robert Bly turned his over to the fund for the anti-Vietnam War Campaign at the 1968 ceremony.)

The Ceremony is opened or closed by a notable public figure.

PRIX GONCOURT

Size:

Around £5

Organization:

This prize is administered by the Académie Goncourt, which is comprised of the following ten members:

Louis Aragon
Alexandre Arnoux
Hervé Bazin
André Billy
Roland Dorgeles

Jean Giono
Phillippe Heriat
Pierre Mac Orlan
Raymond Queneau
Armand Salacrou

Purpose:

The prize is 'destined' to go to a distinguished novel published in French. Only once or twice has it been awarded to a foreign writer, as was the case with the Belgian Charles Plisnier.

Submission of Books to the Académie:

There is, in fact, no question of submission. (According to Serge Montigny). The Académie chooses from among the books sent in by publishers and sometimes by authors themselves.

(This statement seems to me to be a contradiction in terms, but it is a faithful translation from Montigny's letter.)